

# RIDING POINT

**intrepid**  
**Snowmobiler**  
By Craig Nicholson



**M**aybe I'm getting paranoid. Was I tempting fate last winter as I rode over 10,000 kilometres on tour for Snow Goer Canada? I'm always riding point for our crew and wondering what will happen next.

Over many years of snowmobiling, my concern is well founded. On two occasions as the lead sled, I've come within a hands breadth of smacking into a moose. Both times, a large wall of churning brown hide suddenly filled my visor without warning. And both times, before I had any chance to react, the beast was gone in a white out of snow dust, leaving behind only tracks on the trail and in my shorts.

I've crested a hill to find a deer standing where my skis were supposed to go next, and I've actually grazed one that glanced off the side of my sled to disappear back into the bush. I've even splattered a partridge all over my windscreen and visor. Yuck!

Fortunately, most of my many wildlife encounters have been far more benign, with me catching only a glimpse of a fast retreating behind disappearing off the trail. But who's to say that there's not an ungulate somewhere with my name on it? Unfriendly dogs are bad enough.

Daytime groomers can also be scary. I never know when there'll be one just around the next corner or over an upcoming hill. Usually, I spot them far enough ahead to get out of their way and signal those behind me. But my ski tips have kissed the blade of an oncoming machine and I've had to dump my sled into trailside powder a couple of times.

Then there's oncoming riders. I just never know when someone will suddenly materialize ahead. Other than my heart jumping into my throat when that happens, it's no problem if both riders are

staying to the right, as is usually the case. But when the oncomers are taking their half of the trail from the middle, it can be pretty hairy. And when an oncoming rider signals more coming, but no one's in sight, I just know that the rest of his group will be riding hard to catch up, so be careful!

Road crossings are always a worry. Are they properly marked? Are the sightlines good both ways? Several times I've almost been fooled into proceeding when I didn't immediately see an oncoming car that had no day

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time headlights on, or when a second oncoming vehicle was lost in the snow dust of the one just passing in front of me. I've seen a couple of close calls with sleds crossing roads and my crew knows that each rider is responsible for stopping, looking both ways, and then making his or her own crossing: no one gets waved across by the previous rider.

Despite the best efforts of club volunteers, Mother Nature rules the trails. Mostly, the trails are clear of obstructions, but you never know when a tree or large branch will fall across it. I've had two close calls with downed timber where I was just able to stop before becoming an unintentional lumberjack. Actually, when I think about all the kilometres of trails and millions of trees beside them, it's amazing how infrequently this happens.

Mother Nature is also responsible for holes, washouts, dips and other surface irregularities. Sometimes these

are marked, but other times, they occur with no warning. I've also had my share of sudden thumps, bumps, jarring and hanging on for dear life thanks to these unexpected obstacles, such as hardened snowdrifts.

I've learned to sense when a trail switches from one club to another. The surface quality may change subtly or the signage or the trail width. With each new club, I've got to quickly assess their competency compared to the previous one, and thus my own level of comfort with their trail. It would be great if everything was seamlessly consistent, but the fact is that grooming and signage consistency can vary. The good ones let me relax a little and enjoy the ride. Those less good mean I can't let my guard down for a minute.

Occasionally, a smooth trail will transition abruptly into mogul city. Sometimes, it's because the bumpy stretch of trail gets heavier traffic or has a bad surface underneath. Other times, it's because the two adjoining clubs don't coordinate their grooming efforts or one club just doesn't groom all the way every time. Whatever the case, I can't wait to get through the rough stuff – and don't tell me that's what suspension's for!

As the lead rider, I experience all of these various conditions first and try to warn those behind whenever possible. At the same time, I'm watching my mirrors to ensure everyone is still there, checking ahead to avoid anymore of the above, plus wrong turns or missing a stop sign, while trying to remember to throw up the proper hand signals for those behind and oncoming. No wonder that by day's end I'm mentally exhausted – so heaven help the accommodations whose promised hot tub isn't working when I arrive!