

Blackhawk, Small Club-Large Community

April 7, 2014

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Photo credit: Joe D'Orazio

On a cold January night, a new member of the Blackhawk Ski Club observed the following scene: while standing on the side of a steep slope he listened to coaches shouting encouragement as a group of high school racers made laps, down a course of slalom gates and back up a high-speed rope tow. A short walk through the trees he found a group of young ski jumpers flying effortlessly through the cool air and hiking back up a 60-meter ski jump as volunteer parents raked snow to ensure a smooth landing. In the distance the new member heard the echoes of shots being fired on the biathlon range. On the gentler slopes across a small stand of trees a group of young skiers take their first ski lessons from college aged instructors. As the member approached one of the modest buildings, he saw a group of parents huddled around a wood stove in the chalet talking about plans for the upcoming ski race weekend. You might think that this person was in an Austrian or Norwegian mountain village on a Saturday afternoon but alas, this was Tuesday night at Blackhawk Ski Club, just outside Madison, Wisconsin.

Perhaps it's the volunteer-run programs or the wooded park-like setting close to the city, maybe it's the number of sports available to club members, or possibly the fact that the main gate padlock opens for members knowing the birth year of the club's founding father. No matter what the reason, both Club members and visitors alike acknowledge the Blackhawk Ski Club as a winter wonderland and potentially a model for ski and snow sports club programs nationwide.

Located 12 miles from the center of Madison, Blackhawk is home to a winter environment enjoyed by over 1500 Alpine skiers, snowboarders, Nordic skiers and Ski Jumpers. In 1948 Blackhawk's founders developed the 32 acre property by building a ski jump and Nordic trail system to satisfy the jumping and skiing passion of a small number of University of Wisconsin students and local winter sports enthusiasts. Sixty-seven years later Blackhawk has evolved into a 60-acre private club offering an extensive trail system, six alpine ski runs served by five rope tows, four ski jumps and three modest chalets. The draw of Blackhawk is a love of the outdoors, not necessarily a love of luxury. Blackhawk's two main chalets are heated exclusively with wood-burning stoves and members requiring a natural break use one of two icy-cold outhouses 50 feet from the mostly warm chalets.

While some things remain the same over time, modern technology has not passed over this winter sanctuary. Early season skiing is made possible by a "right sized" snow making system, operated by volunteers and the facility Manager. Calling Dan Osborn a *Mountain* manager would misrepresent the 300 foot vertical elevation Blackhawk proudly boasts. But these 300 vertical feet live much larger. The small hill, the unsophisticated buildings are all forgotten when you consider the numerous recreational and social opportunities available to a diverse set of members.



Photo credit: Joe D'Orazio

Blackhawk's community feeling is also reflected in the financial model used to operate the club. This model is founded on the premise that recreational users of the facilities will cover the infrastructure expenses for the entire club. The result is that the cost of high-quality, early season snowmaking, trail grooming, and modest general expenses are covered by the masses – the full membership of the club. Reasonable additional expenses for instructional classes and competitive programs ensure full capacity for all instructions and alpine racing programs. Approximately half of the members take classes and approximately one eighth of club members participate in competitive alpine, Nordic or jumping programs. The result of this setup is that fees paid to participate in ski instruction, Alpine racing, Nordic racing and jumping teams are relatively small when compared to other clubs in the region, making these programs financially accessible to a wide variety of young skiers.

As part of its not-for-profit charter to develop and promote youth sports in the community, Blackhawk's multi-sport youth opportunities provide ample outdoors winter recreation opportunities while simultaneously ensuring a progression for aspiring athletes. At the beginning of the progression, elementary and preschool-aged kids ski with their parents and siblings for an hour or two on the

weekend and often participate in multi-week group lessons. At this early stage, kids are offered an opportunity to try any sport offered at Blackhawk including Nordic skiing, jumping and snowboarding. Approximately 25% of the kids take advantage of the opportunity and try other winter sports.



