

Racing Through Time

As the Nancy Greene Ski League approaches its 45th birthday, past racers, coaches and organizers remember what it was that made skiing's little league so unforgettable.

BY LORI KNOWLES from [40th Anniversary issue](#)



photo: Sun Peaks

Somewhere in Ontario in the '70s...

It would approach without fail at 6:30 a.m. on squeaky-cold Saturday mornings, a hulking '74 Jeep Cherokee Chief, red with black stripes, two doors, a white top and a chrome front grille with teeth so maniacal I thought it might bite me and my nine-year-old teammates.

Our coach, Doc S, ski toque perched high on his forehead, would throw open the driver's door and greet us all with a big grin. He'd trudge through the snow to the back of the truck, toss our skis—Fischer C4s, Rossignol Stratos, Heads, Kneissls—into the back hatch and slam the tailgate shut with a massive metal crunch.

"How are my Wart Hogs this morning?"

"Fine," we'd say.

"You ready to race?"

We'd kick the snow with our Cougar boots.

"Eh?" he'd ask. "Are all you Wart Hogs ready to race?"

We'd clamber in, all eight of us, to the Jeep's backseats. Boys, girls, Carrera goggles with brilliant yellow lenses, Alpinas on boot presses... I have no memory of seat belts. Doc S would fire up the truck and hit the highway. We'd stuff our faces with doughnuts while Bob Seger blasted on the 8-track. "Just take those old records off the shelf..." Our destination?

Anywhere in Ontario ski country: **Alpine, Caledon, Beaver Valley**—or maybe it was **Mansfield**. Our day's mission: to ace another Nancy Greene Ski League race.

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photo: Future Olympian Laurie Graham (left) with BFF Andi Ciotti.

Al Raine, Co-Founder, Nancy Greene Ski League

"The year was 1967. I was head coach in the Southern Ontario Zone and I said to myself, 'We need to get more kids involved in ski racing.' I heard there was a Buddy Werner little kids' league in the States so I looked it up, but it was way too complicated. We needed something simpler, more positive, here in Canada. The whole

idea was to encourage kids to participate. So we designed a simple format for a racing league. No need for a big hill—eight gates would be enough—and no timing. Kids could go head-to-head, as in a dual slalom, you know? How fun is that? I wrote to Nancy [Greene], who was racing National at the time, and asked her if she'd put her name on it. She'd just won the first-ever World Cup, but it was before she'd won the Olympics."

Nancy Greene Raine, Honorary Chair, Nancy Greene Ski League

"Al said that he wanted to start a skiers' little league. Made sense. At smaller ski hills kids would get bored quickly, so they'd just go fast and straight. They needed something to keep them turning! Al said the league races would be dual slaloms, just like they were doing in pro racing. It would be simple, not too sophisticated. Just a fun thing to do. So I said sure, I'll put my name on that."

The Nancy Greene Ski League: A Brief History

"The original philosophy, that children's competition should promote participation and fun and de-emphasize winning, has certainly stood the test of time."

Back somewhere in the '70s...

With the tunes still blasting—Rod Stewart's "If you want my body and you think I'm sexy..."—Doc S would back that Jeep behemoth right up to the front entrance of the ski area we were visiting. The two doors would fling open and we'd all push to the front to get out, eight nine-year-olds with chocolate sprinkles spread willy-nilly across our faces. In unison our dirty mugs would look up at the strange hill.

"Whoa."

"Ho-leeee."

"They've got a triple chair."

"A what?"

"A triple."

THE GREENE PARTY AT SUN PEAKS

It's the highlight of the ski season—if you're seven. And sometimes even if you're not. Each year, 400-plus Nancy Greene Ski League (NGSL) racers, ranging in ages between five and 11, converge on Sun Peaks near Kamloops, B.C., to take part in their own brand of ski jamboree—a two-day whirligig of Spring Break sugar-highs, bouncy castles, and lightning-bolt, dual-slalom ski races known as—wait for it—**The Rio Tinto Alcan Nancy Greene Husky Snow Star Festival**.

For now, let's just call it The Fest.

"It's a huge event," says Nancy Greene Raine, The Fest's namesake and, naturally, its annual grand master of ceremonies. "The whole gang arrives—the mom, dad, brothers, sisters, sometimes even the grandparents. They carpool with other families from their Nancy Greene League teams and make a weekend of it at Sun Peaks. They race and

they ski obstacle courses and they compete in mogul and ski cross competitions. An RCMP officer shows up every year to clock the racers with a radar gun. There's this crazy clown skiing the moguls on super-long straight skis—the kids can't believe he can do it. At night they have these big parties with bouncy castles and the kids get bags of goodies."

