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E SPRING ISSUE | #121

\$9.95 US / CAN
DISPLAY UNTIL MAY 30, 2018

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Long Live Longboards

by KURT GENSHEIMER

“Dope is king, kid.”

I looked quizzically over at the longbeard wearing a felt prospector's cap and canvas coveralls as he took a generous swig from his flask. His skis were made from planks of wood longer than my pickup truck, secured to his work boots with nothing more than two flaps of leather and some tattered shoelaces. He pocketed the flask, smashed his hat down to his eyebrows and bellowed a bear growl as his giant wooden pole stabbed the hardpack.

The longboard skis rapidly picked up speed like a toboggan, and the old man assumed a squatted position to cheat the wind. Even his beard became aerodynamic, blown over the back of his right shoulder.

The cheers grew louder, and the graybeard crossed the finish line in a streak, putting the giant wooden pole between his legs, digging it into the snow as a brake, kicking up a roost of cold smoke. He made it look so effortless that I couldn't help but holler with the roaring crowd. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“OK, buddy. It's your turn.”

About the same time that Norwegians were telemark skiing in the 1850s, Gold Rush prospectors in California's northern Sierra Nevada were looking for ways to stay entertained while buried up to their roofs all winter. Considering nearly every peak in the Lost Sierra region between La Porte and Johnsville was denuded of trees to build hundreds of mining camps, whiskey-fueled creativity worked its magic, and downhill ski racing was invented.

For nearly 75 years, the Lost Sierra had the planet's fastest humans, freefalling down mountains on 15-foot planks of wood, reaching speeds of 90 miles an hour, covering quarter-mile runs in fewer than 14 seconds—faster than most modern cars. But it wasn't necessarily the length of the skis or the skier that unlocked these astonishing speeds. It was the dope, better known as wax.

Like a modern boxer is nothing without his coach, the longboard racer was nothing without his dope man, a master mixologist stirring

up secret concoctions worth more than gold, considering longboard race prize money was counted in thousands of today's dollars. Dope ingredients were sworn to secrecy and differed depending on conditions. Even Snowshoe Thompson, the legendary skier from Telemark, Norway who delivered mail across the treacherous Sierra Nevada in the dead of winter between 1856 and 1876, couldn't compete with the boys of the Plumas Ski Club. He got waxed at his first and only longboard race.

Today the Historic Longboard Revival Series at Plumas-Eureka Ski Bowl near Johnsville keeps this little-known ski-racing heritage alive in the Lost Sierra. Held three times a season in January, February and March (weather permitting), the longboard races are a window in time. Not only do participants dress up in old-timey garb, but so do many spectators and members of the Plumas Ski Club, the organization responsible for this raucous gathering.

It's also a fundraiser for the Ski Bowl, once a fully operating ski hill with two Poma lifts that haven't operated in 20 years despite ongoing efforts. But not having a chairlift or even a surface tow at the Ski Bowl doesn't seem to bother anyone in attendance at the races. Longboarders throw giant sticks over their shoulders and hump to the top of the 300-yard run. Spectators who want to get a little ski tour in before the races show up early and skin the 500-vertical-foot ski hill, past Eureka Lake and up to 7,494-foot Eureka Peak for commanding views of the Lost Sierra. Even kids get their thrills by running up slopes next to the ski lodge and sledding down.

I placed the finely shaped planks of Douglas fir in the snow and cranked the leather straps to my running shoes as tightly as possible. There was no way I would outclass the graybeard who went before me, but considering this was my first time, I didn't care. After watching the races all day, I just had to give the longboards a try, despite the lingering thought that this was a torn ACL just waiting to happen.

I pushed off with the wooden pole, and the longboards gradually picked up speed. My running shoes provided no support or

stiffness whatsoever; I just balanced the best I could and hung on. The skis became surprisingly stable as the finish line came closer and closer. Right as my tips crossed the line, I caught an edge and collapsed, sliding on my ass across home plate, the best way to fall on 15-foot skis. Laughter roared around me, and I was hooked. Long live longboards.

Equal parts history buff, skier and mountain biker, writer Kurt Gensheimer is always hunting the Lost Sierra for colorful characters, hidden treasures and rugged, remote terrain.



Waxing the competition at last March's Historic Longboard Races, Plumas-Eureka Ski Bowl, Calif. **Elliott Wilkinson-Ray**