Photo credit: Joe D'Orazio

In the alpine program, if a child shows the desire to go beyond lessons, they may transition to the alpine development program where they are taught the basics of ski racing and are able to participate in one to four non-threatening competitive races in the region. Often the biggest challenge for first-time racers is the transition from rope tow to chair lifts when they compete at other ski areas! True to the mission of Blackhawk, development racers are provided with a positive, very family-focused and developmentally appropriate experience that establishes their foundation of ski racing through focus on the skiing fundamentals and drills.



Photo credit: Steve Krigbaum

If a child reaches this level and continues to express interest in ski racing, their next step is the Blackhawk Area Racing Team (BART) and more competitions throughout the next three to six years, generally concluding in high school. The BART mission revolves around fun, family-focused, regional competition for all participants. All BART kids are invited to one USSA race per year where they can put their toe in the water of more competitive ski racing. At any stage or age, those that wish to go to the next level will join the Madison Area Racing Team (MART) which participates in USSA sanctioned events throughout the Midwest and beyond. While MART is independent from Blackhawk, both operationally and financially, this group both uses Blackhawk facilities for evening training and shares in preseason work activities, the same as all Club members. The greatest benefit of this alliance is the opportunity for Blackhawk members to participate in the highest level of competition without requiring the club to invest in the overhead expense and staff associated with these highly competitive programs.



Photo credit: Steve Krigbaum



Photo credit: Mark Ronnie

Nordic skiers and ski jumpers are offered similar progression opportunities to that of Alpine enthusiasts. However, unlike the Alpine programs, Blackhawk offers skis, boots, poles and other equipment to many participants at the beginning of this progression. Availability of Club equipment helps reduce the cost of trying the new sport, eliminating a major hurdle to participation. Over the years, much of this equipment was purchased by Club members who believe that reducing the cost of winter sports will directly increase participation. An increased number of jumpers, biathletes and Nordic skiers are the product of this generosity. On several occasions US Ski jumping Team members who started their athletic pursuit at Blackhawk gift their old equipment to young Blackhawk athletes in an effort to begin the cycle anew for aspiring young jumpers.



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The Blackhawk Outreach program provides a fun and healthy outdoors wintertime activity for kids that typically do not have the opportunity to participate in snow sports. In 2006 several volunteers created a six week Nordic skiing progression and outdoors educational experience for 30 kids coming from Madison's lower-income neighborhoods. Ski equipment, free club memberships and winter clothes including hats, mittens, coats and pants were provided by club members for kids in need. In years two and three, the offering was expanded to include subjects on frostbite prevention, winter-specific wildlife activities and the ever popular Nordic skiing scavenger hunt. Seven years since inception the Outreach program continue to provide a unique, positive winter experience to youth groups from area schools and community centers. One fact remains consistent over the years; the Outreach program teaches kids who previously didn't enjoy the short, cold days of Wisconsin winter that there are lots of fun and exciting outdoors activities to do in January and February. The creation of the Outreach program permanently changed the culture at Blackhawk by recognizing the club as a space to share the beauty and benefits of outdoor activities with other communities with less privilege.



Photo credit: Mark Ronnie

The growing club remains fiscally strong and vibrant due to the heart of the Blackhawk ski club, a large number of social members and volunteers. A steak feed, the annual winter carnival, marshmallows by the fire, ski jumping tournaments, an occasional adult beverage after a long workout, Biathlon competitions, the early season Blackhawk Bash and several other social events promote participation in the club and provide members with a unique sense of community. As a volunteer-run club, endless volunteer work opportunities also count as social activities.



Photo credit: Joe D'Orazio

Regardless of vertical challenges and modest facilities Blackhawk members enjoy a true cross pollination of wintertime snow sports, with thriving competitive and recreation programs happily coexisting.



Photo credit Joe D'Orazio

Blackhawk is, to many, a true wintertime community and will be fondly remembered as the start to many lifetimes of winter sport enthusiasts.

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