

Runner Sledding in Montville, Maine

The Greatest Happiness at the Least Expense

by Bridget Rose McKeen

One of Maine's oldest recreational activities, runner sledding, is regaining popularity. This was clearly seen at Hogback Mountain's new runner sled track in Montville. Though the season recently came to a close, Hogback Mountain is making preparations for next year and sledders enthusiastically await further improvements to this "coasting" destination.

Coasting is the traditional term for sledding. The sleds used are the old style you see in the hardware store window or mounted on the wall of your grandfather's barn from a century ago.

Hogback Mountain's 1,800 foot long track provides ideal runner sledding conditions and eliminates obstacles and hazards. A steep start allows for speed and momentum through the long, gradual curve in the middle. A separate walking path makes a short hike to the top and keeps pedestrians off the track. The New England Runner Sledding Association (NERSA) is currently working with Hogback Mountain on a "Sure Sledding" video to educate coasters about safe sledding practices, increasing the overall safety and fun of this historical sport.

"Coasting can be fun without being dangerous," said sled track designer G.W. Martin.

Martin and his family built a 2,000 foot wooden fence, with lumber they milled on their farm where the track is located. The fence protects sledders and displays banners recognizing the business sponsors who helped fund the project. A light over each banner illuminates the track for night time sledding. A pond-fed sprinkler system mists the track, creating a firm ice base which stays frozen throughout the season. Despite



low snow volume in the early winter this year, the track was able to be groomed and maintained.

Runner sledders and supporters of all ages, from near and far, gathered at Hogback Mountain for the 18th annual New England Runner Sled Championships. The February event was open to everyone free of charge, thanks to the generosity of individuals and business sponsors. Many people came just to watch the races or try out runner sledding for the first time. More experienced coasters competed in races but were also very welcoming to newcomers, sharing information and advice.

"It brings so many people together," said Arlita Trahan of Monmouth, "and all types of people too."

Many Hogback Mountain visitors are local but others travel great distances from around the state and beyond, finding lodging in motels, inns and air B and B's. Derek Nevers of Berwick comes up for the weekend every year with friends and family. He appreciates "the wide range of ages. You've got old guys, young kids, all coming together. It's a beautiful thing."

NERSA organizes the championship races at Hogback Mountain as well as other races around the state, including at Lost Valley in Auburn. About 200 spectators attended this year's championships as well as 47 adult racers, 11 junior racers and 7

junior junior racers.

"I just like the speed," said junior race competitor Ian Lucas.

The adult race is for ages 16 and up (with some racers well into their senior years). This year's champion and NERSA President, Brian Trahan, has won five other championship races.

"What is interesting about it," he said "is that every time I won, it was on a different sled."

The winner earns the title of "Fastest Runner Sledder in All the Land" and a trophy sled with plaques naming past champions. 2nd place went to Kerry Merrifield of Knox and 3rd to Chris Johnstone of Fairfield, Connecticut.

In the Junior division, ages 9 to 15, Elijah Dayan took first place. Benton Dayan had 2nd place and Whit Martin 3rd. The Junior winners also receive trophies and the first place winner gets to take home a trophy sled, with plaques of all past Junior champions.

"The way down is my favorite part," said 9-year-old Dixie Dayan. "It's awesome."



Mavrik Fowler of Thorndike is ready to slide.

First place in the Junior Junior division, ages 8 and under, went to Josephine Trahan, 2nd place to Emmaline Trahan and 3rd to Ismar Rebmann. 4-year-old Emmaline said her favorite thing about runner sledding is “Racing. And I got a trophy too.”

The 2-week period leading up to and following the Championships were Hogback Mountain’s busiest of the season, with visitors sliding down over 2,000 times.

Having a designated runner sledding track was a big improvement for the New England Runner Sled Championships. In previous years, the event had taken place on various back roads and pastures. This created occasional challenges for NERSA, land owners, volunteers and local authorities. Snow removal for parking had been difficult and costly in years when the races were held in more remote locations. Selectmen and firemen had occasionally taken issue with the races happening on a dead end town road, trying their best to prohibit such activity. One year, many volunteers were needed to shovel snow back onto the road which had been sanded, so the race could go on. This is nothing new to coasters however.

A notice from the local newspaper in 1826 describes a coasting ban on town roads. “...if any of our children shall, at any time hereafter, coast in any of the streets or highways in the town of Belfast, that it shall be lawful, for any person of age, to demolish the sled...”

“The Boys of Coasting is an old club,” Martin commented.

Coasting has been a mode of transportation and winter sport for most of human history. Originally made of solid wood, steerable sleds with flexible steel runners appeared in the late 1800’s. Recreational coasting reached peak popularity in World War I, through the great depression and World War II eras. During these times of economic hardship, coasting pro-



Hogback Mountain’s well lit ice track

vided high levels of fun at a low cost. Maine company, Paris Manufacturing, became a popular runner sled builder. Flexible Flyer, now owned in Maine as well and still making sleds today, is the most renown producer of runner sleds.

Collecting, sharing and trading runner sleds, many of them antique, is a big part of sledding events. Collectors attending this year’s event had traveled to New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and other states to pick up truckloads of sleds. The Flexible Flyer Airline series of the pre-WWII era is a favorite among collectors. A fleet of tuned up sleds have been donated to Hogback Mountain for visitors to use.

The dozens of sponsors and volunteers, who make it possible for the Hogback Mountain sled track to be free and open to coasters of all ages, are known as “Team Hogback.” Members of Team Hogback can expect a visit from Martin as he gathers sponsorship renewals. New business sponsors can also join the team.

The NERSA facebook page and runnersledding.com post open hours, track conditions, a list of Team Hogback sponsors, sponsorship opportunities, contacts and other information.

The Hogback Mountain runner sled track is open whenever coasting conditions are favorable. Sleds and helmets are available for visitors to use. Runner sledding is a fun, healthy, inexpensive and environmentally friendly activity everyone can enjoy.



Solomon Dayan of Montville coasts.