

*Olympic-size fun in  
the high country of  
British Columbia*

# Winter Games

**H**ave you ever snowmobiled down a mountain using a shovel as a ski? Toured to an enchanting mountain village where skiers swish along the snow-covered main street? Hauled a dead sled out of a picturesque bowl by brute force? Or gone deep-powder riding in the morning, then to play golf that afternoon? These are just some of the fun and games I experienced last winter in Kelowna, B.C., which is located in one of the most scenic settings in Western Canada.

Kelowna isn't the first name that springs to mind when talking about the top mountain-riding areas. In fact, some would write it off as a contender just because it's located in the famous Okanagan Valley, a place not renown for serious winters. But they'd be wrong,

as Dennis Burns and I discovered last March...

The awarding of the 2010 Winter Olympics notwithstanding, 2003 has been a tough year for British Columbia. Throughout the past summer, national headlines tracked countless forest fires, some of which drove people from their homes in several parts of the interior, including 30,000 in Kelowna. And last winter, despite snowfall that was lacking and unpredictable, there were numerous deadly avalanches.

It appears that last winter's multiple avalanche tragedies resulted from a combination of poor judgment, bad luck and unusual conditions. Early snow on the slopes was followed by extended periods without the fresh accumulations that would normally occur. This absence allowed the exist-

ing snow surface to melt, freeze and compact numerous times, making it crusty and slippery. When new snow did come, it didn't stick well. Instead, it perched precariously atop the old, with less than the usual binding effect between successive layers. It's kind of like the friction difference between an asphalt shingle or sheet metal surface on a sloped roof — the latter is much less likely to hold a snow load.

So B.C. slopes that may have been benign in previous winters or under other circumstances became hair-trigger traps in 2003, waiting for the slightest quiver to snap on the unwary or unlucky. Avalanches can be set off by temperature extremes, strong winds, spring thaw and increased snow load

— and by disturbing movements or sounds, such as those made by people having fun.

People just like Dennis and me. That's why we intended to be very careful. But we also wanted to ride whenever possible, so staging out of Kelowna for our own personal winter games was a good choice, as was our guide. Pat Whiteway, executive director of the British Columbia Snowmobile Federation, is an experienced, cautious and knowledgeable mountain rider. At our first meeting, Pat said there were places — such as the steeper ascents at Hunter's Range — that he would not take us to due to the avalanche threat. We would also be extra careful in the places we did go. We didn't need to be

convinced: two more snowmobilers died in a nearby avalanche soon after our arrival. Golf began to look very inviting!

In many other B.C. locales, such a riding restriction could have severely limited our choices and enjoyment, but not around Kelowna. Within an hour's easy drive on good, bare roads, we were able to visit Greystokes, Big White, Park Mountain, Little White and Silver Star, to name just a few of the safe options still available. Each offered a slightly different mix of trail riding, powder playing and hill climbing, with ample snow, good staging areas, and trails and warm-up shelters maintained by very active local snowmobile clubs. Ideal for families and beginners because of the many easy places to ride, these play



areas also provided sufficient challenge for all but the most adventurous snowmobilers. Fortunately, the summer forest fires near Kelowna raged farther south, leaving these prime snowmobiling areas untouched for this coming winter.

We rode in the Kelowna area for five days, each one blessed with good weather. But clear skies or high clouds aren't as critical here as in other more

## If you go

### Who To Contact

**Tourism Kelowna**  
1-800-663-4345  
[www.tourismkelowna.org](http://www.tourismkelowna.org)

**British Columbia Snowmobile Federation**  
(250) 860-8020  
[www.snowmobilebc.ca](http://www.snowmobilebc.ca)

### Where We Stayed

**Best Western Kelowna**  
1-888-860-1212  
[www.discoverkelowna.com](http://www.discoverkelowna.com)

**Sandman Hotel Kelowna**  
1-800-726-3626  
[www.sandmanhotels.com](http://www.sandmanhotels.com)

### Where We Ate

**Jammery, Kelowna**  
**Moxie's Classic Grill, Kelowna**  
**Woodfire Grill, Best Western, Kelowna**  
**Freddy's Brew Pub, Kelowna**  
**deMontreuil's White Crystal Restaurant, Big White**  
**McCulloch Station Pub, East Kelowna**  
**Brandt's Creek Pub, Glenmore**

precipitous destinations, where a low ceiling can mean no riding until visibility cooperates. Nonetheless, we had our share of unexpected challenges...

One consequence of less-than-usual snow is more rock than normal. As Dennis discovered, it was impossible to predict where the snow was deep enough to fully cushion a sled, or where an errant boulder was too close to the surface. On our second day, we headed out on a 160 km tour to Big White. We stopped to play in a meadow bounded by a low, shallow slope sporting several previous tracks. Dennis made a casual loop across its face, and on the downward swing he came to an abrupt halt. We thought he'd just bogged down in snow, but when he rejoined us, his right ski tip was pointing rearward — not a good sign! He'd clipped a small rock, which snapped a metal connector to the ski shaft like a match stick. We were at least 45 minutes from the staging area with a sled that could not be towed easily. After removing the broken ski entirely, Dennis said he'd ride it out on the good one. That feat of balance would be a little easier because the main trail wasn't far away. Still, the prospect of having to stand on the left running board all the way back wasn't my idea of how our game should be played.

