

Southern-Fried Ski Racing

PLENTY OF MASTERS ARE GOING DOWNHILL FAST DOWN IN DIXIE BY BILL MCCOLLOM



Bryce Mountain:
It doesn't take a lot of
hill to be a ski racing hub.



A winning run for Phil Perkins
at the opening SARA slalom at
Bryce Mountain.



Kathy HurdCarillo carves up
the grass at Bryce Mountain.

Here's a quick quiz for all you knowledgeable masters ski racers. What two ski areas have the highest summit elevations in the East? "Sugarloaf in Maine?" you ask. Good guess, but sorry, wrong. "New York's Whiteface Mountain?" Wrong again. "Well then, how about Mt. Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak?" Nope, you lose.

The answer is Beech Mountain (5,500 feet), followed by Sugar Mountain (5,300 ft.), which are both located in North Carolina. Snowshoe Mountain in West Virginia, standing 4,800 ft. at the top of the highest lifts, is not far behind. Yes, there's skiing galore down in Dixie with ample quantities of snow, good vertical drops and a wide variety of terrain. In fact, there are 17 ski areas that comprise the Southeast Ski Areas Association. All are perched along the spine of the Appalachian Mountain chain and Blue Ridge Mountains with Wisp Resort in Maryland the most northerly and Sapphire Valley in southwest North Carolina the farthest south.

And just because this region might be out of the periphery of "mainstream" ski racing, don't think for a moment that southern skiers

can't break out of a snowplow. These mountains have produced a surprising number of nationally ranked racers over the years, and they keep on coming. Racers such as Ryan Locher, Keith Poor, Laura Scripture and Scott Venus have all flirted with the U.S. National Team, and current ski team member Scott Snow made his first turns at Bryce Mountain in Virginia.

Of course, where there's snow, there's skiing; and where there's skiing, there's ski racing; and where there's ski racing, there's masters racing. The Southern Alpine Racing Association (SARA) race schedule includes 14 masters races for the 2010-11 season at six different ski areas. The venues vary from the relatively benign slopes of Bryce Mountain to the 1,500 vertical-ft., monster, leg-burning GS on the Cup Run of Snowshoe Mountain in West Virginia.

One of the hubs of ski racing activity in the South is Bryce Mountain, which is tucked into the northeastern slopes of the Appalachian Mountain chain, a few hours from Washington, D.C. With only 500 feet of vertical, Bryce is an unlikely site for a ski racing Mecca, but

ski area manager Horst Locher makes it happen. An ex-racer and active masters athlete, Locher oversees one of the largest junior programs in the region. Legions of Bryce racers can be found at Mt. Hood in the summer, at Killington for pre-season camps, and filling the results of many of the regional races. Locher has also been SARA masters chair for as long as anyone cares to remember, and annually hosts the opening SARA races after Christmas.

"We usually get about 20 to 25 masters at the races," says Locher. "It's a good slalom but a short GS. It's a good way to get the season started." Locher explains that the masters run with the juniors in the same courses. He also welcomes masters into the weekend training sessions, which include some of the top masters in the South. Masters training programs also are in full stride at Massanutten and Sugar Mountain.

As for southern racing activity, Locher says: "There's a lot of racing going on, and many strong racing programs. Massanutten has night league racing, and the Crescent Ski Council is very active. They



USST member Scott Snow tests the new start ramp at Bryce Mountain.



Agnar Fjordholm at the 2006 Masters National Championships in Big Sky, Mont.



Kathy HurdCarillo races GS at Bryce Mountain.

come from all over the area, from Washington, D.C.; Charlotte and Greensboro to the Atlanta Ski Club, which is one of the largest in the country.”

The number of masters racers in SARA may be small, with about 25 full-time racers traveling the circuit, but like any other masters region in the country, the quality of racing at the top end is competitive. Some 75 percent of SARA racers trek to the masters national championships each year — among them are Phil Perkins, Kathy HurdCarillo, and Agnar Fjordholm.

One of the more avid SARA masters racers, Phil Perkins, was the winner of the opening slalom at Bryce. The 62-year-old Perkins is a software development engineer, and coaches and races out of Bryce Mountain. “I’ve skied all my life, but never raced until I moved from Maine to Virginia,” says Perkins, who races with his wife, Karen. “Racing made skiing more interesting, and 20 years later I’m still having fun with it.”

Perkins is not an apologist for southern skiing, despite his northeastern background. “There’s great snow down here, and plenty of it,” says Perkins. “In the 20 years that I’ve been racing, I can think of only two or three cancellations because of snow conditions.”

The Sugar Mountain GS ranks among his favorites thanks to its good vertical and varied terrain, as does nearby Massanutten,

which Perkins describes as having “lots of character.”

Speaking of characters, masters Class 4 Kathy HurdCarillo lives and races out of Bryce Mountain and is a high-energy ski racing devotee. She had spectators scrambling for their start lists when she scored a second-place finish in slalom at the 2010 Masters Nationals in Sun Valley. HurdCarillo grew up in Washington, D.C., where she became a nationally ranked figure skater. Her skating prowess led to a professional career. “I toured all over the world with the Ice Capades,” says HurdCarillo. “I skied recreationally as a kid out of Bryce, but I was so busy with skating I never gave it much time until I retired.”

At that point HurdCarillo found a home at Bryce Mountain, set up her own dance company and started teaching skiing under Horst Locher. “In the early days I’d bomb down the mountain, sitting in the backseat with my legs totally fried. I never thought to stop and rest,” says HurdCarillo. But Locher saw her carving perfect turns on grass skis and told her that she really should be racing.

“I’d spend all day with the kids and the afternoons starting the NA-STAR racers,” recalls HurdCarillo. “One day at the end of the session I took a timed run, and I was hooked.”

After a few years training with Locher, HurdCarillo started traveling to SARA races, and, seeking more competition, she gradually

increased her radius of travel to include the 2003 National Masters Championships in Park City. “In the South, there are a variety of mind sets,” says HurdCarillo. “Some are serious, some casual. This is a great place to train and race, but with only a handful of women racing here, I need a better frame of reference.”

Agnar Fjordholm has no shortage of references when it comes to ski racing. He raced as a youngster in his native Norway, raced on the U.S. pro tour, and directed the ski school at Breckenridge, Colo. “I got out of skiing when I moved to Washington, D.C., as a professional pilot,” says Fjordholm, now a Class 9 in the masters. “I didn’t ski for about 10 years, and then found out about the SARA masters circuit. I’ve been doing it ever since. Ski racing is such a pleasant diversion from daily routines. I call it my mental therapy.”

For Fjordholm, the attraction is not only in the challenge of taking on the mountain, but like every masters racing circuit around the country, it’s also about the people. “They are a great group of people and their enthusiasm for the sport is inspiring,” says Fjordholm. “I enjoy being among them.”

For those wanting to sample the southern racing fare, Perkins notes: “Most days are sunny and in the 40s and nights are in the 20s. The snow’s great, and the hills are challenging. What’s there not to like?” **SR**