

outdoor extremes

Longboard revival sign of good ol' days

Skiing success rests on courage, skill and the best homemade wax

By Scott Willoughby
The Denver Post

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Phil Gallagher, in red, is the winner over Brett Marty because his toes cross the finish line first Sunday at Plumas Eureka Ski Bowl in California. (Scott Willoughby, The Denver Post)

PLUMAS EUREKA SKI BOWL, Calif. — In the infamous words of "Cornish Bob" Flemming, "Dope is king" in California's high Sierra. Or so it was back in 1867, when the mad miner hopped onto his 12-foot wooden skis and made the most of his magic "dope" by flying down a snow-covered, 1,804-foot race course at 88 mph in 14 seconds.

And so it remains for three days a year at the well-concealed Plumas Eureka Ski Bowl, tucked into a small nook of the Sierra Nevada mountains about an hour north of Truckee, Calif. During those three winter days, modern dopemakers and longboard riders converge on the otherwise defunct Johnsville Ski Area to raise the dead at the Plumas Ski Club Longboard Revival Series, culminating in Sunday's 15th annual World

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Championship races.

"The winners used to get about \$1,000, which was a whole lot of money in those days. That's why the wax — what they would call 'dope' — was so important. The guy who had the best wax for the snow of the day, he got the check," said Dick Lundy, the oldest world championship competitor at age 71. "We're just trying to recreate the old atmosphere, although it's a little more of a party today."

The re-creation — and recreation — knows no bounds for members of Plumas County's colorful ski club (www.plumasskiclub.org), who don period attire from the 1800s and strap themselves onto edgeless wooden planks ranging from 12 to 16 feet long to challenge one another in head-to-head races down the same slopes as Cornish Bob and his cronies, albeit at

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somewhat slower speeds. The skis are built more or less the same as the originals, constructed of tight, vertical-grained Douglas fir, with a steering groove cut out on the bottom and tips bent up by a long steaming process. Bindings consist only of two pieces of leather attached to the sides and laced tight over leather boots, with a small block of wood attached to hold heels in place.

The rules haven't changed much, either: No cheatin' or



Nick Polzak hikes up to the starting line dressed in period attire while preparing to negotiate the hill on his homemade skis all 16 feet, 3 inches of them in Sunday's race in the Plumas Ski Club Longboard Revival Series. (Scott Willoughby, The Denver Post)

spittin'. Once the saw-blade gong sounds, push off with your wooden pole and point 'em down. First one across the line wins.

Next to courage and the ability to balance with a toboggan tied to each foot, dope is the key to longboard racing. As such, recipes have been closely guarded by dopemakers through the years.

In the past, brewing a batch of dope entailed some organic alchemy built around a waxy substance from the brow of a sperm whale, combined with varying amounts of Venice turpentine, oil of cedar, oil of tar, wintergreen, soapstone, balsam of fir, pine patch and, in at least one instance, something referred to as "Edison cylindrical records." These days, it's mostly paraffin wax with the odd extra ingredient.

"Dope is still king. And this kind of dope is definitely serious," said "Freight Train" Phil Gallagher from Quincy, Calif., who won his second world title since 1999 on Sunday by less than a boot length. "It's a wax race, so any organic, original ingredient you can toss in the soup is going to make it just right. My secret is a little glycerin. I use it to clean my ears, along with a little hydrogen peroxide, so I always have a little bit on hand."

Proud history in Plumas

In a place where the tales tend to grow as tall as the pines, the challenge of extracting fact from stacks of fiction is nearly as great as steering the virtually nonnegotiable longboards down a mountainside. But to hear Plumas County Museum director Scott Lawson tell it, downhill ski racing was invented here, when the competitive juices of miners who used to make their way between camps on the so-called "Norway skates" of the 1850s stirred to a boil.

Cornish Bob is the first name recorded on the ski club's somewhat sporadic registry of world

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champions, with the first generation of longboard racers maintaining the competition through the 1880s before it slumped for a

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decade or so. Racing returned for a 15-year streak ending in 1914, followed by a few revivals in the '30s and '50s before the present series took hold in 1993.

"This has been our best year by far," Plumas Ski Club president Ron Logan said.

As a crowd of several hundred clad in period garb looked on, some 40 men and 15 women drew starts for Sunday's championship race, with a new crop of competitors — like second-place finisher Brett Marty riding his homemade 16-foot, 3-inch skis — in their early 20s. Women's champion Allison Young is the daughter of local longboard legend Hank Jones, the only man anyone can remember who was able to swing the unwieldy sticks to a sideways hockey stop.

"It's funny," Lundy said. "All this old stuff is becoming cool again."

Old skis, modern goals

Whether or not Eureka Peak can rightfully claim the world's first organized ski races — as the sign hanging on the ski club's lodge announces — one nugget of history the locals are unwilling to argue is the mine ore bucket "tram" running up and down the mountain they consider the world's first ski lift, because the miners rode it to the top before skiing down.

The ore bucket was long ago replaced by a rope tow, and eventually a Poma tow handed down from Squaw Valley in 1955, although that too has become so antiquated that it could no longer be maintained. As a result, a secondary mission of the Plumas Ski Club and the spectacle of longboard racing is an attempt to raise money for an already approved chairlift replacement on the historic ski hill.

"It's all a volunteer thing. It's all about digging in. I've got three sons, and they all learned to ski right here," said Gallagher, 56, who earned \$50 in gold for his five-lap victory. "We'd love to get the chairlift in. All we need is a little bit — well, a lot — of money. But almost equally important is maintaining longboard racing. There is nothing like it anywhere, and it all started right here in the Sierras. They don't do this anywhere else in the world that I know of."

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