

Set your sights high: Northern Michigan has so much to ski

By KIMBERLEE ROTH

It's winter in northern Michigan, and after several years of low snowfall, we're finally wading in white. Whether you prefer Alpine or Nordic skiing, slalomming down the slopes or gliding along watching the scenery of the woods, our area offers a trail for everyone.

Pete LaPlaca, 56, a Traverse area resident and VASA trail board member, said the trail is "one of the top ski venues in the Midwest, and the beauty of it is that it's free." (Though donations at the trailhead are encouraged and appreciated).

This year, three new pathways were added to the trail, the 5K Headwaters Trail, a 3K loop and a snowshoeing trail.

"People were fearful because of the hills. On these loops, they can enjoy the pathways without the hills," said LaPlaca, who began cross-country skiing when he was 50.

Last year he won his first medal in the VASA's 27K classic race, which he finished in just under two-and-one-half hours.

For this year's race on Saturday, Feb. 10, organizers have added a non-competitive 12K touring category open to all ages. Participants pay a lower entry fee and receive a race bib, but they won't be timed.

LaPlaca said that the number of senior skiers is definitely increasing, in part because of the physical benefits.

"It's the number one aerobic exercise. It burns more calories than anything else and works all the major muscle groups," said LaPlaca. "And, in general, people are much more active today. They're retiring earlier. Many are in very good physical condition all year round, cross training by biking and kayaking in summer, but Nordic skiing is their sport of choice."

To get started, LaPlaca recommends taking a lesson, offered through area ski resorts, including Crystal Mountain, Shanty Creek, The Homestead and Timber Ridge.

"Don't get in over your head. Build up to it. Otherwise you'll come back having used muscles you don't ordinarily use, and you'll be sore."

Boots should fit "like a glove" and don't forget to take fluids out on the trail with you, since dehydration can occur quickly, even in winter.

Susan Brian, 32, recreation and Nordic ski manager at Crystal Mountain has been teaching skiing for 12 years.

She recommends using the most current equipment possible.

"Equipment has really progressed to help people catch on quicker and enjoy the sport more. Using older equipment could hinder performance."

Brian also suggested starting out slowly, especially if you've been sedentary, and setting and working toward a goal.

"It's helpful to have a ski buddy. It can be easier than on your own; it provides a support system."

Fran Hays, 82, an Alpine ski instructor at The Homestead and avid skier, recommends getting started with lessons to learn the basics like stopping and turning, which give new skiers confidence. New equipment is important too.

"Today, skis are more responsive and sensitive, which makes for much faster learning," said Hays.

Tim Brick, owner of Brick Wheels in Traverse City, agrees. "Ski manufacturers are trying to make it easier and more fun and to grow the market. The perception used to be that downhill skiing was for elite, highly aerobically fit people. Now they're varying the flexibility of skis and shortening them, while still getting good performance, and there's been a whole revolution in bindings."

Brick's mother, 77, went out skiing with her grandchildren last week.

"The kids are beside themselves that Grandma can ski," he said. "The neat thing about skiing is that it makes a great family event. It's a great equalizer; gravity always works, regardless of your age."

"It's also a matter of mental approach," said Hays. "It's just great to be out. This is beautiful country. You can have as much fun on a blue or green run as kids have on black runs. If you've been physically active and can walk, there's no reason why you can't learn to ski."



Resources and Runs

Over the Hill Gang www.skiersover50.com 719-389-0022
The country's largest organization of baby boomer and older skiers. Founded in 1977, the 6000-member group offers a variety of membership benefits. \$40/year.

The Master Skier magazine An Escanaba-based publication catering to skiers and racers. www.masterskier.com
m skier@chartermi.net 906-789-1139

The Homestead www.thehomesteadresort.com Glen Arbor
231-334-5000 231-334-5121 for ski conditions Alpine and Nordic skiing Seniors over 62 ski free anytime.

Shanty Creek www.shantycreek.com Bellaire 1-800-678-4111 Alpine and Nordic skiing Special rates for seniors 55 to 69. 70 and over receive a free season pass. Holds a Silver Streak week in January with special lodging rates and free

skiing for those over 55.

Crystal Mountain www.crystalmtn.com Thompsonville
800-968-4676 Alpine and Nordic skiing Has Silver Streak program where seniors 55 and up receive half off lift tickets and trail passes, equipment rental and group lessons.

Caberfae Peaks www.caberfaepeaks.com 231-862-3000
800-968-7544 for ski conditions Alpine skiing Offers Silver Streak program on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays 50 years and older ski all day for \$14.00. Complimentary Ski Lessons and Ski Rental

For all locations, call for lodging specials, ski conditions and to confirm rates as discounts don't always apply on holidays.