

Skier aims for world record, stresses safety of speed skiing

By Ted Fuller
Of the Emerald

Eugene, Oregon — Track Town, USA. A place where names like Prefontaine, Salazar and Decker are uttered in hushed tones usually reserved for deities and legends.

And rightly so. These are world-class athletes, legends in their own time. But for what? Running fast. How fast? Not very, if you think about it.

A world-class miler runs just a little faster than 15 mph. A good half-miler, almost 20 mph. The fastest sprinters can run 100 meters in 10 seconds flat, which works out to a blazing 22.5 mph.

Big deal.

Former University student Kurt Harland has gone five times as fast. Not running of course, and not behind the wheel of a car either. Harland has gone as fast as 116 mph. And he thinks he can go faster — faster than 130 mph.

How? On snow skis.

Harland, 24, is a world-class speed skier. He grew up in Eugene and has been skiing since his parents taught him how in grade school. His first real lesson came as part of his ski instructor certification exams at Willamette Pass two years ago. He raced in slalom and giant slalom for South Eugene High School and went on to state-level races three times.

Harland always has skied aggressively, and as a kid he always skied fast, especially with a bunch of friends.

"Looking back," he says in a serious tone, "I see how dangerous and foolish it was to ski that fast on those crowded slopes in such mediocre conditions." With a confident smile he adds, "But that's why I love speed skiing — it's fast and it's safe."

Last April, Harland finished his rookie year on the professional speed skiing tour in Europe, coming home with the 67th fastest speed in the world. While he's not looking to become a legend in his own time, he would like to set a world record. He also would like to make the sport of speed skiing as popular in the United States as it is in Europe.

Harland got started speed skiing in the spring of 1984 when he and a friend participated in an amateur event at Mount Bachelor that was part of the Camel sprint series. For \$30 he got a day's coaching, three videotaped training runs and a series of safety lectures.

"Throughout the clinic the emphasis was on safe speed," he says.

Skiers provided their own helmet and ski equipment, with the only stipulation being that the skis had to be between 195 and 225 centimeters long. During the timed runs, Harland got up to 76 mph and was hooked.

Instead of attending winter term at the University in 1985, Harland toured Colorado, California and Nevada on the International Speed Skiing amateur tour. Like the Camel sprint series, the ISS tour was open to the public and provided coaching and safety lectures as part of the series. Being a regular, Harland got to know the organizers and began helping with the clinics and running of the events.

Harland described his amateur tour experience as a low-budget operation.

"I slept in my car a lot and had cold chili right out of the can for breakfast."



Kurt Harland

Courtesy photo

He must have been doing something right. In February of this year he went up to Whistler, British Columbia, to compete in the final event of the Canadian amateur tour. He won, beating the best of Canada's speed skiers and qualifying for the pro tour in Europe.

One month later he left for Europe and entered his first professional race at La Clusaz, France. On his last run, Harland had a chance to break a personal record he had set the day before. He didn't set a new mark and is still kicking himself about it.

"I blew it," he says candidly. "I had watched six of the eight fastest runs in the world, so I was pumped. I was going down, concentrating on keeping my tuck."

He demonstrates, compressing his strong, 6-foot-1, 200-pound frame into the classic racing position: knees bent 90 degrees, his chest and thighs parallel to the floor, his elbows tucked in, his hands in front of his face to break the wind.

"Somehow the wind caught my right hand," he continues. "I'm going 120, 125, and the wind just lifts the whole right side of my body up out of the tuck and my right ski off the ground. I realized what was happening and was able to catch myself in time."

Harland's intensity can be felt as he relives the moment, repeating the gyrations his body went through eight months ago.

"I got my ski down on the snow and my arm back in front in one motion, but as I got back into my tuck, I hit my left hand with my right," he continues. "Before I know it, my left arm is behind my head, and my left ski is off the ground. Again I catch myself and realize that I have to regain control. So I stand up out of my tuck, gather myself and get back down again."

The intensity is gone from his face as he sits down.

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