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STORMY ISSUE

Editorial

The Ski Centre recently celebrated its 30th anniversary a milestone that has been achieved by the hard work and support of many, many people. Without detracting from the huge effort that is needed in planning and obtaining the funding to get a project like this off the ground this isn't the hardest part. The hardest bit is keeping the facility running against the endless challenges it faces. And the Ski Centre has had its fair share of challenges. I could point out other local projects, launched with great fanfares, that have fallen by the wayside but the Ski Centre just kept going.

The title of this newsletter "Stormy" not only refers to the winter we have just seen but might equally refer to the challenges that the Centre has faced and overcome in 30 years. There are some club members who were involved with the original Management Committee that ran the old Huntly Nordic Ski Centre. When Aberdeenshire Council took the Centre into direct management, for sound practical reasons, the Ski Club was formed by the members of the now defunct Management Committee. From the start the Club closely worked with Centre in a mutually beneficial way and that has continued up to today. Elizabeth Massie writes of the 30th anniversary celebrations, Andy Miller gives us a potted history, while Frank Musgrave reflects on the range and scope of Club activities.

Storms aren't rare in Scotland but to have three such severe storms in one winter is unusual and my roundup of the Clash season is strongly influenced by Arwen, Malik & Corrie.

Read Muzzy's fascinating insight into the hermit-like existence preparing for the Winter Olympics. We may have had "tranquillised badgers" but now he compares himself to sack of potatoes – a blimbling fast sack though. He fails to mention his tremendous post-Games 6th place in the Holmenkollen 50km in his supposedly weaker classic technique.

Peter

TREEMAGEDDON!!!! *by Peter Thorn*

Clash snow days 2021/22 – 46 (25 good, 21 marginal)

No, not a Hollywood epic disaster movie starring Bruce Willis but a true-life drama featuring Arwen and played out in forests across Scotland and northern England. Tree and property damaging storms are not unusual in Scotland but Storm Arwen, on the 25 November 2021, was a bit different coming from the NE, usually a good direction for bringing snow but this one brought wind gusts in excess of 90 mph that wreaked havoc, bringing down huge areas of forest. It is estimated over 8 million trees were damaged in Scotland and Forest & Land Scotland (FLS) estimate that in one night the number of trees felled was equivalent to one third of the trees they harvest in a year. And no doubt many of you, like me, were without power or telephone lines for several days.

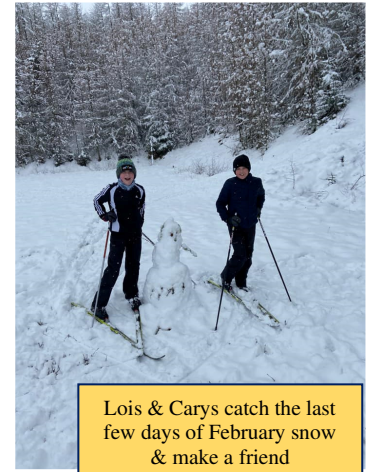


Trees!, trees! everywhere
but not a trail to ski

The Clash did not escape. Trails impassable, in fact unrecognisable, under huge piles of trees. The storm brought a good blanket of snow but alas skiing wasn't possible. FLS had no option but to impose a blanket closure of all forests in Aberdeenshire, three people had been killed by falling trees that night. Tree clearance initially concentrated on the main recreational forests such as Bennachie. As 2021 turned into 2022 and the early season snow (2 weeks) had been lost

there was an increasing worry there may be no skiing in the Clash this winter. In December Colin Miller and myself were asked by FLS to produce a survey of fallen trees. January passed and although most skiers had taken heed of FLS closure skiers were starting to explore the higher trails where there was less tree blockage.

In a mammoth effort FLS had cleared most of the tree blockage and the forest was just going to be officially re-opened to skiers when, starting on the 29th Jan, along came storms Malik and Corrie in quick succession. Although maybe not as strong as Arwen, they were strong enough to bring down more trees in forests already weakened by Arwen. They were strong enough to bring down a 50ft pine tree on my house roof – fortunately no damage. Back to square one and again Miller & Thorn, along with their apprentices Claire, Eileen & Roy produced another fallen tree survey which once again impressed the foresters with its accuracy. FLS sent a team of foresters back into the forest and cleared the trees for a second time, despite getting machinery well and truly bogged down in the mud. On the 25th Feb the forest was officially re-opened to skiers in time to catch a few days of skiing.



