

Making Tracks: the History of the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club

Early Ski Tracks in Whitehorse

Cross country skiing's humble beginnings in the Yukon was dominated by new arrivals of Scandinavian decent. In 1883, when a Finn named Sammy Rido arrived in the North, he fashioned himself a pair of skis and proceeded to ski to the region where Dawson City now is. Years later, in 1934, a Norwegian named Arnie Anderson managed to get a track cleared on the descent from the Midnight Sun Dome down to Dawson and soon afterwards people were racing down the hill.

Skiing began to take off in Whitehorse in 1942, when Anderson moved to the once small town in the southern Yukon, which was then booming due to the construction of the Alaska Highway. That year, Anderson managed to get a ski jump built behind the hospital. In the meantime, a ski chalet was constructed and the Yukon Ski Runners were formed. The club served both cross country and downhill skiers. In 1948, Anderson was the aggregate champion for an international competition in Alaska consisting of cross country skiing, jumping, and giant slalom.



Credit: Yukon Archives, W. Al Turner collection, 87/102, #27.

1950 saw the establishment of a rival ski club. This one was run by the Royal Canadian Air Force and was called the Roundell Ski Club. The new club constructed a ski hill and rope tow on a hill behind the Valleyview subdivision, now known as Telemark Hill. The two clubs merged in the 1960s, becoming the Whitehorse Ski Club and opening another ski hill on Haeckel Hill.

While downhill skiing seemed to be making significant inroads in Whitehorse, cross country skiing slowly gathered steam. A major promoter of cross country skiing was Gordon Ryder, who was greatly involved in both competitive and back country skiing. In addition to travelling to various competitions across Canada, he organized numerous multi-day trips. These included trips up to Fish Lake as well as tours from Carcross and Log Cabin to Skagway.

While downhill competitions were held on the various ski hills, a number of cross country competitions also occurred through the winter, such as Rendezvous cross country ski races. During Rendezvous of 1968, a 15 kilometre race started from the Bishop Coudert residence and went roughly half way up Grey Mountain. Gordon Ryder won this race with a time of thirty-nine minutes and four seconds.

The Great Experiment

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s events were transpiring in other parts of northern Canada that would impact Whitehorse and leave a cross country skiing legacy that is difficult to ignore decades later. In 1955, Catholic missionary Father Jean-Marie Mouchet and RCMP officer P.A. Robin started a cross country skiing program as a way of instilling physical conditioning among the Gwich'in of Old Crow. The two believed that this type of physical activity was fundamental to the Gwich'in people's survival. It did not take long for the Old Crow skiers to get a taste of international success. In March 1962, they travelled to Fairbanks, Alaska for the All-Alaska Cross-Country Ski Races. In these races, Old Crow skiers Ben Charlie and Erwin Linklater were first and third respectively in the men's race while Susie Linklater and Alice Frost were first and second in the women's race.

The success of the ski program did not go unnoticed and Father Mouchet was invited by the Northwest Territories Recreation Department to develop an outdoor education program in Inuvik. From this the Territorial Experimental Ski Training (TEST) Program was born. In 1967, the program in Inuvik was taken over by Bjorger Pettersen, who would later be highly influential in bringing the World Cup to Whitehorse.

In Father Mouchet's absence from the territory, cross country skiing in the Yukon suffered a setback. An editorial in the *Whitehorse Star* appeared on January 15, 1968 lamenting that due to a lack of funds for physical fitness and Father Mouchet's being "promoted to the NWT," no skiers from Old Crow were present at the Olympic trials in Quebec. Looking ahead to the

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forthcoming Arctic Winter Games, the newspaper warned: “Let’s make sure the Yukon is ready this time.”

As this editorial appeared, plans were already well underway to re-establish a ski program in the Yukon. A cross country skiing program had started up again in Old Crow in 1966. In addition to Father Mouchet’s efforts, the program was helped along by teachers Beth-Anne Exham and Irene Brekke as well as the principle of the school, Dave Brekke.

In 1968, the TEST Program made its first inroads in Whitehorse. The Brekkes had moved to Whitehorse and – with Father Mouchet – undertook an experiment to see if the program would take root in the city. The experiment was run out of Takhini Elementary School. The topography of the area lent itself well to the creation of challenging ski trails and Dave Brekke was the school principle. As a result, a three kilometre loop was cut and during the winter of 1968-1969 and Whitehorse saw its first of many TEST participants. The TEST Program was not for the faint hearted and skiers earned badges for training in extremely cold temperatures. Over the winter the new trails played host to a number of events. In January, an Invitational Race was held for skiers from Old Crow. Additionally, the Gordon Taylor Memorial Race was hosted on the trails – named in honour of Charlie and Betty Taylor’s son. TEST also hosted a long distance ski tour called the Skiathon and eventually Saturday races became the norm. These events saw skiers from Alaska and western Canada.

The goal of TEST was to develop kids at an age when their muscles were developing. To fulfill this goal, a great amount of volunteer and community spirit was required. As the cross country ski trail system expanded, Whitehorse hosted more events. In 1972, the city hosted the Arctic Winter Games (AWG). Consequently, a ski stadium needed to be constructed and buildings were required. Gordon Ryder provided many materials to get the job done and the Yukon Government donated old buildings as “ski shacks.”



Credit: Yukon Archives, Whitehorse Star Ltd. Fonds, 82/562, f. 136, #125.

After having hosted in AWG, the TEST ski trails were the site for numerous other large competitions. In 1974, the Canadian Junior Cross Country Ski Championships came to Whitehorse, an event was for athletes nineteen years of age and younger. Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau was designated Honorary Patron of the event.



PRIME MINISTER · PREMIER MINISTRE

It is with great pleasure that I accept the position of Honorary Patron of the 1974 Canadian Junior Cross Country Ski Championships in Whitehorse.

The excellent program developed by the Territorial Experimental Ski Training organization - and the results of the program, evident in the top-notch performances of young northern skiers - are well known to me. At the same time, great enthusiasm for cross country skiing is producing some fine young skiers in Southern Canada as well. The competition for the 1974 Junior Championships will, I know, be tremendously keen and exciting.

To all skiers competing in the Championships I send my very best wishes for success.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau

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1 9 7 4.

Credit: Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club.

Meanwhile, in March 1977 the city's trails were the site of the Shell National Cross Country Ski Championships. Although these championships were national, the level of competition was international as skiers arrived from the United States and Sweden. The very first race of the championships was 30 kilometres. This was won in convincing fashion by Swede Sven-Ake Lundbeack, whose previous accomplishments included a gold medal in the 15 kilometre race at the 1972 Olympics. Hans Skinstad was the top Canadian, finishing third overall. Meanwhile, Sharon Firth won the women's ten kilometre race. In the relay, the Swedish team won the women's event ahead of the Alberta team (which included Sharon and Shirley Firth) and the

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United States team won the men's relay. In honour of his efforts to promote cross country skiing in the North, Father Mouchet was named the event's Honorary Patron.

Volunteers were extraordinarily crucial to the success of TEST. Although not much of a skier himself, Don Sumanik's wife and two sons were avid cross country skiers. His sons were participants in the TEST Program and his wife, Elsie, became a competitive cross country skier as well. Consequently, Sumanik became an active volunteer. Much of this involved the maintenance of the ski trails and – as Sumanik worked early in the morning – he rose at two in the morning in order to track set the trails before work. After hosting the 1977 National Championships, Sumanik envisioned much greater things for the Whitehorse skiing community and the newly developed trail system. He wanted Whitehorse to host the World Cup. One final national calibre event held in the Whitehorse ski trails prior to the World Cup was the Canadian Junior Championships in 1980.