

Black Jack

Cross Country Ski Club

In the early 1980's Roger Crisfield and a handful of cross country enthusiasts got the idea to buy a snowmobile and set tracks up the old Gibbard's road. Jim and Dianne Delong [National Team skier, Rhonda Delong's parents], Helen Bouchier, Dave Smith, Carmel and Brian O'Flanagan, and Guy Woods were all involved. Initially Roger dragged a spring mattress behind the snowmobile until Jim Douglas made the club's first track setter. The new club, named Black Jack for the nearby mountain and old gold mine, charged for day passes by providing a drop box at the trailhead. A few polite, but emphatic signs were posted along the trails encouraging people to be honourable and contribute for the luxury of having set trails. Eventually Roger commissioned Mike Pistak to weld a heavy bar with two slabs of bent metal the width of an old pair of skis, and for a period of time this contraption was dragged by a Thiokol purchased from Red Mountain (now Red Resorts).

Roger Crisfield and Rob Grey, father of National Team skier George Grey, set tracks until Richie Mann (photo on page 17) took over grooming in 1987. Richie also offered his field for a stadium during races, and for training beginner skiers. It is still used for skiers accompanied by their canine companions.

"Skating changed things," says Richie, who retired from track setting two years ago. "The tracks have to be perfect now. There's no tolerance for poor tracks anymore. Classic skiers can always get by if the machine is down for a couple of days, but if a person only skates, they find it frustrating."

Skating became fashionable in the mid '80s but didn't really reach Rossland until the early '90's. Richie's wife, Audrey, saw the sport change from a sociable stroll with friends in the woods to a Lycra, lightweight, high speed "whizzing by" kind of sport. "Yes, we're better skiers now," says Richie. "Our equipment is so much more sophisticated. It's a different culture." However, neither Richie nor Audrey regrets the way that cross-country skiing has evolved. They both use skating and classic technique, although they are still fond of the social aspect of classic skiing.

The Black Jack Cross Country Ski Club has changed from the early days when the club headquarters was a trailer with a potbelly stove, to today's attractive trailhead cabin and kiosk. It

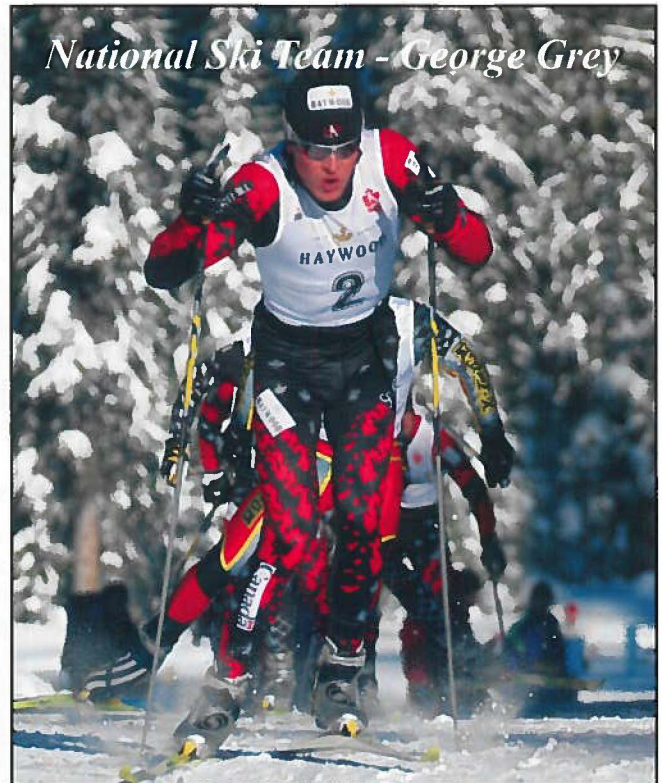


Photo: M. Byskov

has changed from the idle wondering whether or not Rob Grey was going to take out another tree with the Thiokol to eagerly checking the website for the latest grooming update and temperature report. But one thing has remained consistent, and that is the good atmosphere on the ski trails. And truly, Richie and Audrey Mann have set the tone in that regard.

After subdividing their property as part of their retirement plan, Richie and Audrey provided an easement ensuring the club will have access across their land to the Black Jack Ski Trail system, in perpetuity. Linking the club trail system to Centennial Trail and Red Resorts is indeed an asset for this community of skiers.

