

Not your average nordic training day

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Unpacking the van at Virginia Meissner Sno-park Saturday morning, coach Bill Warburton of the Bend Nordic Team ran down inventory of everything he needed for a day on the snow with his team.

Skis. Poles. Gloves. Wax. Frisbees. Soccer balls.

Frisbees and soccer balls?

A nordic coach for the past six years, Warburton, 29, said his choice of equipment is all part of the plan. Younger kids will give up on ski racing before they really know what it's all about if the training isn't fun, so instead of leading the team on a heart-pounding, lung-searing race through the forest, Warburton and his fellow coaches planned a soccer game on skis, and a bit of Frisbee-tossing as they make their way around the trails for about an hour's worth of low-pressure skiing.

"This youth program is totally designed to have fun, to explore the woods, get to know the trails, to get to ride in the van and have a team experience, feel like they're part of a team and get to know each other," Warburton said. "The idea is to build up their excitement; that's really all we're trying to do now."

Colin Dunlap, 14, said feeling like he's part of a team — simple things like riding in the team van and hanging out with the same people every weekend — is the best part of the program. A freshman at Summit High School, Colin considered skiing with the high school team but decided to join up with the Bend Nordic Team after racing bikes during the summer with the Bend Cycling Club.

Colin and other skiers in his age group will be taking the van to the Junior Olympic qualifying race in Methow, Wash., next weekend, the first road trip of the season for the team. Although it's his first year racing, Colin said he thinks he's got an outside chance of qualifying for the Junior Olympics, to be held in March in Presque Isle, Maine.

"One of my coaches, Ben (Husaby), said I've got a chance, but it's going to be tough," Colin said. "I'm just going to have to really push it. (Coach Luke Foster) made it his first year. I know that, so that's my hope."

Husaby, a six-time Pole Pedal Paddle winner, and Brenna Knowles started the Bend Nordic Team and the Bend Cycling Club about a year ago. The programs are part of the larger Bend Endurance Academy, an effort by Husaby and Knowles to combine athletic training with community service.

Knowles said kids involved in the bike club or the nordic team are expected to volunteer in the community, working on projects like building trails, stacking firewood at area homeless shelters, and serving as event staff at fun runs and other volunteer-based community events.

"It's one thing to be a great athlete — that's wonderful, it really helps kids through life with the lessons they learn through athletics," Knowles said. "But you can't be completely selfish. You have to give back to your community. That's a component we are busy developing right now."

The Bend Nordic Team offers programs for beginning skiers between 7 and 11 years old, and training for more advanced skiers up to 22 years old.

Luke Foster skied for Husaby and Knowles as a racer at Central Oregon Community College, and was hired to help coach the youth program because he understood their coaching style. Foster, 25, said it's fun for him to see how far the kids can come in just a few years.

"All the older kids now are kids that I've coached, now that I've been coaching four or five years. Like this kid," Foster said, pointing at a passing high school racer warming up for a race.

"He's super fast. It's fun to watch kids get really fast, really good. And I love it, so I want to spread the love to other people."

Waxing up her skis in a blaze orange cap and oversized aviator sunglasses, Ivy Taylor, 11, said she views nordic skiing largely as a way to get out and play in the snow, now that all the snow around her house has melted.

"It's fun; it's good exercise," Ivy said. "It's just kind of a good opportunity to get together with some fun people and do something active."

Libby McKnight, 10, said she's been nordic skiing with her family since she was 5, but only started racing this year. Getting up early in the morning on a nonschool day to go to practice isn't always easy, Libby said, but it's worth it at the end of the day.

"I feel good about myself when I come home," Libby said.

To learn more

For more information, contact the Bend Nordic Team at 541-678-3864 or at info@bendnordic.org. (<mailto:info@bendnordic.org>)



Coach Bill Warburton scrambles to get the ball Saturday in a game of soccer with members of the Bend Nordic Team at Virginia Meissner Sno-park. Warburton incorporates activities like soccer into the youth program's training to keep it low-key and fun.



Coach Stuart Smith-Blockley, left, applies wax to a pair of skis while visiting with Colin Dunlap, center, and Reitler Hodgert prior to the Bend Nordic Team hitting the trails Saturday at Virginia Meissner Snowpark.