

Schenectady Wintersports Club has blazed trails

Phil Johnson



PHOTO PROVIDED

The Schenectady Wintersports Club's building in Waterbury, Vermont.



The Schenectady Winter-sports Club is 90 years old.

Consider this. The club was in

business before there was a commercial rope tow in the United States; before the country's first chair lift was installed at Sun Valley Idaho; before the first issue of Ski Magazine was published; and before alpine skiing became an event in the Winter Olympics. Snowmaking and machine grooming of ski trails were just dreams then.

It was 1932 when The Schenectady Wintersports Club was founded by a local group from the Mohawk Valley Hiking Club who wanted to add winter outings to their list of activities.

The club's history has been carefully documented over the years, dating from its origins right after the first Lake Placid Olympics to the present. The original group was largely GE affiliated, including outdoorsman and Nobel Prize-winning chemist Irving Langmuir, his protege at GE Vincent Schaefer, the club's first president, and GE engineer and noted conservationist John Apperson. From the start, skiing was a key part of the group's focus. Trails were cleared in the Rotterdam hills, and the first "ride up and ski down" terrain was along Crawford Road.

Looking farther afield, Langmuir, with Schaefer alongside, flew his plane over the area seeking out a place where there was snow and train tracks. There was little snow in the winter of 1933, but a year later, the club organized the first snow trains from Schenectady to North Creek. They were up-and-back, same-day excursions on Sundays at first, but the effort expanded and by 1936 included trains from New York City. It was a social gathering onboard. Baggage cars often became dance floors on the ride home.

One notable feature of the club's program in those days at North Creek was The Safety Committee, organized by Ellis Hospital nurse Lois Perret, who would marry Schaefer. The group provided services to injured skiers on-site at North Creek. Among those she recruited to help was Schenectady physician Dr. Charles Woodall, the father of the legendary ski instructor Freddie Anderson. The Safety Committee was

a precursor to the National Ski Patrol founded in the late 1930s at Stowe, Vermont.

ONE OF THE FIRST CLUBS IN THE COUNTRY

Snowsports clubs at the time were uncommon. Schenectady Wintersports was one of the first, along with one in California and one in Massachusetts, that trace their origins back to the early 1930s. Cousins Bill and Jim Schaefer keep the legacy alive these days, most recently with a history presentation at the club's January meeting.

The Schenectady Winter-sports Club regrouped after World War II, with buses replacing trains as the primary way to get to the slopes. For those sticking closer to home, area contractor Dick Weber in 1950 built two ski tows on land at Wolf Hollow in Rotterdam Junction. The club by then had a membership roster of 800 to 1,000, many of whom were multi-generational family members encouraged by modest dues and access to discounts on lift tickets, and at local ski shops. With club members as instructors, many locals were first taught the basics of skiing in dry land clinics through the YMCA.

SKI HOUSE IN VERMONT

The club was always partial to travel to northern Vermont, and for years rented quarters in the area around Stowe. It took a major step in 1972 when it bought an old farmhouse on Route 100 in Waterbury, Vermont. It has been the club's ski headquarters ever since, these days accommodating as many as 46 people at one time in a combination of single rooms, bunk rooms, and open dorms. This winter, for \$37.50 a night including serve-yourself breakfast, it remains one of the best bargains in all of ski country. It is a communal atmosphere. There is a large fireplace in the common area on the first floor, no television, and for an additional \$10, there is a family-style dinner served on weekends.

Bill Kornrumpf moved to the Schenectady area in the mid-1960s and was instrumental in locating the Vermont facility. A retired GE engineer, he is a past club president and serves as chairman for the club house. He and his wife Gina ski 30-50 times each winter. Except that there are "more people with gray hair," he doesn't see much difference in club membership these days.

"COVID certainly put a damper in involvement over the past couple of years, but we still have an active membership with the lodge as a main draw," Kornrumpf said.

NOT JUST SCHENECTADY ANYMORE

Not all the club members are local these days.

"We draw about two thirds of our membership from Schenectady and the greater Capital District," current club president John Bidell said last week. "The rest are from outside the area who learned about us from word of mouth and their own research. The roster is about equal, parts under 35 years old, 35 to 55 and over 55. We are actively recruiting younger members."

One change over the years has been that women now make up a larger part of the membership.

Like the local workforce, a smaller portion of the current membership have ties to GE.

“These days, we are a year-round club representing diverse backgrounds and different interests, including cross country skiing, telemark and biking in winter and in summer through the Northern New York Paddlers,” said Bidell, whose career was with the US Postal Service and who joined originally after a stay at the clubhouse in Vermont.

The environment for ski clubs has changed in recent years. Social media and other lifestyle factors have affected how people interact these days, and the ski industry is different, too, with corporate involvement like Vail Resorts at Stowe taking over from stand-alone resort operators and local control like in the past. And hanging over the whole outdoors situation going forward is the issue of climate change.

“As skiing has changed, clubs have evolved and matured,” said Bidell. “What separates us from other clubs in the area continues to be the house at Stowe.”

And with a nod to the club’s 90 years, he added, “As long as people want to be involved in the outdoors, there will be a Schenectady Wintersports Club.”

EMPIRE STATE GAMES

Cold temperatures disrupted the Empire State Games last weekend at Lake Placid, especially Friday and Saturday when sub-zero conditions prompted cancellations of some events in cross country and bobsledding, shortening of others like luge and moguls skiing, and shifting start times and days of many others.

Certain events like ski jumping and Nordic Combined will be held later this winter. For updates on the 23 events including results on those that were held, check competition results at empirestatewintergames.com .

SECTION II CHAMPIONSHIPS

This is the final week of regular season races before the Sectional championships in alpine next Tuesday at West Mountain, and in cross country next Wednesday at Lapland Lake. In the alpine competition so far, Broadalbin-Perth senior Colin Cotter has regularly topped the standings, but an impressive Empire State Games performance last week by Queens-bury eighth grader Hudson Montgomery puts that outcome in play.

On the girls’ side, Shenendehowa senior Micaela Leonard is favored to repeat her title from a year ago with Montgomery sibling Meredith, a Queensbury senior. ready to challenge. In cross country, Shen freshman Raquelle Landa and Glens Falls senior Clara Avery have shared the top of the podium this winter, while Queensbury junior Ben Jen-kin has been dominant on the boys’ side, followed by Glens Falls sophomore Forrest Slingerland. The top-10 finishers in Section II competition will qualify for the state championships at the end of February.

HEIDEN SPEED SKATING RECORDS BROKEN

In 1980, Eric Heiden broke Olympic Records in winning all five speed skating events at Lake Placid. He won at every distance, from 500 meters to 10,000 meters, an achievement that has never been matched and, with specialization in sports these days, probably never will.

The oval was refurbished over the past year as part of preparations to host the recent World University Games. There is new infrastructure in place that provides a durable, consistent and faster surface on the same oval. There were 10 new track records set, but not all of Heiden's were broken.

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