

HOME PAGE MY TIMES TODAY'S PAPER VIDEO MOST POPULAR TIMES TOPICS

Get Home Delivery Log In Register Now

The New York Times

Escapes



Travel All NYT Search

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE

AUTOS

Search

Plan Your Trip

Go

Select a Region or Country

Select a Destination

Go

YOU HOLD ALL THE CARDS



DELTA

ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS > SKIING

SKI REPORT

Racing the Slopes, Uphill and Down

By CINDY HIRSCHFELD
Published: March 21, 2008

ON a frosty Saturday morning earlier this winter, a posse of skiers lined up at the base of Grand Targhee Resort in [Wyoming](#). The 30 men and 4 women were mainly in their late 20s to early 40s and embodied the unstudied athleticism of someone who might just run up a mountain for fun.

Interest Guide
Skiing

Enlarge This Image



Jonathon Seikowitz

The start of the mountaineering race for teams of two at Grand Targhee Resort in Wyoming. Mountaineering races are a test of fitness and endurance as well as skiing skills.

Related

[Ski Guides](#) (December 6, 2007)

held in 2002 in [France](#), drew racers from 22 countries. This winter more than 250 European races were scheduled.

Such rallies have been slower to catch on in [North America](#), but momentum is building. One of the first races was held at [Jackson Hole](#), Wyo., eight years ago. Now the nonprofit [United States](#) Ski Mountaineering Association sponsors a national series of 12 races; at least a half-dozen others are scheduled around the country. The Grand Targhee race was

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE



Great Getaways - Travel Deals by E-Mail



Sign up for travel offers from NYTimes.com's premier advertisers.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Ads by Google

what's this?

Skiing Photos & Videos

Skiing videos, pics, blogs News on your favorite skiers here. [www.RedBullSkiing.com](#)

CMH Heli Skiing

The world's greatest skiing in Canada's spectacular wilderness! [www.canadianmountainholidays.com](#)

Ski The Tasman Glacier

Ski 2 breathtaking runs on NZ's longest glacier, visit ice caves... [www.SkiTheTasman.co.nz](#)

BOOK FLIGHTS



FLIGHT HOTEL PACKAGES
 CAR CRUISE ACTIVITIES

Leaving from:

Going to:

Departing:

Returning:

5/21/2008

11 AM

5/23/2008

11 AM

Adults:

Seniors:

Children:

2

0

0

Search for flights

MOST POPULAR - TRAVEL

E-MAILED BLOGGED

1. [No Shoes, No Shirt, No Worries](#)
2. [Surfacing | Quito, Ecuador: An Old Capital's New Look in Ecuador](#)
3. [Journeys | Yosemite National Park: What Adams Saw Through His Lens](#)
4. [Heads Up | Fujian, China: A Living Heritage: The Earthen Homes of Yongding County](#)
5. [36 Hours in Naples, Italy](#)
6. [Frugal Traveler | Kyoto, Japan: Seeking Tranquility, on Less Than \\$200 a Day](#)
7. [Practical Traveler: Even a Weak Dollar Can Be Stretched](#)
8. [Summer in Europe: Rome at Night](#)
9. [Hamptons Prep Work](#)
10. [Practical Traveler | Chaos in the Skies: Air Passengers Want Ways to Fight Back](#)

[Go to Complete List >](#)

the first for teams of two, a format common in Europe and one that captures the backcountry ethic of having a partner.

Before the race, Grant Helgeson and Jim Harris, both of [Park City, Utah](#), scoped out their fellow competitors through the windows of [Snorkel's](#) Cafe. The two friends, who regularly ski the backcountry together, had decided to do the race "sort of on a lark," Mr. Harris said.

"We expect to be in the bottom tier," Mr. Helgeson added as they headed to the start. "It'll be a learning experience."

Part of the appeal of ski-mountaineering competition is that it's still a grass-roots movement, and two avid skiers can decide on the spur of the moment to enter a race. Even so, the caliber of athlete has improved, as skiers who are also competitive trail runners, bikers and triathletes use the races as a way to maintain their fitness in winter.

"When I first started, I could count on a top-5 finish," said Steve Romeo, of Jackson, Wyo., who started racing in 2000. "Now I'm battling for top 10."

Fitness alone, though, isn't enough. "We're putting them into some pretty precarious situations," said Andy Williams, head of special events at Grand Targhee, of the racecourse he helped lay out. Near the end, for instance, competitors had to negotiate a 40-degree chute, only 15 feet wide at its narrowest part.

About 30 minutes — and 2,000 vertical feet — after the start, teams began to emerge from the fog at the top of Fred's Mountain, one of Targhee's three peaks. This was the first of seven transition areas, where racers strip the skins from their skis and switch their bindings to descent mode (or vice versa), optimally in about 30 to 60 seconds. It's brief but significant — like pit stops in stock car racing — where time is lost or gained.

Mr. Helgeson and Mr. Harris were all smiles when they arrived. They shared some water, then moved onto the next leg, a 1,000-foot ski descent. Next they'd [hike](#), or "bootpack," skis strapped to their packs, to the top of a subpeak, then ski to a narrow saddle. From there, competitors in the recreation division would ski to the finish line at the ski area base; those in the race division would hike to the top of 9,700-foot-high Peaked Mountain.

