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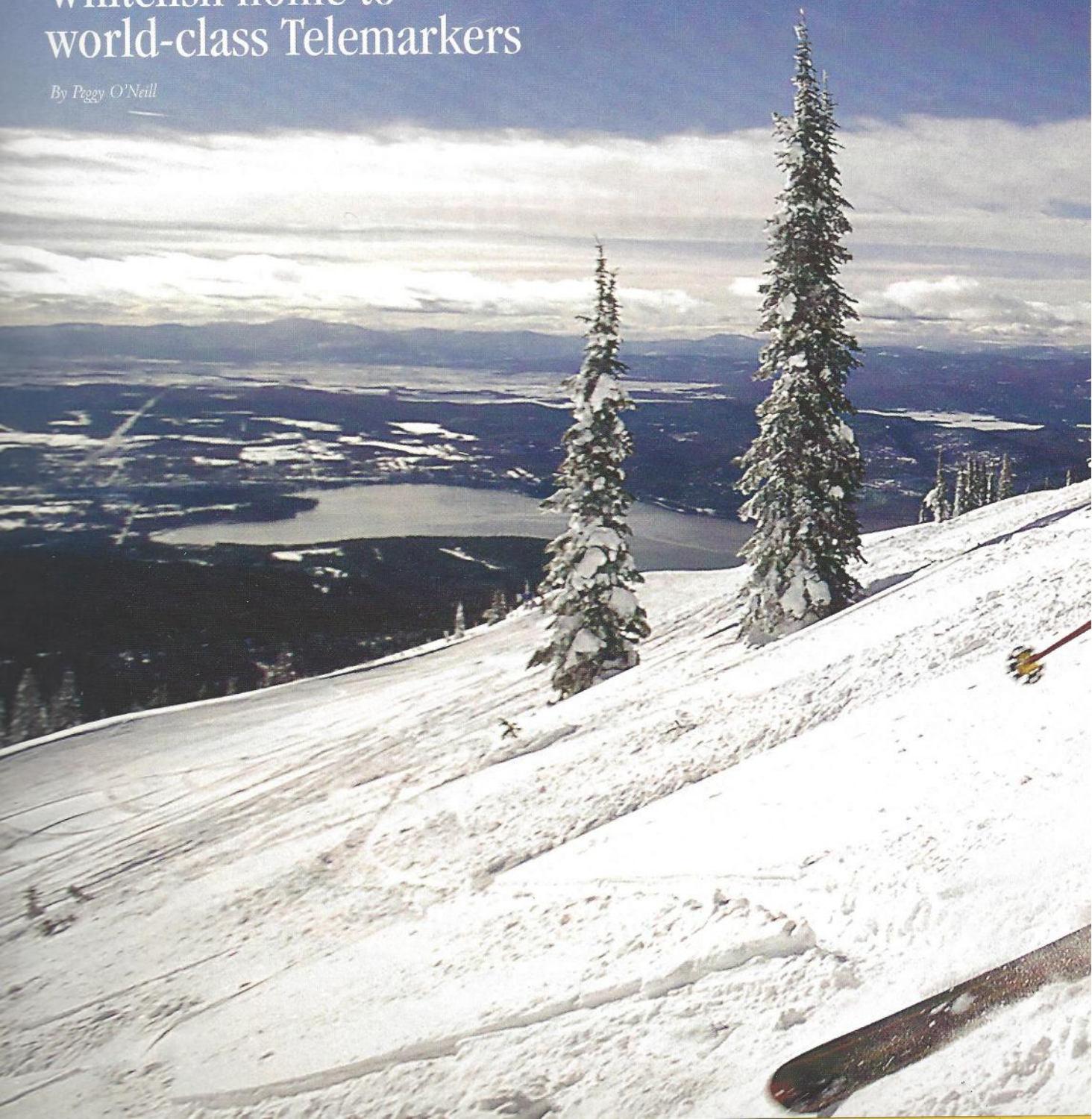


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Free-heeling Frenzy

Whitefish home to
world-class Telemarkers

By Peggy O'Neill





*With Whitefish Lake in the background,
Reid Sabin rips through the powder at Big Mountain.*



BECKY LOMAX PHOTO

SUNDAY MORNING AT the Buffalo Café in Whitefish is a rush of the young, the old, and the middle-aged. Waitresses with strong arms and apparent insensitivity to heat deliver steaming plates piled high with eggs, potatoes, and melted cheese. It's a high-energy place, but once your name is called from the ten-minute-long waitlist and you're escorted to a table, you can settle in and take a good look around. White-haired regulars sit at the counter, lowering their newspapers only long enough to request more coffee. Families with young children occupy most of the four-tops, and young couples sit outside on the curb waiting for the tables to turn. It's a true locals'

hangout in a town that has its fair share of tourist attractions. What began as a railroad and timber industry community now cashes in on its recreational opportunities. But Whitefish is still a

considered a good place to raise a family—most likely, a family of skiers.