Lois & Carys catch the last few days of February snow & make a friend



Late season sun & snow.

March was unusually barren of snow but at the end of the month we were treated to a two-week swansong to the season. Typical late season snow battling against thawing conditions but to starved skiers it was bliss. It attracted several skiers to travel from Edinburgh to bask in sunshine and interesting Clash conditions, but they thought it was great.

What can we learn from the past season? A season for the first time in over 25 years during which the trails have not been groomed on at least one day. Colin Miller commented that there have been many “existential” threats to skiing in the forest over the past 25 years ranging from foot & mouth to windfarms, aging snowmobiles, collapsed garages & condemned portacabins, vehicles – permitted & non-permitted, anti-social behaviour, windblown trees – many times, covid and my favourite TOO MUCH SNOW!!!! But it remains the best snow-holding forest. Our interaction with Forestry over a long period has confirmed the ski trails as a recreational ski area which FLS are committed to maintain to at least the current standard. All expressed in their latest Land Management Plan (<https://forestryandland.gov.scot/what-we-do/planning/active/clashindarroch>) a plan to which the club contributed. By our behaviour in the forest and our reasonable requests we have shown ourselves to be responsible forest users that they can work with. We just have to get them to work faster to make improvements 😊

Our immediate priority is to replace the snowmobile garage but covid and escalating building material prices have hindered this. Longer term, FLS plan to thin areas to let in more light, and snow (eg Short Cut & the top of Wildcat). There are also trail surface repairs that are needed (Herringbone Hill). These are just maintenance, the club has more ambitious ideas such as a Terrain Park and new trails in the heart of the forest, a webcam/weather station but these may have to wait – the garage is the priority.

30th Anniversary of Huntly Nordic and Outdoor Centre

by Elizabeth Massie

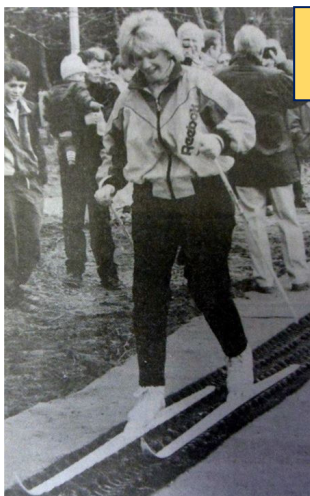
The ski centre celebrated its 30th birthday at the end of March with three days of activity. Lena and Roy invited Deveron Projects to host one of their Friday lunch series at the ski centre on the 25th. A gentle spring day brought a lovely collection of participants, of little to extensive cross country skiing experience, to enjoy a delicious light lunch with celebratory cake and coffee interspersed by talks by Sandy Mitchell, Roy Young and Andy Miller who shed light on the original visionaries and tremendous work done to bring the ski centre to reality. The drive of early volunteers, many of whom are still involved, secured the great facility in Huntly which so many have benefitted from for 30 years. Careful management by well informed x/c skiers has ensured the ski centre continued in a productive direction.

As young and regular ski centre users, Elspeth Cruickshank and Logan Duncan most kindly gave their view of the ski centre from starting ski steps to their current GB development and international racing careers. Their talks were brave and insightful to all gathered there. Frank Musgrave gave further weight to the local, national and international importance of the ski centre from his global grasp. Frank and Roy generously presented a GB Team signed Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic bib to the ski club and ski centre – a fourth consecutive Olympic bib from Huntly skiers Andrew Young and Andrew Musgrave. It's an incredible success story. This was all very good to hear in the presence of two new Live Life Aberdeenshire managers who announced to the lunch party that further development funding was available to ensure that HNOC drives forwards. If notches had been made in the distinctive and robust structure of the

ski centre each time over the last 30 years when each person had skied, hired equipment, competed at local, national or international competition, gone on journeys on skis, we may now have run of wood, such has been its astonishing success but we would have missed the heart of HNOC, the stories, efforts, the life of opportunity which the ski centre brings into being – the Friday lunch gave it a snapshotted voice.

