

# Club keeps trails smooth

Anne Aurand / The Bulletin Published Jan 27, 2013 at 04:00AM

The sun was dazzling off the snow at Virginia Meissner Sno-park last weekend, perfect conditions for a first day of cross-country skiing. About 100 novice nordic skiers, some cradling their skis in their arms and looking a bit tentative, gathered at a big, flat opening near the Meissner trailhead.

“Don’t worry if you don’t know how to put on your skis,” called J.D. Downing, director of XC Oregon, a nonprofit elite skier development program, assuring the beginners that they were in the right place.

It was “Learn to Ski” day, a free, decade-old event organized by the Meissner Nordic Community Ski Club. Once the skiers divided into small groups, volunteer coaches from XC Oregon helped them snap boots into bindings, demonstrated how to plant ski poles and explained when to push on the skis to get a glide.

Skiers scattered like ants from a disturbed anthill and practiced what they learned. (Meanwhile, in the parking lot, a sheriff’s deputy ticketed cars, presumably those lacking sno-park permits — certainly an apres-ski buzz-kill.)

Meissner Nordic

“Learn to Ski day captures the spirit of what we’re about,” said Meissner Nordic club board president Cynthia Engel. “It’s a community-based ski area that’s accessible to everybody.”

Skiers of all ages and abilities frequent the sno-park every day. There are parents teaching their preschoolers to ski, Olympic hopefuls in training, and everything in between.

The nonprofit Meissner Nordic club grooms 40 kilometers of classic and skate skiing trails that crisscross U.S. Forest Service land. It’s mostly the skiers who are footing the grooming bill.

Over the years, club volunteers have organized public events such as Learn to Ski, cleared and groomed trails, peeled logs for the new shelter, stocked firewood and taken turns serving on the board of directors. Board members raise money, manage the grooming program and update the Meissner website and Facebook pages with trail reports and conditions.

“These are community trails maintained by the community,” said Amy Tinderholt, with the Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, in an email. The volunteers increase the Forest Service’s capacity to provide recreation opportunities to the public, she said.

“Due to the investment from Meissner Nordic and the nordic area supporters, the area has become an important winter facility that is home to many events and hosts high school nordic teams,” Tinderholt said.

And, since Meissner is a quick 14 miles west of Bend, it can get busy.

Some say Meissner Nordic is the victim of its own success, referring to the chaotic parking scene on weekends. The club and the Forest Service are working together to further enlarge the parking lot before next winter.

Others believe the area has absorbed its popularity well. Once skiers disperse from the trailhead, the crowd typically thins out. The club has expanded the trail system in recent years, and would like to add more.

### The magic

Cross-country skiing is not just for fitness training.

“It can also just be another way to get outside and appreciate places you wouldn’t get to another way,” Engel said.

It’s those places, scattered all around the Meissner playground, that make it extraordinary.

“So many spots out there are magical,” Engel said, like the place along the Tangent Loop trail where there’s a view of Broken Top, or the sections where skiers are dwarfed by majestic ponderosa pines. The shelters (Meissner and Shooting Star) are cool destinations or rest stops, where wood stoves warm the log shelters that boast views of the mountains to the west and the city to the east.

Michelle Watt, of Bend, loves the shelters because of those stunning mountain views, she said. She likes to skate ski or snowshoe, sometimes with her toddler in tow, to the Meissner shelter for lunch or hot chocolate.

“You always run into friends up here,” Watt said on a recent day, standing around with friends and kids after a ski. “I love the community part of it. It’s just fun and it’s not too much money.”

Because no day pass is required to access the trails, there’s often a misconception that the ski area is free, or that the only cost associated with skiing there is the parking permit. In reality, it costs at least \$50,000 a year to groom Meissner’s trail network, and sno-park fees pay for plowing the parking area, not maintaining the trails.

So it falls to the skiers to support the endeavor. Some occasionally stuff \$5 bills in the donation box at the trailhead for grooming, others contribute once online and get counted as one of the 556 Meissner Nordic club members. Engel said the number 556 doesn’t capture how many people ski there. Through a car-counting calculation, skier numbers are conservatively estimated at 960 per weekend day.

### The evolution

The Meissner Nordic club originated in 1996, a suggestion from local elite skiers who wanted to create a community-based ski club such as those found in many European towns. The name was then Tumalo Langlauf Club. (Tumalo after the local landmark Tumalo Mountain and “Langlauf,” the German word meaning “long run” often used to describe cross-country skiing, according to [www.meissnernordic.org](http://www.meissnernordic.org). (<http://www.meissnernordic.org>))

The nonprofit organization, a chapter of the Oregon Nordic Club, changed its name in 2011 to Meissner Nordic, because, according to Engel, no one knew what Tumalo Langlauf meant, or how to say it or spell it. It wasn’t as easy to find on the Web.

“It didn’t help us reach people. Meissner Nordic Community Ski Club says where we are and what we’re about,” she said.

In the beginning, according to long-timers such as early board member Ken Roadman, it was a low-budget social club. Members held potlucks and went on ski trips together. Over time, the demographic changed, the potlucks fizzled and the club’s energy refocused into creating a ski area with well-

groomed trails, Roadman said.

