

City ski hill celebrates 100 years

Norwegians with a need to fly built Canada's first ski jump on site in 1912

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An annual membership at the Edmonton Ski Club cost \$2 in 1911, and daily admission was 25 cents.

There were no chairlifts.

Business at the club was conducted in Norwegian.

On Jan. 1, 1913, a rickety wooden ski jump was completed, high above the river valley, at a cost of \$47.05.

"John Hougan won the 1913 competition and set the Canadian ski jumping record," said centennial chairman Ken Boutilier. "And 4,000 of Edmonton's 52,000-person population attended it."

One hundred years later, the club charges \$65 to \$215 for season passes and \$9 to \$25 for a full-day lift tickets, still less than it costs in the mountains. Where saplings were planted a century ago, the hill is now lined with evergreen and birch trees.

Business dealings are conducted in English these days and have been for some time.

In 1978, the fourth-generation ski jump, which crossed Connors Road, was torn down to clean up the city for the Commonwealth Games. The demolition work cost \$9,600.

The hill, which has produced generations of competitors, is celebrating its centenary this month. On Sunday, it will offer \$10 family lift tickets and \$20 family rentals.

"It's where I learned how to jump and do tricks like the 360," Olympic gold and silver medallist Jennifer Heil said of her freestyle training days at the club. "I remember the jump made out of metal."

The festivities will carry over to Jan. 22. Alpine ski races will be held all day for children aged 12 and up, and the Edmonton Journal's Nick Lees will challenge former members and members of the public to a race down the slope. The challenge will be followed by a 100-lantern ski parade, and the evening will end with the Black Tie and Tuques gala, which will serve as a kickoff fund-raiser for the club's goal of building a new lodge, followed by fireworks.

Boutilier hopes the centennial gala brings attention to the club in its quest to expand.

Founded by eight Norwegians, including Hougan and A.E. Lillebo, the first chairman, the club received permission in 1912 to build Alberta's first ski jump. The first of many competitions was held at the club on Feb. 24, 1913.

Ski jumping is long gone in Edmonton, but alpine and freestyle skiing have blossomed, and young skiers continue to validate the club as one of the premier competitive training centres in Canada.

Heil began skiing at the club at age three. When she was nine she saw a poster advertising moguls freestyle skiing and soon after was at the hill three times a week to train.

Heil is in the middle of her World Cup season and won't be at the club's centennial bash. She said she was lucky to be part of such a close-knit skiing community.

"I'm so proud of my roots and it's where I fell in love with the sport. I think a lot of the people in the community; they fuelled the passion inside of me."

Board member Todd Rutter began skiing at the hill in 1975.

"Thirty-five years after I started skiing here," he said, "the same passion, commitment, and intense interest in competitive skiing continues to be passed on."

Eighty-year-old Bruce McGavin joined the club in 1944. One of his fondest memories is from the Muck Luck Mardi Gras in the 1960s.

"It was John Hougan's idea to put Roman candles on the back of our skis and go off the jump and through a flaming hoop," McGavin recalled. "It was the big climax of the night, but we had to be careful not to sit down. My friend, Ole Hovind, mistakenly sat down and burned his new snow pants."

Club president Andy Weiler said the hill is an important part of the city, and he looks forward to the next 100 years of its history.

"We know what we have here, and that's a jewel, a jewel in the river valley," said Weiler. "We want to draw more people to the hill and we hope our centennial celebration puts us closer to reaching our vision."

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