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*Speed skiing:
racing the wind*

Courtesy photo

Kurt Harland (left), a 24-year-old Eugene resident rated as the 67th fastest skier in the world, races head to head with Finland native Kalevi Hakkinen, 53, in an exhibition race.

Speed skiing is like no other type of ski racing. In the more familiar slalom and downhill events, the object is to weave through a set course in the fastest time without missing a "gate." Most of the challenge involves making quicker turns than your opponents.

In speed skiing, there are no gates to go through. The course is straight down the hill, and looks like a drag strip on a snow-covered wall. The winner is the one who passes through the timing lights at the bottom of the course at the fastest speed, usually in the 120 to 130 mph range.

By Ted Fuller

In comparison, top speed for recreational skiers on an open run is probably about 30 to 35 mph, according to Kurt Harland, a Eugene resident and speed skier with the 67th fastest speed in the world.

"It's just not possible or at all safe to go much faster," he said. Snow conditions, equipment and other skiers limit how fast recreational skiers can go, he added.

Speed skiers, on the other hand, have some of the best equipment made, ski only when snow and weather conditions are exceptional (for safety's sake) and ski on closed courses designed specifically for optimum speed.

Speed skiing courses are usually set apart from other ski runs and are roped or fenced off to keep people from straying onto the course. Meticulous grooming of the course is required to make it as smooth as possible.

"Everything is magnified 'at speed' (over 100 mph)," Harland said. "Every little lump or dimple a skier hits becomes a bone-jarring bump."

Even with the snow groomed and packed to a firm, smooth surface, speed skiers have a hard time keeping their skis down as they careen down the mountain.

One might think that speed skiing is a dangerous sport. Broken legs, sprained wrists, twisted knees and black and blue marks are a part of the sport. But Harland claims that serious injuries are not that common in speed skiing — rarely anything more serious than bruises. There are exceptions, though.

Harland told of one speed skier he saw fall near the top of the course.

"He just slid down the course," Harland said. "The rubber suits are so slick (for less wind drag), there's no way to stop, so you just slide down and enjoy the ride."

As the fallen skier got closer to the bottom of the course, Harland knew something was wrong, he said.

"I saw him suddenly start rolling around, squirming as he kept sliding down the course," Harland said.

After stopping at the bottom of the course, the fallen skier was rushed to a hospital. The friction between the snow and the rubber suit built up so much heat during the slide that the rubber had melted, giving him third-degree burns on most of his back.

But Harland also saw someone hit a rock at speed and not get hurt, he said.

"It (the rocky bluff) was off to the side of the course, fenced and padded, even though no one was expected to get near it," he explained. "The guy who hit it was shaken up, so they flew him off to the hospital to make sure he was OK. I saw him an hour later walking around. He was only bruised."

While Harland acknowledged that there is danger involved in speed skiing, he made it clear that the emphasis of the sport is safe speed. Everyone who competes must wear a helmet and their equipment must meet rigid specifications. Everything is inspected to ensure safety standards are met.

Also, every run a skier makes is closely watched. If the officials rule that a skier is going too fast, that he can't handle the high speed, he is forbidden to make any more runs that day. There are usually no arguments when the officials order someone off the mountain.

"It's obvious when someone's not in control," Harland said. "Good speed skiers know their limits. They don't take unnecessary risks."

Speed skiers always have the option of dropping out of the competition, even if they are at the starting line about to push off.

"It's a mental sport," Harland explained. "If you aren't mentally ready at the start, you'll never make it to the finish."

At Harland's first professional race, Franz Weber, the Austrian who holds the world record at 129 mph, decided not to ski on the last day. Many skiers had fallen the day before, and later Franz said that he had dreamt that he would fall on the last day of competition. As it turned out, no one fell on the last day, and six of the eight fastest speeds ever run were turned in.

The world record holder's decision not to race and admission of fear impressed Harland immensely, he said. "I think that was a very commendable thing to do,"

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