

## Ski Club History

The Hay River Ski Club biathlon facility and regular trail systems, laid out around a cozy clubhouse nestled in the midst of a forest of spruce and aspen, traces an interesting and very northern history.

The first skiers in Hay River were recreational skiers who used Vale Island as an early site. They established trail networks throughout the spruce woods adjacent to Great Slave Lake. Later this group initiated a move out to a site 15 km. south of Hay River. This location provided the added feature of the elevated riverbanks and picturesque river valley skiing. At the same time, the Hay River Elks made an ambitious commitment to developing the area into a nine-hole golf course. What has evolved is a remarkable year-round facility with outstanding recreational opportunities for all seasons.

The Northwest Territories has a proud tradition of participation in cross country skiing. The T.E.S.T. (Territorial Experimental Ski Training) program which began in Inuvik in the early 70's developed young northern skiers who excelled at the sport. Twin sisters, Sharon and Shirley Firth, went on to become the most celebrated skiers in Canada's cross country skiing history. These athletes along with their Mackenzie delta team-mates formed the nucleus of Canada's national cross country ski team in their day. They represented our country in world championships and winter Olympic games. This inspiration percolated throughout the north and inspired ski club development in small settlements and larger communities alike. In the mid 1970's Sport North established itself, providing support for various ski development programs. The Arctic Winter Games came into their own at this time, doing much to encourage the development of skiing in the Northwest Territories. Hay River was the site for the cross-country ski competition in the 1978 Arctic Winter Games.

## Trails:

The Hay River Elks were formidable early course and facility builders. Through the work of dedicated Elks club volunteers who gave countless hours to developing this recreational area, the site took shape to accommodate both golf and ski programs. Thank you to Rein Langner for the Elks Club chronology which follows:

### Evolution of The Hay River Elks Golf Course

1970 - The Hay River Elks Lodge received their charter. The Lodge had been raising funds and contributing to various community organizations, concentrating on children and youth activities.

1977 - The Lodge had accumulated approximately \$20,000. It was decided that the Lodge should undertake a community project of their own. A committee was struck, headed by Mearl Smith, to search out a suitable project. The Committee recommended the development of the golf course in the river valley. The lease of the land from the GNWT was arranged, and an engineering firm from Vancouver was commissioned to design and lay out the course.

**1978** - During the winter of 1978 Stan Dean and Sons was contracted to clear, pile and burn the brush.

**1979** - In the summer the fairways were broken up with a disk breaker. By this time the available funds were depleted. Of course The Elks Lodge had no equipment and relied on volunteer labour by members.

Herb Uhlenberg displayed extraordinary ingenuity in sourcing equipment. He located an old Ford tractor for sale, arranged to buy it, repaint it Elk's purple and transport it to the golf course. The tractor looked sharp, but the engine was worn

out. Herb and Rein Langner removed the engine, sent it out to Edmonton for rebuild. Transportation was provided for free, on a back haul, by Grimshaw Trucking. Herb Uhlenberg and Rein Langner reassembled the tractor. This tractor was too small to do much useful work at this time, however later it was used to operate the broadcast seeder, pull some harrows, and to pull a water wagon. A club house foundation was poured, and a base floor was laid.

The Katimivik organization had a team in Hay River, which was looking for work experience for young people. Although building a log building was not exactly what they were looking for, logs were provided and during the winter a few logs were laid down for a Club House building.

**1980** - HERB Uhlenberg got a lead on a larger Massey-Ferguson Tractor that The DOT was retiring at the airport. The Elks purchased this tractor. Herb arranged for the loan of an agricultural disk, and during this summer Herb, Lloyd Griffin, and Rein Langner spent many evenings and weekends disking and dragging the fairways and driving range. A lot of stumps, roots, and rocks turned up. Several work bees were held, with the Ladies of the Royal Purple bringing out lunch for the workers. In the meantime, fairway seed and greens seed was purchased. The seed needed to be stored out of the weather. Rein Langner arranged for the provision of a surplus metal skid storage building at no cost.

**1981** - With further disking, dragging, and work bees for picking roots and rocks, the fairways were ready for seeding. Herb also got a line on some 10,000 feet of PVC plastic water line for future irrigation. The greens were laid out. A couple greens were seeded. It became obvious that the greens would require regular watering. This was done via a trailer with tank. Water was pumped and hauled from the river.

**1982** - It became obvious that natural grass on the greens was not viable. Sand was put on the remaining greens. Herb searched out a new five gang fairway mower for around \$10,000.