"It was Nancy's idea," confirms Cailin Kovacs, VP of the Sun Peaks Alpine Club and four-year lead organizer of The Fest. "It started 10 years ago as an event just for Sun Peaks, but the concept took off and now we get Nancy Greeners from all over B.C. —Cypress, Seymour, Grouse, the Okanagan, Prince George—as well as Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. Last season we had 446 competitors come out. It's become the largest youth event of its kind in Canada."

Parents—particularly those keen on grooming future national team members—might say the main draw of The Fest is a fun vacation, but it's also an opportunity to build on the league's ABC's of ski racing: agility, balance, coordination, strength and speed. Jetting through GS races on Sun Peaks' OSV, or duking it out in a dual slalom against that Amazon eight-year-old from Apex, can only mean good things when it comes to quality ski training.

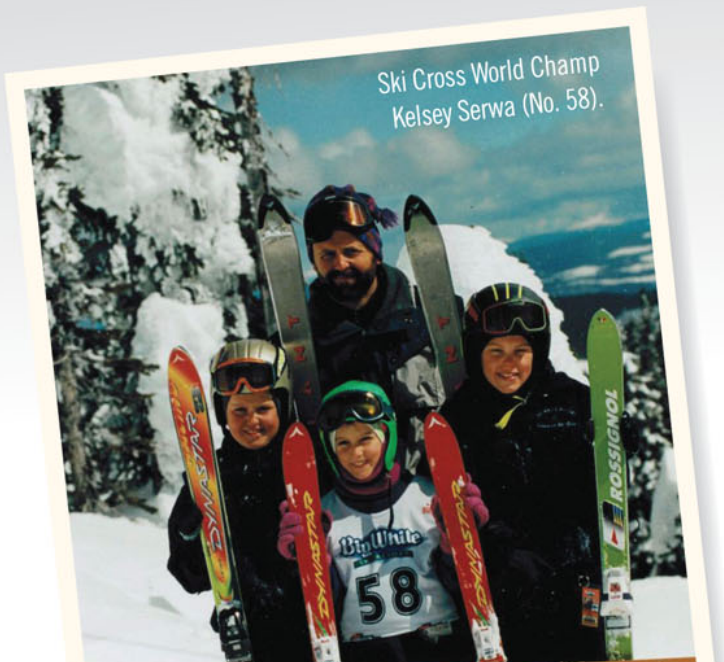
But for kids, we bet The Fest isn't so much about all that. As Kovacs explains, there's a stuffed mascot Husky dog in it for every single competitor, plus water bottles, a backpack and a huge bag of swag—including a Nancy Greene-approved Mars bar in every package.

Better yet, every year Nancy herself jumps into the course to race with the kids who don't have partners. She signs helmets at the finish line, even if the kids have no idea she's a World Cup champ and Canada's ultimate Olympian.

"One year a parent asked his kid how he did in the race," Nancy remembers. "'Oh!' the little guy said, 'I did super-well. Next year I'm going to race Nancy Blue!'"

The next Rio Tinto Alcan Nancy Greene Husky Snow Star Festival takes place March 23-24 at Sun Peaks. For more information on this (and many other shorter-named events throughout the season), go to www.sunpeaksresort.com.

RACING THROUGH TIME





"From the start, Kell Antoft agreed to help me organize the league in Ontario. He and I became co-founders. We set it up in places like Kitchener, Oshawa and Peterborough. I developed a coaching program and began putting on clinics. Kell got the rules together and sent them out to the clubs. He was extremely well organized. The season went off so well in southern Ontario that by the end of the first year we'd caught national attention."

The Nancy Greene League ; A Brief History

"The first NGSL teams included boys and girls aged eight to 13, ranging from beginner racers to more experienced ones. Coaching was mostly done by volunteers. As ski clubs became more organized, the ability level of young skiers improved dramatically."

Al Raine

"One of the biggest hurdles was teaching those new coaches—mostly parents and volunteers—how to set courses. None of them had any experience. I'd travel all over southern Ontario teaching them how to set eight to 20 bamboo gates on a small hill. We kept it simple. We'd punch them in by hand, sometimes we'd tie a flag to them. Then I'd go away and let them set their own. The result would often be too tight or too open, but really, as long as the kids were having fun, it didn't matter."

Back in the '70s...

Before each race, Doc S—who was some kid's parent—would give us Nancy Greeners a quick course inspection.

"Okay, Wart Hogs, pay attention. Here's how it goes: Red gate. Blue gate. Red gate. Blue gate. Open gate. Open gate. Hairpin. Flush. Got that?"

