

Skaters, forget the figure eights

Nordic skating is all about adventure and distance, not grace.

BY HOLLY RAMER
Associated Press

FAIRLEE, Vt.

If you prepare meticulously for the worst, the worst can actually be fun.

That's how Nordic skating enthusiast Jamie Hess explains the attitude toward his favorite sport in Sweden, where many skaters like to brag about crashing through the ice, clawing their way out, then continuing on their way.

In Vermont — where the ice was a solid 12 inches thick the day I took one of Hess' workshops — I didn't need the ice picks, rope or spare clothing that serious "wild" or cross-country skaters carry. But I was unprepared in other ways, what with my weak ankles and mistaken belief that the groomed trail winding around Lake Morey was only 2 miles, not 4.

In the end, though, it actually was kind of fun.

Specially equipped

Popular in Scandinavia and northern Europe for centuries, long-distance outdoor skating remains a relatively obscure pursuit in the United States. Hess, who fell in love with the sport on a trip to Sweden in 1999, is credited with boosting its popularity through his workshops, tours and Nordic Skater shop in Norwich, Vt., which sells skates designed to skim over ice that hasn't been smoothed by a Zamboni machine.

The lakes of Vermont and New Hampshire offer some of the best conditions, including the 4-mile loop on Lake Morey, which was expanded from 2 miles last year and is the nation's longest

groomed ice skating trail. It was blanketed beautifully in fog when a friend and I arrived for Hess's three-hour workshop, and I immediately imagined gliding into the mist toward the snow-covered hills.

"Push to the side, don't kick and glide, that's how it works on these skates," he said.

Nordic skates consist of long blades with slightly curved tips that clip onto cross-country ski boots. The longer blades are better able to skim over bumps in the ice that would likely trip up conventional blades.

"It's sort of like if you have a truck with big tires — you don't go into the potholes the way a car with small tires would," Hess told me and about a dozen other students. "If the ice is really bumpy, you're sitting on top of the bumps instead of dipping into the dips, between the bumps."

We started behind the Lake Morey Resort at the southern tip of the lake. After a few minutes of instruction, Hess ushered us onto the ice, where most of us struggled for balance as we navigated the ridges and bumps along the opening stretch of ice.

Sound of success

Wessel Kok, 44, who grew up skating in the Netherlands and now travels to Lake Morey once a year to skate, advises new skaters to take it slow. He compares Nordic skating to riding a bicycle: Eventually you become proficient enough that aside from checking your balance now and then, you don't have to focus all your energy on what you're doing.

"Don't push yourself too much," he said. "You don't have to race all the time. You can also just take your time and rest when you need to rest, and just make it a joyful event."

Hess tells his students to

enjoy the different sounds the ice makes.

"When the ice is making noise, generally it's a good thing. Especially the deep booming sounds that make you think a big hole's about to open up right under you. That's actually a good sound because it means the ice is thickening and strengthening," he said.

The loudest noise I heard was the soft scratching of my blades as I wobbled over the shallow air pockets in the ice and the cheerful greetings as one by one, nearly all the members of my group passed me. Hess' 14-year-old son had whizzed by twice.

I started to get discouraged about halfway around the lake, until I realized that I could simply unclip my blades and walk the rest of the way. That knowledge alone was enough to get me to the finish line.

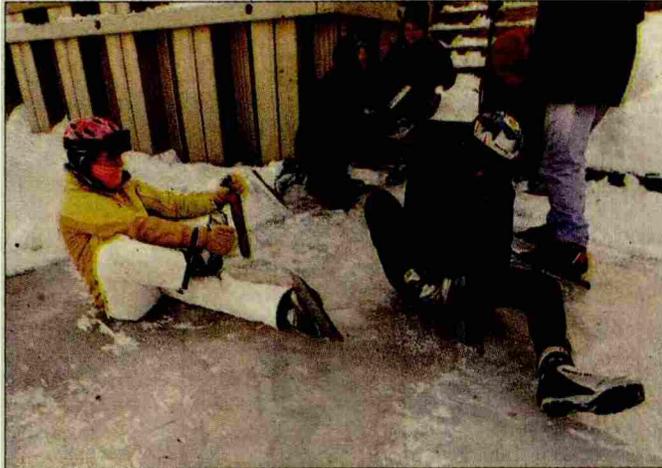
Going Nordic

- The Nordic Skater offers equipment rentals, tours, lessons, events.
- 326 Main St., Norwich, Vt.; www.nordicskater.com or toll-free 1-866-244-2570.
- All-day rentals are \$20.
- Free introductory events (registration required): Squam Winterfest, Squam Lake, Holderness, N.H., noon-3 p.m., Feb. 16; Great Ice in Grand Isle, all day, City Bay, North Hero, Vt., Feb. 17.
- Wild Skating Tours for experienced skaters are held in late February and March in Vermont, New Hampshire and in Lake George, N.Y.
- For a list of ice skating trails and ovals where Nordic skating can be done in Alaska, Colorado, Connect-



icut, Maine, Massachu-
setts, Michigan, Minnesota,
Montana, New Hampshire,
New York, Utah, Vermont

and Wisconsin, go to www.nordicskating.org (click
on "Where to skate," then
"USA").



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**Skaters put on their blades, which clip to cross-country ski
boots, during a Nordic skating workshop in Fairlee, Vt.**