On Saturday, the ski centre doors were opened to all who wished to try out the facility for free. Additional activities were brought by Leisure Lend to the park. Lots of people had a happy day. Our club's Sunday Morning Training Group gave up their morning to provide a fantastic roller ski demonstration in classic and skate technique to an astonishing and intrigued audience. That was even before SMT took on a roller ski agility course set up by coaches Kirstie and Simon. To the delight of all onlookers, jumps, serves, fast feet, slaloms, opposite pump tracks produced a phenomenal display which was captured by the local press, but somehow missed by the BBC. Well done SMT and thank you even to the pink shorted skier who endured lots of questions live over the PA system!

Frank seized the opportunity to present Scottish Series Roller Ski Trophies to several SMT athletes! The presentation had been delayed by Covid. Notable course times and records by Sophie Forth and Elspeth Cruickshank completed an impressive trophy haul by young Huntly athletes.



BBC's Hazel Irvine opened Phase 1 in 1992. Skiing on the old Enka mat.

HUNTLY NORDIC & OUTDOOR CENTRE PHASE 2 DEVELOPMENT STORY

by Andy Miller

As part of the 30-year celebration of the Centre, I was asked to say a few words around the Phase 2 development funded by the Big Lottery in 2004. Fewer people nowadays will be aware of the history behind the plans and many of the youngsters currently enjoying these facilities would not even have been a twinkle of the imagination? The actual groundwork for this went back to 1998, when the original Enka track (up-turned egg box) was showing signs of early wear and we had some years of experience to identify what we needed to do in the future. Essentially the Ski Centre was originally designed aimed at young children and an introduction to skiing, which served its initial purpose.

However, deep down there was more we could do to make it more sustainable. A Report was commissioned from Scott Wilson Consultants using EU Leader funding, to establish what the priorities going forward were:

- Rename the Centre to **Huntly Nordic & Outdoor Centre** to better reflect the ambition and broaden appeal, as well as improve signage off the A96 and include mountain bike hire and promoting cycling around Huntly.
- Through the club develop Competition & Events – such as the Open days and rollerski races that became part of the GB and Scottish Rollerski Series.
- Improve public use of the facilities such as the café, toilets and changing.
- Improve Ski Sales (at the time it was 34% of turnover in 1996/97).
- Upgrade the track to survive! – the biggest difference would be to install a rollerski track to enable both skate & classic skiing to develop, while at the same time safeguarding jobs.
- That Aberdeenshire Council take over the management of the Centre to free up volunteers to develop HNSC.

The first race on the new track June 2004.



So, there was a plan – we just needed to find capital funding to do this? This was frustrating to club members as back in those days Aberdeenshire had no capital budget for Leisure Developments. It was a waiting game for the right opportunity – which came in 2002 with the **Big Lottery New Opportunities PE & Sport**. The then Director of Leisure & Recreation Rod Stone, devised a scheme to allocate funds to each Area Committee from the Lottery pot for Aberdeenshire. The Marr Area Committee quickly realised that they had 2 ringfenced Outdoor Activity options to choose from without competing with other areas for all weather pitches. They prioritised Huntly over Alford Ski Centre because Huntly offered more NEW development in line with the Big Lottery rationale.

The club and others in the Scottish Ski Scene were consulted in the design of the track and we made sure we didn't repeat the mistakes made elsewhere. There was a lot of out-the-box thinking in the design and how the facilities were constructed to ensure it lasted. What we ended up with was a list of desires including:

- 400m Figure of 8 classic track re-design with bridge strengthening and upgrade to striding lanes area
- 30m x 6 m downhill carpet with cushion underlay & tubing
- 800m rollerski track with 10mm tarmac surface
- Skatepark - £2k from group and £20k from NOPES

As I researched this article, I stumbled across some cost figures and who the contractors were – essentially Aberdeenshire Roads Department (Alford Squad) and the Huntly Landscape Services Squad, which came to about £175,000 in 2003. There was some minor spend of equipment for the Centre including £7000 on skis & rollerskis, £3500 on 10 mountain bikes & helmets and £4000 on the round tables and the wooden chairs which are still used today. Some things last! We did invest in signage and a people counter at the gate and by the macerator, but unfortunately these were vandalised. However, it quickly told us that the laying down of the road was a big hit with walkers and cyclists in the town!

