

# Special Olympians train for Games

As we stood at the intersection of Backcountry and Riverside trails last weekend, a half-dozen members of the Kelowna Special Olympics team skidded to a stop beside us.

Riverside was not yet groomed, so the three of us were debating whether to make the first tracks on that Kelowna Nordic Ski and Snowshoe Club trail or do the longer trek to the Meadow Cabin on groomed Backcountry.

Head coach Garth Vickers noted 20 members of his cross-country team were at Kelowna Nordic in preparation for the 2016 Special Olympics Canada Winter Games in Corner Brook, N.L., on March 1 to 5, the first Special Olympics Canada Games to be hosted in Newfoundland and Labrador.

For those who don't know, Vickers has been involved with Special Olympics since 1998, during which time he has coached athletes with the Special Olympics cross-country ski program to the local, provincial and national level. He has also coached Team B.C. at the National Winter Games.

More members of his team joined us and, with their unbridled enthusiasm spurring us on, our threesome decided we should do the longer route. We started out first but within a short distance, the Special Olympians were leaving us in the dust (or powder, since there was 10 cm of new snow).

However, team members then veered left, down Backcountry Connector and back to Riverside. Foolishly, perhaps, we continued further afield up Backcountry, then Fletcher Challenge to Riverside, adding five kilometres to our loop. The top end of Backcountry and Fletcher Challenge weren't groomed, so it was obviously a lot more breaking trail than we anticipated.

The Sheriff had dropped off Constant Companion Carmen at the Summit Parking Lot on Highway 33 so she could ski Thunder Mountain with three other women and join us at the Meadow Cabin for lunch. Her 9.7 kilometres compared to our 12.9 clicks meant she was at the cabin for almost an hour before we arrived.

By the time we got back to the main cabin on McCulloch Road, the Garmin GPS read 19 kilometres and CCC was wishing she had come with the three of us for "a really good workout." The 19 clicks was like our pre-hip surgery outings, outdistancing the Sheriff's best of 12 kilometres so far this season. The surgical waitlist left hip still ached on Tuesday.

It's only the beginning of February but already longtime downhill skiers and boarders are talking about this season as one for the history books. Not only did the season get off to an early and snow-filled start but the Okanagan has had a series of Powder Alert days ever since.

On Thursday, for example, Big White Ski-Resort reported 11 cm (four inches) of new snow with a total of 73 cm (29 inches) during the past seven days.

Unfortunately, the Gem Lake Express Quad was closed this week due to maintenance issues. The mechanical part required to get the chair spinning safely again was on a truck travelling all the way from Quebec. Big White expected to reopen the chair to the public on Saturday. Can you imagine how deep the powder was by then? In the meantime, Big White kept the Falcon Chair going all week for powder hounds.



J.P. SQUIRE/The Okanagan Sunday

Members of the Kelowna Special Olympics cross-country ski team head up Backcountry Trail at Kelowna Nordic Ski and Snowshoe Club last weekend. The team is preparing for the 2016 Special Olympics Canada Winter Games in Corner Brook, N.L., on March 1 to 5.



**J. P. SQUIRE**  
Making Tracks

the latest snow conditions.

The regular monthly meeting of the Central Okanagan Naturalists' Club on Tuesday coincides with the popular club's annual banquet. The potluck dinner begins at 6 p.m., one hour earlier than the usual time for the monthly meeting at Evangel Church, 8261 Gordon Dr. in Kelowna. Tickets are \$5 and available from Rick Gee (rdgee@shaw.ca) who is planning a photo presentation on 2015 outings. Don't forget to bring your own plate, bowl, cup and cutlery.

The Penticton Museum is hosting another popular series of its Brown Bag Lectures every Tuesday from noon to 1 p.m. for those who want to spice up their lunch hour with presentations and discussions on a variety of heritage and culture topics.

The public presentations are at the museum auditorium, 785 Main St., and include coffee, tea and confections. Admission is by donation with the suggested donation of \$2 for adults and \$1 for children. On Jan. 26, for example, Don Gayton discussed History of Wetland Restoration in the Okanagan.

"Ponds and marshes — even very small ones — host a staggering amount of biological diversity, from salamanders to songbirds," he said. "The vast majority of the Okanagan's wetlands are in the valley bottom, right where all our

Okanagan wetlands. Those same wetlands that we drained, filled in and paved over were once habitat for a number of endangered species, some unique to all of Canada."

The Okanagan Basin Water Board, along with a series of partner organizations, is developing a wetland strategy to begin reversing that historic loss. Gayton, a local ecologist and OBWB wetlands coordinator, provided an illustrated tour of the remaining wetlands and outlined the grass-roots strategy to identify, preserve and enhance Okanagan wetlands.

He is building on the work of Ted Lea, who did an amazing job of mapping Okanagan wetlands and "backcasted" to the 1800s to show how dramatic the wetland losses and alterations have been.

In the wake of the deaths of five people in an avalanche near McBride on Jan. 29, the B.C. Coroners Service and Avalanche Canada are joining forces to stress the need for preparedness for those heading into the backcountry this winter.

A total of 17 snowmobilers were in the Mount Renshaw Alpine Recreation Site when the avalanche hit. First responders, the B.C. Coroners Service and Avalanche Canada all note that the majority of groups had the proper rescue equipment with them, and that the impressive effort made by those on scene to rescue themselves and others undoubtedly prevented the loss of more lives.

However, noted Gilles Valade, executive director of Avalanche Canada, even better than knowing to respond to an avalanche incident is knowing how to prevent one from occurring in the

recreationists," said Valade. "Basic skills, such as recognizing avalanche terrain and not exposing multiple people to overhead hazard, make a big difference in reducing the consequences of an event."

Equipment alone is not enough, added chief coroner Lisa Lapointe. Three of the five fatalities from the Renshaw avalanche had deployed avalanche airbags designed to "float" someone along the surface of a moving avalanche. But the airbags were ineffective in this case because the victims were in a gully at the bottom of a slope — an area where the debris flow of the avalanche is too constricted.

The vast majority of fatal

avalanches are triggered by the victim or someone in the victim's party. Avalanche skills training courses teach proper trip planning, terrain selection and safe travel techniques, which can be effective in preventing accidents.

Information about current safety conditions, as well as training courses and equipment needs, can be found at Avalanche Canada's website: avalanche.ca.

J.P. Squire, aka the Ski Sheriff, is an Okanagan Sunday reporter and an avid outdoors enthusiast. His column appears every weekend. You can contact him with your outdoor news at his new email address: j.p.squire@telus.net.

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