

Cayuga Nordic Ski Club attracts all abilities, styles

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Steve Folsom teaches his 21/2-year-old daughter, Grace, how to cross-country ski last weekend in the Highland Forest. The Folsoms are members of the Cayuga Nordic Ski Club, which was established in 1984 and boasts a membership of around 100. / HOLLY FOLSOM / PROVIDED PHOTO

ITHACA — As winter draws to a close, there are some who hope Ithaca's unpredictable weather will yield at least one more snowstorm.

For members of the Cayuga Nordic Ski Club (CNSC), a landscape swathed in white means strapping on cross-country skis and gliding through forests, touring with friends, the occasional race, and introducing children and adults to the sport.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, a small group of snow enthusiasts met at the top of Beam Hill near Dryden. Yvette de Boer, a sixth-grade science teacher and avid skier, led a line of 10 brightly clad adults and children through the forest to a cleared, snowy circle.

“Simon says, ‘Go around the circle on one ski,’” de Boer called out. The club’s youngest members launched themselves into the game, seemingly unperturbed by the occasional slip or fall.

Warmed up, the group moved on to a small hill, where de Boer demonstrated the “snow plow.” Turning the tips of her skis together into a “V,” she controlled her downward momentum and eased to a halt at the bottom.

“Bend your knees, so if you do fall, you don’t have so far to go,” she instructed the children.

Soon, they were sliding and plowing down the hill with gusto, then scrambling up the slope again.

“The whole purpose of our meeting is to get kids to be social with one another and develop this life-long love of skiing,” de Boer said. “It’s not about trying to go fast or trying to learn how to ski. Those are all secondary. It’s mostly about enjoying that time outside together.”

The club

Enjoying the snow with fellow skiers was one of the motivations that drove de Boer’s father Tobias, now a professor emeritus of engineering at Cornell University, to found the CNSC in 1984.

Since then, more than 100 individuals and families from around Ithaca have joined the club.

The CNSC’s membership runs the gamut, from beginners to serious racers and from octogenarians like Tobias de Boer to 2-year-olds who try on their first skis at one of his daughter’s classes.

Kids’ classes led by Yvette de Boer draw as many as 30 children and 20 adults at one time. And this year, Mitch Collinsworth, a veteran of several ski-orienteeing world cups and championships, has added training for middle-school-age skiers, which will expand to include high-schoolers next year.

Adult novices take their first kicks and glides during clinics on local golf courses, while more advanced skiers brush up on their technique or add another style of cross-country skiing — skating — to their repertoire.

“Classic style is the one you usually see,” said Dan Karig, the CNSC vice-president and a retired geology professor. “It’s like a linked, standing broad jump. You’re jumping from one foot to another and then gliding on one ski. It’s demanding and takes a lot of balance. If you see somebody doing it right, it’s very elegant.”

Skating, or freestyle, “is almost like regular ice-skating,” Karig said. “The skis are going out at an angle.”

The club’s racing members often practice both styles with great success. Five years ago, Karig, now 75, skied to second place in the Masters World Cup, which draws elite athletes from around the world. Tobias de Boer, for his part, completed the Canadian ski marathon — 160 kilometers (100 miles) in two days — twice over the years.

“The number of racers has dwindled,” club president Jack Rueckheim says of the handful of CNSC competitors. “It’s hard to train when there’s no snow on the ground, so people don’t feel ready to race. Plus, some of us have just gotten old.”

Nevertheless, the club’s annual Cayuga Nordic Classic Ski Race at Hammond Hill draws dozens of skiers from around the region, many of them fellow members of the New York State Ski Racing Association, the race’s sanctioning body.

More than anything, the CNSC is about bringing people together.

“It’s a touring club,” Karig said. “We have whole series of tours. Every weekend, given the right snow conditions.”

While they are powerless over the snow, club members ensure that trails are properly mapped and remain in good condition.

“Ski and multiuse trails would become impassable within a couple of years if we didn’t maintain them and remove downed logs,” Karig said.

All of these activities are announced on an email listserv, the group’s main means of communication.

“The listserv is great for spur-of-the-moment tours, given the area’s unpredictable weather conditions,” Rueckheim said. “The schedule we make at the beginning of the season usually falls by the wayside.”

“It’s a challenge that the snow is not dependable,” Yvette de Boer said. “Last year, it was really abominable, and we could only hold the kids’ class once or twice. I guess we could do activities without snow, but for me the passion is to be out on snow.”

In the end, she says, skiing is so much more than just a sport.

“Along with the physical movement,” she said, “I love the variety on trails — the pushing up the hills, gliding fast on downs, taking turns, cruising on the flats ... it’s just really play time for me. I think it just brings me a sense of inner peace.”