While Dennis started back, Pat

headed to high ground to try and make cell contact to arrange a replacement sled. Then he and I followed that one lone ski track down the mountain. It was an obvious trail until we reached the Kelowna Snowmobile Club's warm-up shelter and groomer shed. Then, that lone ski track disappeared. Unable to spot it and growing concerned, Pat and I headed quickly down to the staging area.

Thankfully, Dennis had arrived in medal time — riding on one ski and his new riding invention, a shovel! He'd commandeered a sturdy metal one from the groomer, and jammed the handle through the suspension with the shovel face to the rear and the weight of the sled rested on its curved blade. Talk about flotation! Steering wasn't exactly precise, but he scooted along just as slick as you please, and none the worse for wear! Ingenuity deserves reward, so the pick-up Pat had arranged soon arrived. Dennis met us later that day at the Big White Ski Resort with a replacement sled for the return ride.

I wish that had been the end of our sled misfortunes. The next day, we undertook our most ambitious outing: to Park Mountain near Lumby. This is one of those incredible B.C. locales where you can seemingly ride forever over sweeping hills and through magnifi-



cent bowls and scenic valleys. We made it to the end of the groomed trail at a Lumby Snowmobile Club warm-up shelter, planning to ride out from there as far as time and fuel would allow.

Beside the hut was a small bowl — hardly more than a slight depression. However, it was a warm day and the snow was deep, so when one of our companions drove a short track sled in, he had difficulty getting out. I figured to have no problem with my 151-inch paddle track, and was doing fine until, having climbed about halfway out, the sled stopped with a loud clunk. Stump or rock, I thought, dreading a repeat of the previous day's ordeal. Worse, a quick visual inspection under the hood revealed a shattered chaincase — the chain had snapped and punched clean through the metal. Even I, Mr. Preparedness himself, don't carry those spare parts. My sled was going nowhere. How I longed for that shovel to give it a decent burial!

**The Kelowna area offers everything a snowmobiler could want, including trails, play areas and handy warm-up shelters.**



I swear that the depth of this bowl was no more than 75 feet, with a very gradual ascent. But it might as well have been sloped like Mt. Everest! Try as we might, we couldn't tow, push, pull or otherwise man-handle that dead soldier to the top. At least not before all of us had abandoned our outer wear and helmets, and were dripping sweat, while filling the air with steamy exhalations and even steamier curses. Finally, after packing down an alternate route

with countless pass-overs from our other sleds, we seven weary Olympians were able to haul that beast out to the rim. There, when the time came, it would all be downhill for the race back to the trucks. For now, though, we returned to our hard-earned games — after all, we'd come to play, not work!

And the Kelowna region is a great place for playing. Situated about equidistant between Vancouver and Calgary, the city is also midway on the shores of

the magnificent Okanagan Lake. Kelowna is surrounded by mountains, including the Monashees to the east, which offer ample snowmobiling opportunities. With a population of 100,000, Kelowna has all the choices, services, amenities and night life of a major urban centre, while retaining the benefit of close proximity to back-country adventure. It's easily accessible by highway, and boasts the southern interior's only international airport.

Dry air and bright skies characterize Kelowna winters, which are much milder than areas to the north and east. But as we quickly discovered, just because the golf courses are open and the flowers are budding, doesn't mean there still isn't great snowmobiling up that next hill! In fact, Big White Ski Resort, located only 45 minutes from Kelowna, boasts an annual average snowfall of 24.5 feet of dry inland powder each winter. More great riding and snow can also be found within two hours at places such as Kamloops, Enderby, Sicamous and Merritt. Even Revelstoke is close enough for a side trip while visiting Kelowna.

Despite the setbacks, our winter games racked up 580 km in five days. At least that was the linear measure — who knows what the distance tally was for all the hill-climbing, drift-busting, air-catching, and powder-cutting we



**It's not pretty, but this makeshift repair allowed Dennis to nurse his sick Summit all the way down the mountain.**

did. And we sure made a few medal-worthy jumps! We explored hidden valleys, stopped for many a panoramic view, and lunched at various shelters. We did more trail riding than usual because of the prevalent avalanche threat. But that's the beauty of snowmobiling, Kelowna style — when conditions are right, there are plenty of big slopes to conquer, but there are also many other riding alternatives, any of which beat sitting around your hotel room waiting for the weather to break so you can see your way to the mountain top.

