

Slide into Skijoring

This winter, grab your skis and your horse for rollicking fun the Scandinavian way.

My fondest childhood memories may be of those wintry weekday mornings when I woke to the local radio station announcing we had a snow day. Instead of rolling over and going back to sleep, I'd jump out of bed, layer on my warmest winter wear, and trudge down the road to my girlfriend's farm for a day of unique, snowy fun.

When I got there, her pony would already be tacked up. One of us would strap on our skis and grab the end of a long rope. The other would mount the pony's back and hold the other end of the rope. We'd spend the entire day towing each other around the apple orchard, trying to wrap the other around a tree.

The pony would gallop up and down the long drive, pulling the skier behind. The brisk, winter wind pulled tears from our eyes, while we laughed with exhilaration. We concentrated on keeping our skis straight and not letting go of the rope connected to the galloping pony. We knew for sure that we were the luckiest kids in town.

Of Reindeer & Quarter Horses

What we didn't know was that we were practicing an old form of travel used by Scandinavians for hundred of years. When the winter proved to be too much for other modes of transportation, the people in Scandinavia would strap on long wooden skis and use reindeer power to pull them to their desired destination. This form of travel was called "ski joring" or "ski driving."

In 1928, skijoring was introduced as a demonstration sport at the second Winter Olympic games in St. Moritz, Switzerland. The horses raced against each other towing their drivers, who skied behind.



Equestrian skijoring started in the 1940s, when Quarter Horse owner Tom Schroeder teamed up with an avid skier in Leadville, Colorado. At Leadville's winter carnival, Schroeder rode his galloping horse down a track, towing skier Muggs Ossman behind.

The modern form of equestrian skijoring is now a popular winter sport, with organized races, events, and clinics in five states, and at least one Canadian province.

This modern form of equestrian skijoring caught on in North America, and is now an exciting, popular winter sport with organized races, events, and clinics in five states, and at least one Canadian province.

A Day at the Races

Last winter, I ventured to the Eastern Townships of Quebec, Canada, to see this grownup version of my childhood sport with my own eyes. Accompanying me were Stephanie and Laurel, both avid riders who live near me in Orono, Ontario, Canada.

We arrived in the tiny village of Notre Dame de la Merci, located 60 miles north of Montreal, to find the town packed with trucks and trailers, snowmobiles, skiers, and snowshoers. Not really sure what to



Click above to see skijoring competition in action in Leadville, Colorado.

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The skijoring track can be anywhere from 600 to 1,200 feet long. Skiers hold on to a rope no longer than 33 feet for a straight course, 50 feet for a curved course. The rope is attached to the D-rings on the back of a saddle by a carabiner and harness. In addition to ski jumping, competitors face three sets of stands with rings attached by magnets. During the race, skiers attempt to gather the rings and stack them on their arms. Also shown are Canadian competitors enjoying a few post-race shots of Caribou, a popular alcoholic beverage in Quebec.

expect, I made my way through the trailers and found Bert Caron, the founder and manager of Canada's North East Ski Joring Association. Bert welcomed us with open arms and guided us around the grounds, all the while giving us a rundown on how the race works.

The track for skijoring can be anywhere from 600 to 1,200 feet in length, depending on the availability of flat ground. Airports are handy places for the straight track events! This straight-track race was 1,000 feet in length, with three jumps approximately four feet high.

In addition to the jumps, there were three sets of ring stands with rings attached by magnets. The rings are about shoulder height, and are large enough for a skier (or snowboarder) to put her hand through. During the race, competitors attempt to gather rings and stack them on their arms.

The skiers hold on to a rope, which must be no longer than 33 feet for a straight course, and 50 feet for a curved course. The rope is attached to the D-rings on the back of a horse's saddle by a carabiner and harness. Typically, competitors use Western saddles.

The race is timed. The clock starts when the skier — rather than the horse and rider — passes the start line. The rider gallops the horse down the track at full

speed while the skier, at speeds of up to 50 mph, navigates the jumps, collects and keeps rings, and crosses the finish line with at least one ski on and one hand on the rope. The rider, of course, must remain mounted for the entire race.

Each missed ring costs a two-second penalty, and each missed jump costs five seconds. The race is quick, but is certainly not easy!

When the races started, I watched with pounding heart and mouth wide open. I was hooked after the first few exhilarating events. Afterward, we ventured to a tent to warm our toes by the fire and enjoy a few shots of Caribou, a mixture of red wine and alcohol popular among the Quebecois. Waiting for the results and awards, we chatted with the competitors, some of whom were skiers and snowboarders who'd never ridden horses and were participating in the sport for the first time.

Michal Roberge was amazed by the strength of the horses. When asked if he enjoyed competing he responded with a grin, "It's awesome! Addictive! I want to do it again and again! It's such a feeling of adrenaline."

Geoffrey Smith, co-founder of the North East Ski Joring Association with his wife, Brooke, told us some of his horse-training tips for skijoring.

"Any fast horse works fine," said Smith. "We have all types — Arabians, Quarter Horses, Thoroughbreds, Morgans. The key is finding a horse that's not afraid of ropes, and likes to pull. Most horses will do it. A few won't, but most of them love it, like my Quarter Horse, Stormy."

Smith told me that he starts a horse in skijoring by trail riding with a long lead line to get him used to having the rope all over him. In the summer, the horse pulls Smith around on roller blades, skis with tires, or on regular snow skis on sand.

"All of these methods can be used, but I prefer skiing on sand with snow skis to get both the skier and the horse in shape," he explains.

My traveling companions wanted to go home and start practicing right away.

I'm wishing for lots of snow days this year, so I can start practicing skijoring. I hope to have a demonstration event at our local ski club this winter to show everyone how much fun you can have with your horse this winter.

See you on the flats!

For more information, contact the North American Ski Joring Association. In the West, visit www.nasja.com; in the East, visit www.nesja.com.

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