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March 21, 2008

Living for longboards

By Mark McLaughlin
Special to the Sun

March 19, 2008, 3:02 PM

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They take their ski history seriously up in Plumas County.

History buffs claim that the first downhill ski races in the Western Hemisphere were in Plumas County. And the historical record seems to uphold that boast, which is about as hefty as the 10 to 16-foot-long Douglas fir skis raced on last weekend at the 15th Annual World Championship Historic Longboard Revival Races at Plumas Eureka State Park, near Johnsville.

It was appropriately cold and blustery at the base of Eureka Peak on Sunday following last weekend's winter storm, with about 8 inches of fresh powder topping the hefty snowpack. The conditions, however, didn't diminish the enthusiasm among the 200 racers and spectators in attendance.

There were about 17 women who signed up to compete on the heavy wooden skis and 38 guys ready to strut their stuff on the big boards. That's more than double the number of competitors that showed up for the 2006 championship race event.

Need and speed

California skiing got its start not as a sport per se, but as a form of transportation over deep snow. Scandinavians, especially Norwegians, who arrived during the Gold Rush introduced the concept of skiing and soon miners were traveling over Sierra snow on simple wooden planks, pushing themselves along with one long pole.

Doctors were soon skiing miles to treat injuries or deliver babies. Residents in snow country skied to work, hauled supplies on skis, even funerals were held with mourners and pallbearers gliding smoothly along on skis.

It wasn't long before various snowbound communities throughout the "Lost Sierra" region of Plumas County had skiers competing against each other.

Mining towns with colorful names like Poker Flat, Whiskey Diggings and La Porte all sponsored longboard ski teams that would race each other for cash prizes that could reach \$1,000. The sport became organized when Creed Raymond founded the Alturas Snowshoe Club at La Porte in late 1866.

The Alturas Club was founded for the physical and mental well being of the miners during the winter months. Elected ski club officers codified the rules for how the races would be run. Early courses were 100 feet wide, up to 1,800 feet long, and ran straight down the mountain. The start and finish lines were marked with American flags. Racers ran in heats of two to four skiers at a time with the winners advancing to the next round in a single elimination format.

Defending women's champion, Kina Nemeth of Truckee, placed third this year. Allison Youngs, from Quincy, won the women's races. Phil Gallagher from Meadow Valley, Calif. took first place this year, after coming in second in 2006.



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Photo by Mark McLaughlin

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With no chairlifts or rope tows available, winning contestants had to hike back up the mountain in order to run the next heat. The boards were long, heavy, and with no side cut to aid in turning. It was all about speed.

In 1867, Lotti Joy shot down La Porte's 1,230-foot-long race slope at 49 miles per hour to set the earliest women's speed record. Soon the longboards reached 16 feet in length and in 1874, Tommy Todd schussed down at 88 mph. Not bad for a guy on skis that didn't turn and the only way to stop was to straddle a wooden pole to use it as a rudder and brake.

It's not unreasonable to say that these pioneer skiers were the fastest humans on the planet at that time.

Picking Planks

According to a Plumas Ski Club pamphlet, "The longboard skis were constructed of tight, vertical-grained Douglas fir. The skis were shaped with planes, the groove on the bottom with a special 'grooving' plane, and the tips bent by a long steaming process."

There was no mention of weight, but some pairs of these skis weigh more than 25 pounds. At the Johnsville course, contestants weaved with the weight as they carried the longboards up the ski slope to the starting line.

Bindings consisted only of two pieces of leather attached to the sides with three or four holes on each side for lacing tight. A small block of wood was attached to the ski to hold the heel in place. For starting and stopping, a six-foot long single stout pole with a block at one end was employed.

Starting was accomplished by making three or four strong lunging thrusts, while stopping was matter of sitting on the pole to apply pressure, creating a drag and at the same time, a spectacular 'rooster tail' of snow.

Breaking poles are not uncommon, and in the 2006 competition several snapped, hence the nickname "soprano sticks."

A strong start is key in a race of this type, but it's the wax or "dope" that is most important. Doping the boards involves applying concoctions of tree oils, pine pitch, turpentine, and even the brow of the sperm whale, as well as other ingredients to the ski bottoms. The recipes to these waxy substances were closely guarded secrets among 19th century dopemakers, a tradition that continues today.

Many of the top skiers at the recent races brought their own homemade longboards and used their best dope for the changing snow surface conditions.

The winners of the 2008 Annual World Longboard Ski Championships this weekend were Allison Youngs, from nearby Quincy, California, who won the women's races. Phil Gallagher from Meadow Valley, Calif. took first place this year, after coming in second in 2006. The defending women's champion, Kina Nemeth, from Truckee, placed third this year.