"Ha! He said *flush*, like a toilet!" This from Wart Hog Rob, age nine, whose specialty was Captain Underpants humour. (He also liked to wipe his nose on his jacket.)

Doc S would grin at Wart Hog Rob. "Just remember," he'd advise seemingly wisely, "turn early, and turn often."

Karen Fricker, Former NGSL Coach

"For most of these kids, it was the first time they'd had a chance to go through a racecourse. They were ready from a technical perspective, but how to explain a course? 'Go around the red,' we'd say, 'then around the blue, then around the red.' It seemed simple enough—until Cameron Dougherty looked up at me one time with huge eyes and said: 'Which side is around?'"

Wendy Lumby, Olympian & Program Director, Saskatchewan Alpine

"My first NGSL race was when I was three, in 1969, at Happy Valley in Calgary. My older sister Pollie was racing in a Nancy Greene race when she fell and broke her leg on the first run. I was allowed to take her second run for her. There were many people cheering me on toward the finish line, but I was shy. I stopped before I crossed the line and cried until my mum came and got me. I never did finish that race."

Back in the '70s...

At the top of the course, Doc S would shout: "CHEW BAMBOO!" And so we would. We'd head straight at the gates and smash into them. Bamboo poles would be flying left and right. Gatekeepers in orange vests would sigh and slide over with a bat to ram them back in again.

Al Raine

"There wasn't much in the way of race supplies back then. We used to go down to

Chinatown in Vancouver where this little old guy would sell us bamboo poles for incredibly cheap prices. I bet he had no idea what we were using them for. All he cared about was that this Nancy Greene League—whatever that was—was really good for his bamboo import business.”

Nancy Greene Raine

“The first year they ran the Nancy Greene Ski League in Ontario (1968), the Canadian national championships happened to be at Georgian Peaks, so I was in Ontario for it. The top NGSL team from that year—Craigleith Ski Club, I think—was invited to come over and ski with me. I remember I raced with them through a few gates—beat them all, of course. At the end of it they gave me a photo they’d all signed on the back. I took a look at it a few years later and do you know who was on that team? Steve Podborski, Craig Podborski, Rob Safrata and Lynn Warll. Not a bad start for the league! I raced them all again 25 years later at an NGSL anniversary event and they all beat me—all but one, and that one was on a snowboard!”

Steve Podborski, Crazy Canuck

“I was a racer in the NGSL the first year it was created in 1968. I was 10 years old and there were several very good skiers on the team, including Rob Safrata, who went on to become an Olympian in the Giant Slalom in the Innsbruck Winter Games in 1976.”

Nancy Esso , Former Racer & Coach

“I was on Osler’s [Osler Bluff Ski Club] Nancy Greene team as a racer from the age of eight (1968) until 13. The first final was at Georgian Peaks and they had national team member Diana Gibson forerunning the race. She fell because of the ice, so the rest of us at the top became petrified! Then Craigleith showed up with uniforms and psyched everyone else out. All our stars fell, and Craigleith won!”

Steve Podborski

“I raced in that league until I was 13. I remember that it taught me how to break through. This one time, the coach was assigning start orders, and because I was having some challenges, he moved me back in the order. I was so unhappy that I went for it and ended up winning the race! It was a small miracle, but it proved to me that effort equals results. It also proves the NGSL is a great place to start ski racing.”

Laurie Graham, Olympia & World Cup Downhill Winner

“I credit my coach, Ken Crompton, for recognizing my potential and advising my parents to keep me in the Nancy Greene Ski League for as long as possible to enjoy this atmosphere of fun and competition, knowing I would have years ahead of me during which the World Cup and the Olympics would be a full-time job. For me, the NGSL was a critical springboard to the top of the world’s highest peaks.”

Kare Fricker

“At some point the kids discovered that Nerds (those tiny hard candies) fit perfectly into straws, so from then on the Nerd Fights were on. The kids would take over one end of the chalet and we would turn the tables sideways against the wall. They had to wear helmets and goggles and they could only shoot toward each other, not across the room where they risked hitting a non-participant. They had a great time. I’m sure the cleaning team hated us.”

Esta Evans, Former NGSL Coach

“At the end of each day, my Nancy Greeners—The Helmet Heads—would do synchro on the final pitch where all the parents were waiting. It became kind of a comedy routine. We named ourselves the Yetis and each person gave their rendition of ‘terrible’ skiing. The routine included two kids spinning out of control, two kids criss-crossing each other while feigning terror, and a couple more kids skiing and falling, skiing and falling.... And all of

this would be in formation!"