The Centre was opened by the Princess Royal who actually does cross country ski and it was a great day for the club and centre. There were lots of ski demonstrations by the young skiers led by Roy young and Alex Standen, with some photo evidence still around. Mike Dixon from Eurosport came too and has been such an advocate of the Centre since then. A small NOPES development fund was put in place for the next 3 years to subsidise schools coming to use the centre, mainly transport costs. We should not forget what a massive impact the Big Lottery has had here and elsewhere in Huntly and continue to be thankful.



Roy explains to the Princess Royal. While Andy Miller looks behind to a small boy in orange – who did he grow into?

As we all know – club members and the public learned about skate skiing and the usage of the Centre increased. The Club Skiers developed further and within 6 years we had athletes attending the Vancouver 2010 Olympics to put Huntly on the world map. The centre was used for training camps for BNDS and we invited our Norwegian friends over to train with the squad to bring on the competition. One of my abiding memories was a BNDS camp where Roy had invited Per Ekland the Norwegian Junior Team Coach and the Secretary of the Norwegian Ski Federation. As part of the ambition to team wrote on the wipe board “To be the best no-snow nation in the world”! I asked Per if this was achievable and his reply is still with me today “If they believe it, they will achieve it!” How right he was!

So, as we look forward beyond this milestone of 30 years to the next phase of the Centre, we must dream big and upgrade what we see as “normal” to meet the growing expectations of the new generation of skiers and other users of the centre. Whatever is put down must exceed current requirements and challenge skill levels, so the next generation are more accomplished skiers than their peers. Such is progress!

(Andy concentrates on Phase 2 which saw the rollerski track & downhill appear. Prior to that it was just the artificial surface, the Enka mat until that fell apart, then we skied on the underlay. It was the first manager of the centre, Peter Collins who, probably more than anyone, worked out how to best use this strange surface and get the most out of limited resources. It was Peter who started up the JDS that turned novice youngsters into accomplished skiers and we’ve seen what that has led to. Several “ski experts” told me in the early days that the surface was no use for learning to ski – how wrong they were – ed).

Huntly Weekend

by Frank Musgrave

On Saturday March 13th Peter Thorn and Colin Miller had organized a **mountain tour on Cairngorm**. Unfortunately I had to give this a miss due to a shoulder injury, but on Sunday March 14th I had the pleasure of going along to **Gartly** to watch Sarah Young (long time HNSC member, now Snowsport Scotland Pathway Coach (Cross Country skiing)) leading a weekend for **Snowsport Scotland Pathway** athletes, including several aspiring HNSC athletes. The athletes spent the previous day training at Huntly Nordic and Outdoor Centre but moved over to Gartly (to enjoy rollerskiing on the Coynnachie road and strength and conditioning in the Tin Hut) because **HNOC** was the base on Sunday

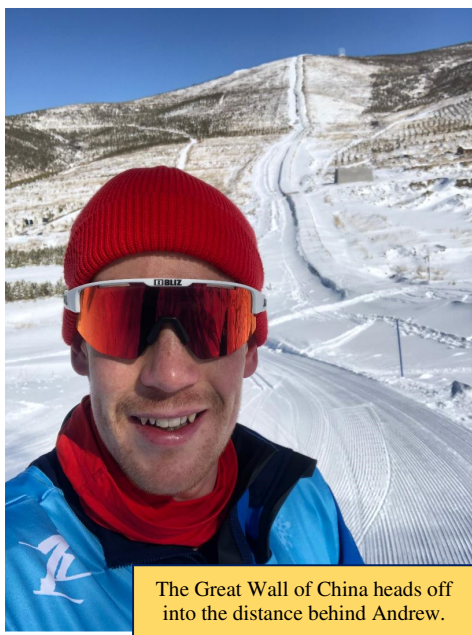


You don't need snow. Scottish Pathway skiers being put through their paces in the Clash. Don't worry Sarah found plenty of snow for them.

for our long established **Junior Development Squad** programme.

