

CROSS COUNTRY SKIER

THE JOURNAL OF NORDIC SKIING
WWW.CROSSCOUNTRYSKIER.COM



NOV 2010
VOL 30.2



INTO THE WILDERNESS
DIRECTORY OF
NORDIC CENTERS
HARDWOOD HILLS
VISTA VERDE

EVENT PROFILE: SISU MARATHON

by Mike Ivey

Western Upper Michigan's "Big Snow Country" has long been known to the alpine ski crowd. Blessed with 200 inches of lake effect snow annually, downhill areas have attracted skiers since the 1960s.

But Nordic skiing has made inroads in recent years, as well, with for-profit ABR and non-profit Wolverine Nordic taking advantage of the abundant snowfall and hilly terrain. Still, it has been hard to make inroads with businesses looking to revive a region that's struggled economically since the closing of the iron ore mines a generation ago.

"There was a day when everyone figured cross country skiers only ate granola bars and pitched a tent," says DeeGee Pawlicki, executive director of the Western U.P. Visitors and Convention Bureau.

That attitude continues to change and was helped by the inaugural SISU Ski Festival last year in Ironwood. The second running of the event will take place Saturday, Jan. 15, 2011. "Sisu" is a Finnish word meaning strength, determination and stubbornness — a nod to the hearty settlers who immigrated to Upper Michigan's Gogebic Range in the early 1900s to toil in the deep underground mines.

Last year, more than 400 skiers participated in the 42-kilometer SISU marathon, the 20 km half-marathon and the short "Taste and Tour," which combines skiing with eating at a half-dozen food stops. All of the events end with a downtown finish on the snow-covered city streets à la the Mora Vasaloppet or American Birkebeiner. New for 2011 are free two km and five km kids races on Friday.

Duluth's Adam Swank won the men's SISU skate marathon last year with Ironwood's Paulette Niemi taking the women's featured event. Both plan to defend their titles in 2011.

"They pulled it off really well without any glitches, which is hard to do the first year," says Swank, who counts a third-place Birkie finish in 2009 among his many race accomplishments.

A physician by day, Swank can often be found taking advantage of the early season snow in Ironwood, which sits just across the border from Hurley Wis., about two hours east of Duluth on U.S. 2.

"Ironwood has the best snow in the Midwest, perfect terrain and they're developing a great cross country scene," he says.

SISU organizers are hoping to top the 1,000-skier mark this year

as word spreads of the early-season marathon event, the outstanding snow conditions and the post-race festivities at the landmark Ironwood Theater.

"I think everybody felt relieved it went so well," says 2011 race director Geneva Smiles, the community coordinator at Grandview Health Systems.

It wasn't easy. From the beginning, organizers faced some skepticism from the local business community who didn't see the potential of a cross country ski race. Despite the success of nearby events like the Birkie in Hayward, Wis. and the Noquemanon in Marquette, Mich., the old stereotypes about Nordic skiing persisted. This summer, there was still some grumbling in Ironwood about the closed streets and traffic interruptions.

But Ironwood Mayor Bob Burchell — a major race booster who skied the inaugural event -- says the SISU Ski Fest isn't just about generating tourism dollars. He says it showcases the historic buildings of Ironwood and brings pride to the city, which saw its population fall from 18,000 in the 1930s to just over 6,000 today.

"This is more about our whole community than just trying to fill motel rooms," says Burchell, owner of the Classic Motel. "It's something for the locals to get involved with. We had over 200 volunteers last year and I think they were as excited as the skiers."

The cross country ski scene in Ironwood got a big boost with the opening of ABR Trails in 1995. The ski touring center has been steadily expanding and now features 60 kilometers of trails. Thanks to big Lake Superior 15 miles due north,





“SISU” IS A FINNISH WORD MEANING STRENGTH, DETERMINATION AND STUBBORNNESS — A NOD TO THE HEARTY SETTLERS WHO IMMIGRATED TO UPPER MICHIGAN’S GOGEBIC RANGE IN THE EARLY 1900S TO TOIL IN THE DEEP UNDERGROUND MINES.

the ski season can run from November to April.

ABR co-owner Eric Anderson had long dreamed of a cross country ski marathon in his hometown. His first idea was to start the race at ABR, wind through private land and finish at the Wolverine Nordic trails about five miles away. The logistics, however, made it untenable.

But the idea for a point-to-point marathon really took off with the establishment of the “Miners Heritage Trail” through a reclaimed mining site just east of downtown. It provided a better route into the city, a chance to showcase the new trail and the opportunity for a Main Street finish.

“I’d always had this idea for a marathon but it was a lot more than one touring center could handle,” says Anderson. “What really made it possible was when all these other people got involved.”

The 2011 SISU will again start at ABR, with buses shuttling skiers and spectators back and forth throughout the day. The course has been tweaked and widened to eliminate some bottlenecks. Also, skiers will only tackle a small piece of the steep Peltonen

Pass trail, a change from 2010.

“We received about 150 comments from racers last year and one thing they wanted was more room to pass and fewer big hills,” says Anderson.

After leaving the ABR system, both the long and short races continue on toward Ironwood via a combination of private land, an old railroad grade and the Miners Heritage Trail. One last climb takes skiers past the 50-foot tall Hiawatha Indian statue before the final downhill dash to the line.

“I don’t think it’s going to be as grueling as last year,” says race director Smiles.

One thing organizers don’t have to worry about is enough snow, something that has plagued other marathons.

“January is our peak snow season, so we should be good there,” says Anderson. “My only worry would be bitter cold, but since we’re so close to the lake, it’s more moderate than inland areas.”

For details visit www.sisuskifest.com.



Mike Ivey is a writer based in Madison, Wis. and a long-time cross country skier.