Darcy Varhu , Former NGSL Racer & Coach

"Once, in about 1986 while coaching an NGSL race at Rabbit Hill, a rumour quickly spread that Nancy Greene herself had turned up and was standing in the finish congratulating racers. It turned out that Nancy was in Edmonton for some reason and had heard there was a race going on, so she decided to show up. The kids and parents were all blown away. I still have the napkin she signed for me back in the '70s. It says, 'Good luck, Darcy' and is signed by Nancy with a drawing of a ski racer."



photo: Family Yurkiw

Larisa Yurkiw, National Ski Team Member

"In one of my family's first time trials for Nancy Greene, no one finished. My brother Harrison was in the bathroom and missed his run. My other brother Mitchell lost his ski. And I skied around the finish line because my coach told me to during inspection so as not to disturb the timing! After that though, watching my brothers compete in the NGSL fuelled my ski-racing fire and now that fire just won't go out."

Wendy Lumby

"My own Nancy Greene career began in 1972 at Mt. Norquay. In my last season as a 10-year-old, I was unbeaten in all the races except the first one, when I came 2nd to a 14-year-old boy. I was quite upset, and I never let him beat me again. I went on to have a fun career on the World Cup circuit and was also an Olympian in 1988. It was the Nancy Greene Ski League that started me on my path

to enjoying skiing for life."

Ashleigh McIvor, Ski Cross Olympic Gold Medallist, Vancouver 2010

"I raced in the Nancy Greene Ski League from when I was about nine or 10. It prepared me for international competition. I remember managing to ski Whistler's deep powder and jumping off cliffs in between training and racing! That's the beauty of the NGSL—we got to do all sorts of skiing, not only gates, just as the Europeans do. This set me up to be good at ski cross when it burst onto the scene."

Kelsey Serwa, Olympia & Ski Cross World Champion

"My best memory of racing in the Nancy Greene Ski League was ripping around the mountain with my friends. I would follow the boys off jumps and down the steepest runs without much thought. There is a bowl at Big White called "The Cliff," which is by far the steepest run on the mountain. There was a speed-skiing race one weekend, so a track had been groomed where moguls usually spotted the steep descent. Our NGSL coach thought we were ready to try our luck on the groomed track, so I pointed them straight. It was insane! I was only seven at the time and my parents saw us in action. I think it was at that point they realized what they had gotten their kids into."

Gerry Wingenbach, Former Alberta Ski Team Coach

"Last winter I was skiing with Nancy and Al Raine. A young girl got on the quad with us.

Nancy lit up and I started talking with her. I asked the girl if she raced in the Nancy Greene Ski League and she said yes. Then I started to say, 'Well, his is Nan.....' but I got an elbow in the ribs from Nancy, and Al said, 'No, don't go there.' Nancy continued talking with the girl about the joys of skiing and asking the young girl questions. At the time, I thought it as strange that he didn't want to fess up who she was. But later, thinking about it, I figured that Nancy wanted to make the conversation all about the young girl, and not about Nancy Greene. That's what the Nancy Greene Ski League's all about. To Nancy, it's about the kids and not Nancy Greene. What other Canadian athlete has put more back into her sport?"

Nancy Greene Raine

"For most kids, this league is their first experience in ski racing. It should be used not only to teach them how to run gates, but to teach them skiing skills as well. The two are integral. It doesn't matter about the times — parents shouldn't bother worrying about the times. If you point out to Johnny and his teammates that Johnny's time was the fastest, you send a message to them all that their times are all that matters. And really, their times aren't all that matters. Learning how to approach the gates and learning the skills —in the Nancy Greene Ski League, that's what matters."

Back in the 70s ...

Looking back, the Wart Hogs weren't especially good. Randy, for one, would hook his tips constantly. Janet would slide so much on the ice she'd bang into the bottom gate of the flushes. Valerie would miss the entire middle of the course and have no idea how that happened. And me—well, I didn't like ruts, so I just skied the long way around them.

"That approach might slow you down a little bit," Doc S would say. Then he'd see my expression. "But probably not too much. Do it if it makes you comfortable."

We never knew how our team did in those Nancy Greene Ski League races. We'd miss the medal ceremonies because we'd found a trail through the trees that was really super-fantastic. Then Doc would tell us to get into the Jeep fast, it would be past time to drive home...our parents would be waiting.

"Awww. not alreadyyy."

"C'mon, Wart Hogs," Doc S would say, hauling himself up into the driver's seat of that great big truck and sliding in a new 8-track. I know where there's a doughnut shop." *