In recent years, the club purchased a used Bombardier 400 Snowcat, a quality grooming machine, and started paying professional, experienced groomers to do the job, typically four times a week, unless conditions allow for the less expensive option: a snowmobile, driven by a volunteer, that pulls a rake-like grooming attachment.

The club's approximately \$50,000 annual budget is 95 percent consumed by grooming. The machines consume a lot of fuel and require a lot of maintenance.

Engel said she is most proud of the fact that grooming operations have become predictable and more frequent in recent years.

"We've gotten to the point where we feel like we have world-class ski trails," she said.

#### Public events

But the social aspect has not died.

Take the Luminaria, an after-dark event where volunteers line the trail to the Meissner shelter with hundreds of paper bags with candles inside. It's a fundraiser, a tradition and a family-friendly nighttime adventure that draws Meissner regulars and newcomers alike.

Sue Vordenberg, a local retiree and skier, started it around 2003, when the United States was at war in Iraq.

"A ski for peace was my notion of a nice way to express concern about the general unrest," she said.

With friends, she acquired donated bags and tea candles, illuminated a short loop, and created an environment where skiers could have a peaceful, solitary experience. Now the route is longer and the party is bigger.

"It's grown from a quiet meditative experience to a very fun social thing," she said. "I love that it's grown."

This year's Luminaria on Feb. 9 — see "If you go" — will be dedicated to Vordenberg's husband, Lloyd Vordenberg, a longtime club member and avid volunteer groomer who died recently.

There's also the waffle feed, which started in 2004, after a Meissner die-hard returned from Norway with a special cast-iron waffle iron that sits on a fire. He started making waffles for the skiers at the shelter. He's moved on, but Walter McKnight, a local kindergarten teacher, tracked down one of these uncommon waffle irons and has taken over the job. McKnight buys the ingredients for the rich, creamy, traditional Norwegian recipe, dons a silly Viking hat and cooks waffles a couple of times a year for anyone who shows up until the batter runs out.

"It's really fun. Everyone is happy when they have food in their stomachs on a cold day," he said. "I like the Scandinavian tradition, which is what nordic skiing is entwined with. Mostly it's for the kids, to get kids interested in skiing. It's so common for parents to say, 'You can make to the shelter, there's waffles waiting for you.' Those are the people I really play it up for. I say, 'You made it! More whip cream!' As a parent and a teacher, I know you have to make things fun."

#### Signs of success

Ben Husaby, a founding member of the nordic club and executive director of Bend Endurance Academy, a nonprofit organization that operates masters and youth development skiing programs at Meissner, said he hopes Meissner remains a community-based and volunteer-driven operation, because it's impressive how well the volunteers run it, and the relaxed and positive environment could change if it were run like a business.

People who ski there now can donate when and how they choose. And it's clear many feel compelled to do so, he said. Years ago, when club leaders shifted toward becoming a grooming operation, Husaby said he worried the club would become overburdened with the costs of grooming.

"My fears were unfounded," he said. "I thought it would cost too much, but people stepped up."

"I've run a lot of businesses. If you could get this kind of support in a business ... you'd be a success," said Shawn McFadden, a club board member who oversees the grooming operations, a time-consuming responsibility this time of year. "The community is behind this, so it's a success. People are smiling and happy and everything is going well. Our customers are the skiers. When they're ecstatic and happy and waving, it makes it worth while."

### **IF YOU GO**

Upcoming free, public events

**What:** The Luminaria — a candlelit ski to Meissner Shelter, with warm beverages and cookies.

**When:** 6 p.m. Feb. 9

**What:** Waffle Feed at Meissner Shelter — look for the guy in the Viking hat making waffles over the fire. Extra whipped cream for kids.

**When:** 10:30 a.m. Feb. 23

### **On the Web**

For more information about the ski area, including trail maps, grooming reports and weather conditions: [www.meissnernordic.org](http://www.meissnernordic.org) (<http://www.meissnernordic.org>)

**Who was Virginia Meissner?**

The Virginia Meissner Sno-park was posthumously named after Virginia Meissner, who was born in Salem in 1925.

She learned a love of the outdoors from her father. At the University of Oregon, she was involved in the school's outdoor club and mountaineering club and she climbed all of the major peaks in Oregon.

She also skied at Willamette Pass ski area, where she met her husband, Jack Meissner, whom she married in 1949. For years, they taught skiing at Willamette Pass and later taught alpine and cross country skiing at Mt. Bachelor. Eventually, Virginia Meissner taught cross-country skiing (along with hiking and cycling) exclusively for Central Oregon Community College.

She wrote "Cross Country Ski Tours in Central Oregon," (1984), "Day Hikes in Central Oregon," (1981) and "Hiking Central Oregon and Beyond" (1987).

In the early 1970s she and other Bend residents formed the Central Oregon Nordic Club, the second chapter of the Oregon Nordic Club in the state. Before she died of cancer in 1988, she persuaded state and federal agencies to create the sno-park that was later renamed in her honor.

— Anne Aurand

Source: [www.meissnernordic.org/about/virginia-meissner-a-biography](http://www.meissnernordic.org/about/virginia-meissner-a-biography)  
(<http://www.meissnernordic.org/about/virginia-meissner-a-biography>)