When the first racers reached the Peaked Mountain summit at around the one-and-a-half-hour mark, it was a brisk 18 degrees. The Grand Teton, usually visible to the north, was hidden by the milky fog. There was talk of cold hands and frozen hydration-system tubes. But a reward lay ahead: 2,000 feet of virtually untracked powder in an area usually reserved for snowcat skiing.

That kind of big-mountain skiing is what distinguishes ski-mountaineering races from other winter competitions, said Pete Swenson, a former pro mountain [bike](#) racer who won the national ski mountaineering title in 2006. No one's done more to promote the sport in the United States than Mr. Swenson.

He spends much of his winter traveling from race to race, and organizes the [Colorado](#) Ski Mountaineering Cup, a seven-race series now in its second season, and consults on others — all as a volunteer. Last winter the Colorado series drew 200 skiers.

Mr. Swenson sees a large untapped competitor pool in this country. At the 2006 world championships in [Italy](#), he recalled, "there were about 80 of us in the elite field, but just behind us were 400 raging citizen racers. I thought, 'Man, we need to bring this here, we have so many good athletes.' This sport will be very popular in the U.S. You just have to get people to see it."

The New York TimesTRAVEL
nytimes.com/travel



The boom in nude vacations

Also in Travel:

- [Hamptons prep work](#)
- [Ansel Adams's Yosemite](#)
- [How to stretch a dollar in Europe](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS

CTIAExpedia.com

LAST MINUTE SKIING HOTEL DEALS

Commodore on the Beach	\$70
GRAND HOTEL OSLO	\$240
The Ritz-Carlton Seoul	\$182
Renaissance Riverside Hotel	\$185
Husa Universal	\$70
Grand Hotel Forte Dei Marmi	\$123

With that in mind, the Targhee classic started at 10:30 a.m. (most races begin before the lifts open) so other skiers could watch it. Even so, it was still a far cry from the European race scene, where, Mr. Romeo said, “you’ve got helis videoing the races and fans on knife-edge ridges cheering on the racers with cowbells.”

After another ski climb up Peaked and a final plunge — via the steep chute — to the base area, Brandon French, of Kalispell, Mont., and Scott Coldiron, of [Spokane, Wash.](#), won the event in 2 hours 14 minutes.

“It’s one of the harder days I’ve ever had in winter,” said Erich Wilbrecht, of Jackson, who placed third with his partner, Cary Smith. “The prolonged climbs were a grunt.” It was no small admission coming from Mr. Wilbrecht, a 1992 Olympic biathlete.

While the sport’s elite side becomes more competitive, there’s still opportunity for newcomers and for those like Mike Keane and Matt Erickson, fit skiers who enjoy the challenge of pushing themselves but don’t take the competitive aspect too seriously. The pair raced with cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon in their packs, cracking them open as they crossed the finish line last in the race division, at just under four hours.

“I got into this for fun,” said Mr. Keane, who discovered backcountry skiing when he moved to Jackson five years ago. “It’s comparable to a regular day in the backcountry, but it puts it in a different context.” Mr. Erickson added: “For us, it’s all about finishing. It’s like playing basketball with the San Antonio Spurs — you’re never going to win, but it’s still fun to play.”

The next day at Targhee, a shorter “free ride” race started at the top of Fred’s Mountain and had just two bootpack climbs. It was a fast, fun alternative for the hard-core racers and also attracted first-timers like Liz Onufer, a telemark skier from Tetonia, [Idaho](#). The biggest challenge, said Ms. Onufer, who won the women’s division in about 34 minutes, was maintaining an even pace so she wouldn’t tire too quickly.

As for Mr. Helgeson and Mr. Harris, the first-time racers from Park City, they had exuberantly finished the previous day’s race in just over three hours. But on this day the true backcountry had beckoned.

Instead of competing, they opted for a day of ski mountaineering in nearby [Grand Teton National Park](#).

[More Articles in Travel »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Ads by Google what's this?

Montana Map
Instant Access to Directions & Maps All The Time With The Maps Toolbar
[Maps.alottoolbars.com](#)

Cerro Castor Skiing 2008
Ski Cerro Castor with PowderQuest Las Lenas, Bariloche, Patagonia
[www.PowderQuest.com](#)

Vermont's Snow Mountain
Ski Vermont's Snow Mountain Accommodation deals. Book now.
[vermont.milestoneinternet.com](#)

Past Coverage

- [BREAKING GROUND; Viceroy Snowmass \(March 14, 2008\)](#)
- [SKI REPORT; Boarders and Free Skiers Get Own Peak \(March 14, 2008\)](#)
- [SKI GUIDE; Okemo Mountain Resort \(March 14, 2008\)](#)
- [SKI GUIDE; Killington Resort \(March 7, 2008\)](#)

Related Searches

..... [Add Alert](#)

Mentioned in This Article

[Idaho](#) | [Colorado](#) | [France](#) |