With over 570 members the Club is just as vibrant today as in yesteryear— that's significant considering the

population of Rossland is only 3,500. The club membership includes recreational skiers of all ages as well as up-and-coming young racers. Black Jack is proud to have nurtured current National Ski Team star, George Grey as a young skier as well as the talent of tomorrow - Darrin Markvardsen and Claire Peacock who are both currently on the BC Ski Team. Skier development programs are run by a dedicated team of volunteer coaches and paid clinicians, and the Jackrabbits and Junior Racers are committed and talented young athletes. Watch for some of our littlest ones in the 2022 Olympics.

The trail network has expanded from the original loops carved out of Richie Mann's acreage to include more than 40 km of groomed trails that traverse private and provincial lands, and are suitable for all levels of skiers. The terrain is varied and challenging, as many racers have breathlessly discovered. This year, updated signage will help out-of-towners get the most of their visit and guide the club membership along the expanded trail network. Also new this season will be an extension to the existing 3 kilometer loop of lighted trails for night skiing.

In addition to the above, the enlarged stadium enables more spectators to enjoy races and other events. Traditionally the club hosts a Loppet, a Kootenay Cup and a fun Short Track Relay each year. After a successful experience with a Continental Cup in 2003, they are looking forward to hosting other large events in the future, such as a World Master's competition or a BC Cup.

The club is also the proud host of both the cross-country and biathlon events in the upcoming 2006 BC Winter Games. Rossland invites all winter sports enthusiasts to visit during this exciting four-day celebration. 2500 young athletes from throughout the province will be here competing in 29 different sports.

Many of the improvements were the result of funds awarded to the club through our active Grant Committee. Black Jack has been recognized as a viable community asset and given grants from the Softwood Industry Initiative, the Columbia Basin Trust, Teckcominco and the Gaming Commission. Some of the grants required matching funds that the club has worked hard to raise. The fruits of their labor have been very beneficial to the club, and have helped make Black Jack one of the premier cross-country ski destinations in BC. Last season the club hosted a bus load of extremely enthusiastic skiers from Vancouver, many of whom were impressed at the fantastic snow conditions at the ski trails when much of the province was suffering from a serious lack of snow.

The Black Jack venue is an excellent training site for early season skiing because the area is generally blessed with superior early condition. Athletes and teams participating in the 2010 Olympics should take note! In addition, this year we anticipate having access to additional trails at higher elevation as we expand our tenure further into Provincial lands, thus enabling us to hit the trails even earlier than before.

Red Resorts, a downhill ski mountain just across the road from Black Jack, and under the guidance of new investors, is beginning to expand and improve facilities. While Rossland is committed to maintaining its mining town charm, a feeling of change and invigorating vibrancy is in the air with new businesses and restaurants opening up. Now is the time to act - pack up your skis and come visit Black Jack where we celebrate our history and our future - you won't be sorry!

This article combines articles written by A. Glenn-Miller and K. Moore. To read Miller's complete article, visit the Black Jack website at www.skiblackjack.ca.

Photo: A. Glenn-Miller, Black Jack Cross Country Ski Club

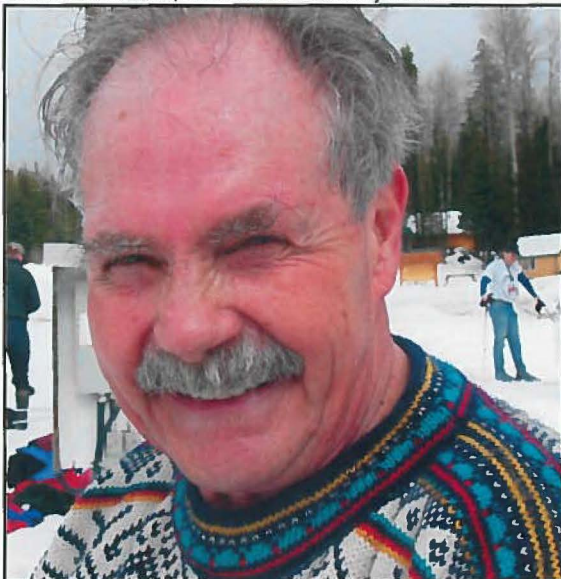


Photo: D. Cornelius, Black Jack Cross Country Ski Club