**1983** - Additional work was done on the fairways and greens. It also became obvious that a caretaker would be required, as the maintenance was more than volunteer labour could handle. Others decided to organize the Golf Club. The Elks turned operation of the facility over to the Golf Club.

Although Elks Lodge members helped at work bees and some non-members also provided assistance when the reality of a golf course became apparent. For example, The South Mackenzie Correctional Centre guests cleared underbrush along the fairways.

Members who deserve special mention are:

Mearl Smith – Arranged for the original land lease and engineering plan. Arranged to provide electric service to the site at an affordable cost, thanks to Alberta Power (Northland.) Mearl moved away before the course became playable.

Lloyd Griffin – Organized and operated the Saturday night bingo, and the occasional regular bingo. Without the funds provided by these activities this project would have been impossible. Lloyd also assisted operating machinery and with physical labour.

Herb Uhlenberg – Sourced material, supplies and equipment, repaired and maintained equipment, operated equipment.

Rein Langner – Was the ER when this project was initiated. Assisted with repair and maintenance of equipment. Provided a storage building, provided loan of equipment, assisted with the TV bingos, operated equipment and provided general labour.

(The latest update (above) comes thanks to the work of Elks' pioneer, Rein Lagner. Rein was back in Hay River for the Hay River Homecoming in the summer of 2013. At that time, he expressed an interest in updating some of the early facility history. This update has been added to this site in January 2014. Thank you, Rein.)

The Hay River Ski Club worked Classical ski trails on both sides of the Hay River up until the early 1980's. This meant for a later start to the season in those days since so much of a base had to be packed before the track setter could cut the trails. Even then, wooded trail sections opened up only as the heavier snow accumulations arrived.

In recent years skating trails have been excellent in early November and there is often excellent skiing through into late April! The present trail system has state of the art lighting and is

arguably the longest lit trail system in North America. In addition, the Hay River ski facility and clubhouse are open for skiing twenty-four hours a day from November to April.

## **Biathlon:**

Biathlon facilities began with a range situated on the ice surface of the Hay River. It was certainly a challenging and frosty experience for athletes, spectators, and officials since the range lacked any shelter and was subject to some hefty breezes winding down the Hay River gorge.

In the 1980's the first site was cleared for a biathlon range adjacent to the parking area and close to the golf/ski clubhouse. These facilities grew from tents, with air-tight wood stoves, in the first few years, to the present wood framed and windowed palace dubbed "Home on the Range". The shooting range itself is lit throughout the season and provides perfect training facilities for biathletes of all skill levels.



## **Buildings:**

The first ski club building at the present site was a 12' x 12' spruce log cabin built on the heights of the south side of the Hay River. Pat Bobinski, Bruce Green and a crew of club volunteers put this building together in the mid 70's. It is still in use, mostly as a staging spot for trail signs, and as every skier's postcard start to the classic Solitude Trail. In the fall of 2000, the cabin went under



renovations with the addition of a new roof, floor, windows and a new stove. The cabin will be a great retreat for warming up in, staging training or spending a night under the stars.

Railway cars served as the clubhouse and storage facility in the early 1980's. The youth group Katimavik spent a year at the site in 1980, living in the railway cars and starting up a log

building intended to house golf and skiing. It was quite an adventure for the youth group who had lots of energy but lacked the resources to carry off this ambitious task.

At the end of that year this tentative structure was dismantled. The Hay River Elks undertook a serious construction project, gathering volunteers and professional Log builders, to create a large log facility. This construction was a credit to the Elks and the incredible volunteer community in Hay River. It was a large high ceiling log building with a kitchenette, a separate ski club room with its own entrance, two wood stoves, and situated high up on the bank of the Hay River overlooking the river valley below.



### **Ski and Golf Facility Constructed by the Hay River Elks**

## **Rebuilding:**

A devastating fire in the winter of 1991 completely destroyed the Hay River Golf & Ski Club. Formidable leadership in the Hay River Community at this time came from the Hay River Elks under president Gary Hoffman, the Hay River Ski Club represented by Pat Bobinski and Rick Holmes, the Hay River Community Recreation Board, presided over by Dave MacDonald, and the Hay River Golf Club under President Rick Babkirk.

This team and their members used their energies to rebuild the facility. With support from the Territorial government and the local representative, John Pollard, core resources were made available. The new facility celebrates the energy and vision of golfers, skiers, biathletes, and the community of Hay River at large.

There is, at present, a magnificent log golf clubhouse with outstanding facilities. The ski club building with the recently added waxing room is ideal for families, racers, and touring ski enthusiasts. For big ski events, such as the annual Ptub Race, both buildings open wide to capacity crowds.

