

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: the National Telemark Team

by Becky Lomax

"I fight fires all summer so I can race all winter," says 33-year-old Carrie Johnson, senior female racer on the U.S. Telemark Team. And she's not alone. Most of the national team members scrape, scrimp, pinch and save to fund their winter competition. Forget year round training! Forget the coach! Forget the wax technician! In the world of national and international ski racing, telemark skiers are in a league of their own.

Telemark racing takes not only gumption, but the willingness to live on Top Ramen and squirrel away every penny for travel. "The top male tele racer in the world makes only \$10,000 on endorsements while half of the World Cup competitors pay their expenses out of their own pockets," points out 39-year-old Glenn Gustafson, veteran U.S. Telemark Team member and the first U.S. competitor to enter telemark World Cup competitions in the 1990s. "But the tele racing world is a tight fraternity of people. You can't put a price tag on friendships and travel."

The U.S. Telemark Team is comprised of 17 members—12 men and 5 women, most of whom live and train at Big Mountain Resort in Whitefish, Montana. The remainder hail from Washington, Massachusetts, Idaho and Colorado. While the team has no wax technician, coach, official training or travel budget, it does have a team physician, chiropractor and physical therapist—all Whitefish supporters who donate services to the athlete's welfare. Sponsorship from Karbon, Scarpa, Karhu, Shred Alert and K2 help the team with gear or deals, as do local businesses like Big Mountain and The White Room, a new backcountry ski shop in town. Beyond that, team members solicit individual sponsors.

Members of the national freeheel team are a different breed—tough, independent, full of initiative. They must be, given the lack of funding. They compete under the United States Telemark Ski Association, self- and peer-coached, training as time permits.

Training

In true pull 'em up by the bootstraps fashion, telemark racers draft each other as coaches. "The group is so tight," explains Johnson. "We're just a bunch of diehard skiers who push each other." With no hired coach or training program in place, some



U.S. Telemark Team U.S. Nationals at Big Mountain, Whitefish, Montana, March 2006.

U.S. national team members head to Europe each winter to train alongside the Norwegian team.

Like alpine racing, training means gates. Internationally sanctioned telemark events—giant slalom, sprint classic and classic (slalom is recognized only in U.S. national competitions)—use gates as the courses' backbones. On a balance point smaller than alpine skis, the racer shifts the lead foot between each gate and slides past with a full boot length visible between the front heel and back toe. Failure to hold the boot space past the gate subtracts seconds from the finish time. Peer coaching, competitors set their own gates and train as they can.

Beyond skiing gates in a telemark stance, the three main events throw in a distance jump, which requires airtime past a penalty line and landing in a tele stance. Failure to maintain correct telemark form or falling short of the jump line accrues penalties, which also subtract seconds from the finish time. For jump practice, most skiers hit the local terrain park.

Training for sprint classic and the grand daddy of them all—the classic—requires a hefty dose of skate skiing, but not on Nordic skate gear. Although telemark skiers may workout on lightweight equipment, in competition it's fat skis, heavy bindings and



Carrie Johnson

monster boots all the way. Skate technique negotiates rollers, uphill and a rapaloosa or 360-degree banked turn.

For 18-year-old David Hobbs of Whitefish, Montana, now in his second year on the national team, the tele bug bit him when his alpine ski class experimented with telemark gear on a powder day. After a winter of local telemark league racing—where Hobbs said he ranked consistently in the "middle of back of the pack with no idea what boot space was"—he was prepped for competition. But to get down the competition road, he designed his own training program, joining both the local alpine and Nordic teams.

Hobbs picks up gate training with the Big

Mountain Race Team—on telemark gear. "It's a bummer because even 12-year-olds are faster than me," he laments. "But I haven't been tele skiing as long as they've been alpine skiing." In defense of Hobbs, he must move his body more for telemark turns as opposed to carved alpine lines. "In between each turn, I have to do a complete lead change," he explains. "It's harder for me to get my skis to go back on edge and pressure them really well. Alpine skiing is just more efficient." In spite of the struggle, he persists toward excelling at gates.

To develop skate techniques and stamina, Hobbs also trains with Glacier Nordic Ski Team—the local junior team. While his compatriots glide by on fly-weight toothpicks and boots lighter than tennis shoes, he skates at least one 10-kilometer workout per week on bulky plastic telemark boots and wide shaped skis with beefy bindings. "It's really hard to keep up with the Nordic skiers," Hobbs confesses. "A lot of times, I ski with the girls who are going slower and hang at the back of the pack." But his skiing is not all schlepping brick feet across flats, for he sprints up hills. "That kills me," he laughs. "I'm done." Ingenious training programs, like Hobbs', underscore the maverick route that telemark racing has also followed.

