

THE NANSEN SKI CLUB
A LEGACY OF SERVICE

SKI CLUB FEATURE

BY LOU DZIERZAK



There are dozens of Nordic ski clubs across the country that are dedicated to bringing new people into the sport. But only one can call themselves the “oldest ski club in North America.”

Founded in Berlin, New Hampshire, in 1872, the Nansen Ski Club is celebrating its 138th season of promoting cross country skiing. Leane Rexford, current club president, says, “Almost everybody we meet has a story about their personal or family experience with the ski club. My grandmother used to take me skiing out on the original trail with a Thermos of cocoa. We would spend the day out on the snow. We’re trying to continue that history with our kids.”

Originally founded as the Berlin Mills Ski Club, the organization was formed by Norwegians to promote home-country culture and Nordic skiing. Members spoke their native language at meetings and initially membership was limited to male Scandinavians living in Coos County, New Hampshire.

In the early 1920s, members voted to change the name to honor Fridtjof Nansen, a 19th century Norwegian Arctic explorer and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Nansen is best known for leading the first crossing of Greenland, on skis, in 1888 and exploring the region near the North Pole.

In January 1929, Nansen’s visit to the city of Berlin and the club was greeted with welcoming ceremonies and a parade.

Decades later, the Nansen name remains, but the club’s original mission has broadened to include people of all backgrounds interested in cross country skiing.

“The club was organized to bring skiing to the next generation,” says Doug Huntley, club vice president. “Leane and I are both parents of kids we are teaching to ski. The club is not so much for the people who are in the club now, but to bring skiing to the next generation. That’s our focus.”

The Nansen Ski Club was incorporated in the 1940s. Today, club officials are completing requirements to become a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

Change is a constant in the club’s timeline. In 1936, in partnership with the city of Berlin and the National Youth Administration, the club built a 171-foot ski jump. The largest of its kind when it opened, the Nansen ski jump held that title in the eastern half of the United States for over 50 years. In 1938, the ski hill hosted the Olympic trials. The jump closed in 1988.

For many years, the club maintained a 40-kilometer trail system on leased land. When the land was sold for use as a federal prison site, the club moved to Milan Hill State



Park, about seven miles from town. Membership dipped from over 300 to below 100, but is rebuilding.

Huntley says, "A lot of people assumed when they built the prison on top of our property that we were done. We've been slowly combating that and we're seeing growth again. People are always excited when they understand we are still here."

The club does not charge members any fees and relies on donations to fund trail maintenance, grooming and an equipment locker.

Rexford says, "We are the poorest county in the state. We get a lot of great support from our members but we are also sensitive to the financial difficulties of the times and this region."

Members range from toddlers learning to ski to local teenagers wandering around the trail on no-wax skis. The club's oldest member is in his 80s and once competed on the ski hill.

"The last four years have been a rebuilding and rebranding of the club. Now we have come out the other side

and are attracting new members," Huntley says.

Moving to the John Morton-designed trail system in the Milan Hill State Park required some outreach. "A lot of people needed some convincing," says Huntley, "The John Morton-designed trail is a used as a training trail for Olympians. A lot of people who aren't Olympians find that a little intimidating. As we got more people up there, the word spread that it's not something to be afraid of, it's something you can have fun on."

The club skis on trails that get snow early in the season and remain open until late March or early April. Retired club members volunteer their time and expertise to groom the trails with a Bombardier 180 snowcat the club purchased from the Salt Lake City Olympic committee after the 2002 Winter Games.

Attracting new members is at the top of the current officers' to-do list. Offering lessons to kids and school groups is a top priority. An equipment locker managed by the club allows people without skis, poles

or boots to give skiing a try without any rental fees.

Every winter on the Saturday of a full moon, the club hosts a nighttime ski event and invites as many kids as they can gather. A telescope lets the kids explore the night ski, weather permitting. Rexford notes, "We've skied in snowstorms and below zero temperatures."

Clubs in other parts of the country may claim an earlier start, but there seems to be no debate that the Nansen Ski Club is the oldest continually operating club in the United States.

"Being called the oldest ski club in the United States is something special," Huntley says. "We have a responsibility to the people in the past and a responsibility to the area for the future. This is one of the jewels of the area and we need to nurture and protect it. We're trying to build some excitement in an area that hasn't been focused on cross country skiing in the last 10 or 20 years." **CCS**



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