



Dave Reese/Dal

U.S. TELEMAR SKI TEAM member Glenn Gustafson trains on Big Mountain last week. Gustafson and a group of telemark ski team will leave for Finland and Europe Jan. 5. Big Mountain will be the site of the World Championships March 20-24.

US AGAINST THE WORLD

Local telemark skiers begin annual quest for world domination

By **DAVE REESE**
The Daily Inter Lake

When the first chairlifts were loaded for opening day on Big Mountain last week, the U.S. Telemark Ski Team was there in force, preparing to defend the hill.

The team, which has nine of its 16 members from Whitefish, opens the 2002-2003 season next week with the U.S. Open Telemark Race on Big Mountain.

On opening day you could see the skiers' telltale gray-and-yellow ski suits around Big Mountain, and could hear their whoops and hollers as the team began to reunite for the year. They have good reason to want to be prepared for the season:

Big Mountain will be home to the biennial telemark World Championships March 20-24, 2003, and Whitefish local Reid Sabin, formerly the world's No. 1 telemarker, will be out to defend the World Championship title that he earned in 2001 in Valtherons, France.

Sabin cut back on his competition after the birth of his first child last year, but he's not going to let go of his title easily. He was there on opening day at Big Mountain, getting his legs under him and refining his technique.

"It's going to take some work, but I'm excited about it," Sabin said. "I'll try to be ready by race time."



Dave Reese/Daily Inter Lake

WHITEFISH TELEMAR ski racer Reid Sabin will be out to defend his World Championship title at Big Mountain March 20-24.

The last time the World Championships were held in North America was in 1996 at Whistler, B.C.

Big Mountain, meanwhile, has perhaps become the telemark capital of the world. In three of the last four years, the mountain has had 12 World Cup telemark races. With this year's races at Big Mountain, it will bring the total to 15 — the most World Cup-caliber races of any ski area in North America.

Several of the Whitefish World Cuppers are also out to grab a podium finish at the World Championships. Glenn Gustafson, a White-

fish native, finished first at the Swedish championships last year and was the Montana Telemark Series winner.

"This is going to be a defining year for the sport of telemarking in Montana," Gustafson said. "This is the culmination of a lot of hard work and dedication."

Neil Persons first brought telemark notoriety to Whitefish. In 1995 he made the U.S. team, and his ski mates at Big Mountain quickly took notice. They followed in his footsteps and now more than half of the U.S. telemark team hails

from Whitefish.

The local members of the U.S. men's team are Sabin, Gustafson, Neil Persons, Jef Elliott, Kris Carpenter and Peter McMahon. The local members of the women's team are Chris Coughlin, Natalie Angell and Cody McCarthy, a top finisher in the 1999 World Cup series.

Many of the skiers will head to Finland and Europe next month to begin five weeks of competition. Gustafson, Carpenter, McMahon, Angell and Coughlin, along with other members of the U.S. team, will leave for Finland Jan. 5 to race in Yllas, a city near the Arctic Circle.

Quinn Lewis, the 2002 National Champion from Whitefish, and Carrie Johnson will travel with them in hopes of making the U.S. team. After their stint in Finland, the skiers travel to Kvittfjell, Norway. That just happens to be the place where former Whitefish alpine skier (and Persons' step-brother) Tommy Moe won his gold and silver medals in the 1994 Olympics, sweeping the downhill and giant slalom.

After Norway, the telemarkers travel to Slovenia, then on to Chamrousse, France, near Grenoble, the site of the 1968 Olympics.

World Cup telemark athletes receive no winnings in their races, but do get some equipment sponsorships, therefore most of the athletes have full-time jobs

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or work double-time in summer to support their winter habit. "It gives you a reason to train and stay young," Gustafson said.

With skimpy budgets, when the athletes travel around the world they stay with friends and families. "We're making some great lifelong friendships," Gustafson said. "We're all super-proud to represent Whitefish around the world."

TELEMARK SKI racers compete in three events: the classic, sprint classic and giant slalom.

In the classic, skiers race on a gated course, with elements of Nordic skiing thrown in. There's a long-distance jump midway through the course and a 360-degree turn into a short cross-country section near the finish. The sprint classic is a shorter version of the classic, with two runs made. The giant slalom is two runs on a GS course.

This is the fourth season that the Montana Telemark Ski Association is in charge of the Montana series races, which this year includes stops at Big Mountain, Blacktail, Snowbowl and Marshall.

To help maintain the sport's popularity, the telemark ski association will have clinics and fun races around the state. The clinics will cover technique and body position, then will go through gates. "Citizens racing is the heart and soul of telemark racing in Montana,"

Gustafson said.

The telemark association will also have a mogul competition Feb. 1 in conjunction with the alpine Bump Bash contest at Big Mountain.

Following are telemark race dates at local ski areas:

Dec. 14-15: U.S. Open at Big Mountain

Dec. 21: U.S. Telemark Ski Team Clinic/Fun Race at Blacktail Mountain

Jan. 4: U.S. Telemark Ski Team Clinic/Fun Race at Big Mountain

March 20-24: FIS Telemark World Championships, Big Mountain



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