Survival

While telemark racing throws its roots back to skiing's origin, its more recent history bumps along. Internationally, competitions fall under FIS jurisdiction—same as Nordic disciplines. But in the United States, telemark membership severed its relationship with U.S. Ski Association in 1994, establishing the U.S. Telemark Ski Association (USTSA) as its sanctioning body that tallies national points.

The budding U.S. Telemark Team in 1995 nabbed its first international medal when Jackson Hole's Halsey Hewson placed third in giant slalom in Rauland, Norway. "We were all excited" because Tommy Moe had just won the 1994 Olympic downhill in Lillehammer," recalls Gustafson of his first World Cup season. In the spirit that differentiates telemark competition from other international races, that year the Norwegians organized a trip for all the competitors to Morgedal, the cradle

of skiing. Visiting Sondre Norheim's cabin, now a ski museum and protected landmark honoring the late 1800s "inventor" of the telemark turn, they staged an impromptu roof jumping contest on Norheim's house. "We all hiked up and took turns—Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, Germany, Norway, Finland and the U.S.," laughs Gustafson. "It was such a cool introduction to the tele world."

Four years later in 1999, the first U.S.

woman made her international mark when Whitefish's Cody Thompson-McCarthy placed fifth in overall World Cup standings and nabbed a silver medal in classic at the World Championships. The following year, she bumped up her women's World Cup standing to second, and in 2001 walked off with podium gold in the classic at the World Cup in Kimberley, B.C.

For the American men, the height of international victory came in 2000 when

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Reid Sabin, a compact Whitefish power-packed racer, took the overall World Cup champion title and matched it the following year. He also stole the tele-world's coveted 2001 World Championship classic gold medal in Val Thorens, France.

International medals have eluded the national team in recent years, and subtle shifts in the team's makeup have evolved. While injured seasoned team members like Gustafson and Neil Persons cheered from the sidelines last winter, younger competitors pushed their way into the ranks. Hot from placing in the top 10 in all three 2005 World Junior Telemark Championship events, 17-year-old Brett Stein from Wayland, Massachusetts, tied for second overall last winter at the U.S. Nationals and finished the 2006 season 18th in overall World Cup standings.

Competition Dreams

While the big American race is the U.S. Nationals, this past winter's entries at Big Mountain saw less than 50 racers. Still, Gustafson says, "It's the easiest place to knock heads with the top people."

The international circuit spans both North America and Europe, usually with two World Cups in each. In this continent, the tour splits between the U.S. and Canada, bouncing in recent years between hosting resorts like Montana's Big Mountain, Idaho's Schweitzer and British Columbia's Kimberley. As a biennial year, the World Championships draw the best of the best together in March to Thyon, Switzerland.

While almost every team member expresses desire to see telemark racing enter Olympic venues, it may be a long road to 2010. With jumps and grueling skate sections dumping competitors

lung-heaving, wasted and prostrate on the snow across the finish line, classic courses could upstage downhill making Bode Millers look like pansies. "The classic is the triathlon of telemark," says Johnson. "I think it would blow their socks off." But finish times range 3- to 5-minutes, a bit longer than the average TV watcher's attention span for a single competitor. USTSA's racing director Paul Lamb thinks sprint classic is the way to go. "It's a television-friendly event, incorporating Nordic, freestyle and alpine in 60 - 80 seconds. With its two-run format, the audience experiences the anticipation of the second run."

However, for television, technology must catch up. Gatekeepers and the jump judge track penalty points, which must be amassed by hand and then subtracted from the run time. Results are not instantaneous; sometimes they take an hour or so. And penalties make a huge difference: They've knocked winning times from the World Cup podium. Lamb says that the Europeans have been experimenting with whittling down the waiting time by using cell phones to tap in penalties.

While every team member cherishes the camaraderie within both the U.S. team and the international field, becoming an Olympic event may change the tenor of relationships. Johnson muses, "It could become more cutthroat."

The U.S. Telemark Team is a hearty lot. If they could bottle, market and sell their gumption, they'd pay their way to all the international competitions they could muster. "They're all around good athletes," says Gustafson, "with a huge dose of self-motivation." A bit of an understatement, don't you think?