For families and couples in search of multiple winter activities, Kelowna

offers exceptional downhill skiing at the Big White and Silver Star Ski Resorts, while non-snowmobilers can discover plenty of shopping, galleries, attractions and local tours. But for snowmobilers like us — in search of winter games — Kelowna is just the ticket. And when there's such good snowmobiling to be had, who needs to wait for the real Olympics?

For their assistance on this tour *Snow Goer Canada* thanks Tommi, Nancy, Pat, Deana, Roger, Wayne, and Josh and Derik Bannister and his Ski-Doo team at Banner Sea 'N' Ski. \*

*Craig Nicholson's syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobiler Television.*

## Tested on tour



### Hand-e-View mirror

Why any snowmobiler would ride without being able to see behind remains a mystery. And with a Hand-e-View, there's no excuse. The mirror straps around the wrist of your glove and fastens to itself with velcro, so the glove slips on and off easily while it remains in place. To see behind, all you have to do is raise your left hand. Hand-e-View is excellent for trail riders and a must for mountain snowmobilers because their sleds don't have mirrors. I carry one in my tour kit just in case I lose a mirror off my sled along the way. Cost is \$10.95. Call E-Z TRAXX at 1-800-665-2033 or click on [www.eztraxx.com](http://www.eztraxx.com) for more info.

## Western Watch

### New B.C. racing series announced

Fighting back against the sagging popularity of snowmobile racing in British Columbia, the B.C. Snowmobile Federation's Racing Division is setting up a new amateur "B-level" series while cutting the number of top-level events by a third.

B-level events will include hillclimb and snowcross and will be geared toward clubs and racers with less experience and less money to spend. BCSF racing executive director John Wren says the B events will make it "easier for somebody new to get into the race scene," and will enable a sort of getting-to-know-you period between

racers, clubs, and the sanctioning body.

B events will take place at "totally separate race sites from the A events," he says. Courses will generally be less demanding, and sanctioning fees and racing costs will be lower.

Wren does not expect a strong turnout for B racing in the first year. "It's something that we're going to have to develop; it's going to take a little bit of time." There's no schedule yet because the series was only announced in September, so clubs haven't had time to respond to it. Wren anticipates the series will include four or five events.

The top-level A-event schedule, which should be posted on [www.bcsfracing.com](http://www.bcsfracing.com) by mid-October, will cut the series from last year's nine races down to probably six races, says Wren.

B-event hillclimbs will be aimed primarily at having fun with stock, improved, and mod classes, and snowcross

B races will be run in Trail 600 and 800, Sport 600 and 800, Pro-Am 500, 600, and Open, Juniors, Ladies, and Masters classes. While most racing will involve only production machines, the B Pro-Am class will allow any kind of snowmobile and may attract some professional riders who "want a little bit of a tune-up before they hit the A events."

Wren wants to hear from riders and clubs interested in the B series. Contact him at 250 398-7357, or by email at [bcsfracing@telus.net](mailto:bcsfracing@telus.net).

— Steve Thornton

### New avalanche course geared to snowmobilers

Avalanches stirred up public interest in Western Canada last year — not least among the people who run snowmobile associations. This year, the B.C. Snowmobile Federation and the Alberta Snowmobile Association are working with the Canadian Avalanche Association to develop a new and improved professional-level avalanche training course specifically for snowmobilers.

Much of the avalanche awareness training currently available is geared to skiers, but the increased range and speed of a snowmobile poses a different set of problems and requires specialized education, says Bob Zimmerman, first vice-president of the BCSF. "We almost fall into the heli-skier situation, for the area we can cover."

A professional-level snowmobilers' course offered over the last few years by the Canadian Avalanche Association failed to attract sufficient interest and was cancelled. Organizers hope an improved program can be in place this winter.

The course would be equivalent to a Level 1 Technician program, so graduates would be equipped to teach avalanche safety to others. "We're trying to increase our teaching capability," says Zimmerman, adding that Snowmobile Patrol members and snowmobile tourism operators would be good candidates for it.

Recognizing danger, and knowing how to avoid an avalanche and what to do if it can't be avoided, would be among the subjects discussed. The course would involve riding into back-country areas to view terrain up close.

It's all just getting under way, so the nature of the program and the costs have yet to be determined. Zimmerman says it would likely run for about a week.

Last winter, nine snowmobilers died in avalanches in B.C. and Alberta, according to the CAA. Zimmerman points out that increasing back-country use by snowmobilers is likely to raise the number of avalanche encounters.

## Mountain magic



Holtzman Engineering's new "altitude specific" springs for the Yamaha RX-1's CV carbs promise to keep the big four-stroke from losing too much power as you gain elevation. Three different springs are available: green for up to 4,000 feet; yellow for 4,000-8,000; and red for 8,000-12,000. The springs are easy to install and come in a convenient storage tube. Cost is \$34 (US) for a set of four; more info from [www.holtzmaneng.com](http://www.holtzmaneng.com), or call (715) 479-8727.