

New England cross-country centres turn to snow-making

‘In the past 10 years, it’s become harder to rely on Mother Nature’;

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 16, 2012

Because of meagre snowfalls in recent years, several Nordic ski centres in New England are experimenting with man-made snow, adopting technology that is widespread in Alpine areas.

The world of Nordic skiing is experiencing one of the most significant changes in its history. Originally a mode of transportation that evolved into a sport, cross-country skiing — a.k.a. ski touring — dates back hundreds of years to Scandinavia. Some historians say skiing even has roots in ancient Mongolia, millennia ago.

The Rikert Nordic Center near Middlebury, Vt., about 2½ hours south of Montreal, has set up snow guns along a five-kilometre section of trail, one of the longest stretches in North America.

“We are covering about 10 per cent of our trail system,” said Mike Hussey, director of Rikert, “whereas alpine areas manufacture snow on 80 per cent or more of their terrain.

“In the past 10 years, it’s become harder to rely on Mother Nature.”

Rikert has 50 kilometres of trails for all levels of cross-country skiers, from beginners to racers. From Rikert lodge, it’s a five-kilometre ski to the cabin of famed poet Robert Frost.

And on good snow days, you can hook up with the famed Catamount Trail, a primarily rugged, ungroomed trail that spans Vermont’s mountains, woodlands and fields.

The Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vt., one of the best-known cross-country ski pioneers in North America, also has installed snow guns on a few bare spots where wind and sun erode the snow.

“We need a little boost on the open fields near the lodge,” said Sam von Trapp of the family whose story was portrayed in *The Sound of Music*. “That’s where the wind and sun take their toll, but in the shady, protected woods, we’re able to retain the snow.”

Two other major New England cross-country areas are into snow-making. Even in the snowy Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, which traditionally has exceptional snowfall, the Craftsbury Nordic Center is adding a snow gun to ensure an earlier start and later end to the season, and keep their skiers at home and support local businesses.

The 100-kilometre Bretton Woods network in the Mount Washington region of New Hampshire has two snow guns on a one-kilometre stretch. The movement even has spread west. Soldier Hollow near Park City in Utah is also experimenting with snow-making.

So far, Quebec's Nordic areas are not pursuing man-made snow. Mont Sainte-Anne has an exceptional 200 kilometres of trails, the second-largest network in North America (after one in California). It did try snow-making in 2002, but didn't stick with the program.

"We have good soil, without rocks," explains Pierre Vézina, champion Nordic skier and director of Mont Sainte-Anne's cross-country complex.

"So we only need about 10 to 15 centimetres of snow to have a good surface."

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