Club members who didn't fancy venturing out had the option of staying at home to watch TV and see HNSC members Andrew Musgrave (15k Free Style) and Andrew Young (Sprint Classic & 15kF) in action for **Great Britain at the Falun World Cup** in Sweden, results included a top ten finish for Andrew Musgrave. Meanwhile HNSC athletes Hamish Wolfe, on the **Home Nations Performance Pathway** coached by long time club member Alex Standen, was in action at the **Scandinavian Cup** races at **Steinkjer, Norway** (15k Free style and 15k Classic) among the best athletes in the world outside World Cup competitions. HNSC next generation racers Logan Duncan, Jacob Ipsen and Ramus Ipsen were also in action (15k Free style, 7.5k Classic), their first opportunity to race for two years because of Covid, at the **OPA Games** invitation event in **Italy** with the **British Nordic Development Squad**,

One weekend, Huntly skiers in action at six different events, entry level to elite. British cross-country skiing at present is a bit like seaside rock: wherever you break it you will find **HNSC** through the middle.



China, Cold, Covid, Altitude, The Great Wall & Olympics

by Andrew Musgrave

This year's Olympics was always going to be a bit of an interesting experience. Altitude, wind, frigid temperatures, and a venue on the edge of the Gobi Desert assured these races would be unlike anything we'd previously encountered. When you add the worldwide reaction to Chinese human rights violations and a global pandemic to the mix, you don't exactly have an ideal recipe for the world's greatest sporting event. Despite all this, the Games was still going to be the culmination of four years hard work, and every cross-country athlete was aiming to be there in the best form of their lives. On the British Team we put our heads down, ignored outside distractions as much as humanly possible and did everything we could to be at the top of our game in Beijing.

Number one on the of the list of priorities for getting to Beijing at the top of our game was staying healthy and avoiding covid. Getting infected within the 30 days leading up to the Games would not only damage our chances of being in top shape, but it would also make it very difficult logistically to get to Beijing, due to the stringent Chinese test regime.

James, Youngie, and I all had individualised plans in the build-up through January. I stayed at altitude for a solid training block after new year. James came up to altitude slightly later than me after some time with his parents in France, while Youngie stayed in Norway for more intense training at lower altitude.

Terrified of the wave of covid spreading through Europe, we isolated ourselves from each other and the outside world. We stopped going to the gym, ate food in our own rooms and endured the greatest hardship of all: avoiding going out for good Italian coffee in the centre of Livigno. If there was one person on the team who was going to get covid, then it had to be Youngie. The likelihood of Andrew getting ill or injured seems to increase exponentially the closer we get to any major championship. Last year it was a broken leg right before the Oberstdorf World Championships, at the Sochi Olympics he fell down the stairs a few days after we arrived, at the Falun World Championships he had some sort of illness... and the list goes on. Poor lad!

Right on cue, a few weeks before this year's Games, Youngie tested positive for covid. This led to the rest of us, coaches and waxers included, becoming completely paranoid. If Youngie could get ill alone in a cabin in the Norwegian mountains, then anyone could get it. Life became less about optimising training and more about eliminating infection risk at all cost. Whether due to luck, or decent infection risk control, we somehow managed to avoid Youngie's fate, get through January unscathed, and make it to China.

Previously I've experienced a sense of excitement and anticipation when heading off to the Olympics. This year all I felt was relief. I could finally relax and focus on with the job of getting ready to race. Staying relaxed lasted approximately two days, when I read that the Norwegian nordic-combined star Jarl Riber had tested positive for covid. The previous day I'd been sitting next to him on a bus. For the rest of the Games I went back to being paranoid, avoiding everyone and hiding in my room when I wasn't racing or training.

On our first test of the competition tracks we were met with a temperature of twenty-six degrees below zero, an icy wind and blowing snow. I didn't learn much about the course; I was much too focused on trying to cover up any part of

exposed skin and stay warm, rather than analysing corners and hills. The one useful thing I did work out was that a set of windproof boxers was going to be rather important for the races. (*The Muzzy trademark short sleeves were obviously out of the question – ed*)

My racing kicked off with the 30km skiathlon. Luckily by this point we'd had a few more days of slightly warmer temperatures and I'd worked out where the course actually went, so didn't get lost. The race itself was brutal. The combination of abrasive, dry and cold snow, altitude, and hard tracks meant the field completely blew up. There were bigger time differences than I've ever seen in a top-level international race. Unfortunately, I was not the one causing the field to blow up. Instead, I was one of the ones blowing up. I was at a standstill in comparison to the race's winner, Bolshunov. I came into the finish in 17th place, well over four minutes behind Bolshunov. A respectable result in terms of position, but definitely not the result I'd dreamt of.