Long-time U.S. Telemark Team member Neil Persons grew up in Whitefish. His dad, Cliff, is considered a Telemark

skiing pioneer and put in close to forty years working as a groomer and patroller for Big Mountain, the resort just outside of Whitefish. Persons shares his small table at the Buffalo with Reid Sabin, two-time overall World Cup Tele champion and current national champion. Reid moved to Whitefish after attending college in Missoula. Although he still races when he can, he is no longer part of the U.S. Telemark Team. He spends his energy raising his two young children. Joining Persons and Sabin for the late morning breakfast is eighteen-year-old up-and-comer David Hobbs, one of the youngest members of the U.S. Tele Team. Indeed if the entire Tele



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Team had been invited for breakfast, quite a few could show up given that a good two-thirds of the team hail from Big Mountain and some of the others train here.

Is there something in the air, the snow, the water supply, or the coffee at The Buffalo that breeds Tele talent? Persons claims no.

"It's more the people who live here," he said. "And the people who work for the mountain are supportive of our events."

Big Mountain has hosted Thursday Night Tele League races for about twenty years. And at least for Persons and Hobbs, that's where they got their start. Sabin competed in similar league races in Missoula before making

the move to Whitefish. "Deep down I wanted to be competitive with Neil," jokes Sabin, who at thirty-four, is five years Persons's junior. Typically, about eighty skiers show up for the league races.

"It's not a serious atmosphere," Sabin says. "People just go to have fun and meet other people."

And really that seems to be the atmosphere the Tele racers crave badly enough to lure them on World Cup tours and what keeps them going well past the age when their alpine counterparts retire. They're obviously not in it for the money or fame.

"If they are, they're in the wrong sport," said Hobbs, who also participates in another



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FACING PAGE: ABOVE, DAVID HOBBS is pictured during the 2006 Finals last year.

FACING PAGE: BELOW, Reid Sabin is a two-time overall World Cup Tele champion and current national champion.

THIS PAGE: Telemark skiing has attracted more women in the last few years.

obscure sport—extreme unicycling.

Hobbs is still in high school, but many of his teammates support their racing habit by working full-time jobs outside of the ski-racing industry. Persons works for the railroad and Sabin does landscape work and helps run a cross-country ski center and lodge in Whitefish with his wife and another couple.

"Racing is fun but it doesn't pay the bills," Sabin said. "There is no funding for the U.S. Telemark Team. For us, it's a hobby more than a profession."

And for many of them, it means maxing-out a credit card during the racing season and working

ridiculous hours in the off-months to pay it off, Persons said.

If there were celebrities in the world of Telemark, Sabin and Persons would be on the A-list. Sabin has been featured in *OUTSIDE* and *Ski* magazines. He's also the first American man to ever win a Telemark World Cup. And other Telemark racers name Persons as their role model, motivator, and the one who launched the snowball effect of Telemark racing at Big Mountain. But other diners at The Buffalo recognize them mostly as their neighbors. After all, Telemark skiers aren't likely to stick out at Big Mountain. Hobbs estimates that snow sport disciplines are split



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equally among alpine skiing, snowboarding, and Telemarking there.

Norwegian farmer Sondre Norheim is credited with developing the technique called Telemark, which is named for the Telemark region of Norway. In the 1860s, Norheim used the free-healed technique in a ski competition and the idea caught on. Telemark remained popular until new technology led to the equipment used in alpine skiing. The Telemark turn is a graceful maneuver involving keeping the front foot flat to the ski and flexing the back leg while raising the back heel. It's almost like genuflecting. The skis are kept parallel but are

staggered. Telemark racing involves several events including giant slalom and classic. Telemark giant slalom is similar to alpine giant slalom. It combines speed and long radius Telemark turns, and it also includes a jump. The classic is a unique race that combines several elements including a distance jump, a cross-country skating section, and what seems like an impossible, 360-degree turn called a reipjlekke (which means "loop of rope" in Norwegian).

Several A-list Telemarkers from Whitefish have made it on the national scene.



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With each passing year, Telemark appeals to a wider audience. According to the 2006 Outdoor Industry Foundation Recreation Participation Study, participation in Telemark skiing has increased by more than 160 percent since 1998, with 3.5 million people trying the sport at least once. Hobbs represents the group with the most participants — young men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, a statistic that has changed since Telemark participation numbers were tracked. In 1998, fortyfour percent of the participants were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. Female participation has increased over the last few



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Telemarking is consistently gaining in popularity throughout Montana.

years and now stands at 43 percent.

Hobbs might be the future of the sport. But Persons and Sabin aren't bowing out any time soon. Sabin says he'll keep racing as much as he can around his family's schedule. And newly married Persons says he'll introduce his wife to the sport and perhaps, someday, the kids he's planning on.

"I'm going to race 'til I

drop," Persons adds.

If the future means eventual inclusion in the Olympics or even participation that equals alpine skiing, these three racers won't complain, but they would hate to see it lose the appeal it has right now for them.

"If it gets that big you wonder if you would have made the life long friendships you've made," Persons said.

"If I had to do it over, I wouldn't change a thing," Sabin says. "I had a lot of fun."

The breakfast crowd at the Buffalo dies down. The waitress clears the plates. Hobbs has plans to hit the trail on his unicycle. Persons is going fishing with his dad. And Sabin walks out in the sunlight where he's greeted by his wife, two-year-old son and four-year-old daughter.

Future tele racers?

"I don't care what they do," Sabin says, "just as long as they enjoy the mountains somehow." **M**

PEGGY O'NEILL spends most winter weekends trying to perfect the Telemark turn. She has a long way to go.