I won't dwell too much on the 15km Classic. In short, it was a complete disaster. I'm not even sure what my final position was, all I know is that it was a long way back. What on earth happened I still don't know. All I can tell you is that a sack of potatoes would be insulted at being compared to me in that race.

My last race was the fifty kilometre, on the final weekend of the Games. The first two competitions hadn't gone entirely to plan, but I was still confident of having a good race. Long skate events are my strong point, and this was definitely going to be a long, hard slog on the slow Chinese snow.

After warmer weather for the 15km, the temperatures were back down towards twenty below freezing. We got to the stadium to a message from the International Ski Federation that they were considering postponing the race, changing the course, or shortening the race due to the cold temperatures and wind. I thought this was strange, as it was not much colder or windier than we raced the skiathlon at the start of the Games. I thought that the race would probably go ahead as planned, as all the athletes and coaches I had spoken to seemed to think the conditions were fine for racing. The one thing I was convinced of, was that the race wouldn't be shortened. There surely was no way they would shorten the blue riband event of the Games.

After a long silence, we received word (via Norwegian news before hearing anything from FIS) that the race was both delayed by an hour and shortened. I was pretty annoyed. I understand that exposure time plays a part in cold temperatures, but I feel if it was so cold that a 50km race was too dangerous, then racing 28km shouldn't have been a great idea either. The distance also seemed completely arbitrary, and no one has yet explained to me how on earth they decided that suddenly under 29 kilometres the risk of cold exposure was magically reduced. It definitely didn't make it warmer or less windy.

There was nothing I could do to change the FIS jury's mind though, so I got on with the job of warming up and racing. I've had some good results in thirty-kilometre races previously, so was still convinced I'd be in the fight for a top position. I knew my two previous races in Beijing had been below par, but I felt like it was my classic that had been letting me down, not my form.

We headed off and I settled, feeling good, into a decent position near the front of the pack. After about half-way though, I realised that I was going to be in for another tough day. I was dangling off the lead pack of fifteen or so skiers and struggling to hang on. A few minutes later I lost the group and had to dig deep to not get caught from behind. Over the last couple of laps I managed to move up a few positions, but had to watch my dream of a medal disappear up the track ahead of me. I came into the finish in 12th. Again, a respectable result, but not what I'd travelled to China to achieve.

After a month or two back home, I've had time to review what caused me to underperform in China. I think the training we did in the build-up was decent. I managed all the key sessions we had set up, and I'm pretty sure my form was close to as good as it could have been. As soon as I was back from China I travelled to the test-lab in Trondheim for testing on the rollerski-treadmill. My results were solid, exactly where I would expect them to be in peak form.

My conclusion is that, although there were probably a few things we could have done differently prior to the Games, the main issue is that I struggle when racing at altitude compared to lower elevations. My strength is my ability to push at a higher work-rate and lactate level compared to other competitors on uphill sections, then recovery quickly on descents. At altitude this ability to recover is massively reduced, and I end up fatiguing more and more for each ascent throughout the course. The altitude effect in China was compounded by the abrasive, slow snow, and the hard, long climbs.

I'm disappointed with how things went, but underperformance has made me more motivated than ever to push hard to come back stronger for next year's World Championships and the Olympics in four years time. I'm getting older, but have more in me yet!

(Andrew fails to mention, so I will, his tremendous post-Games 6th place in the Holmenkollen 50km in his supposedly weaker classic technique – ed.)

TECHNICAL CORNER

We don't have too many technical theses on equipment so I felt moved to address this failing with a subject dear to my heart – rockhoppers. I bumped into our Chair on the trails who ridiculed my choice of mis-matched skis questioning their performance. I countered that the skis were perfectly matched, the different lengths (210cm & 205cm) helped with cornering and the deep gouges slowed descents so I didn't fall over as much. I reckoned more time is lost getting up from falls than lost by skiing at a more sedate pace. The skis are excellent over rocks & mud!!!

Coming in next issue..... How to repair skis after following Secretary's advice to ski over rocks & mud.



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