Cross-Country Skiing: A Lifetime Sport

BY KAREN WILLIAMSON | PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

I like winter.

I like clean, white snow glistening in sunlight. I like how a full moon lights up a snow-covered landscape as if it were day. I like to watch snow falling—as long as I don’t have to drive in it.

My affinity for snow has made cross-country skiing an important part of my life since I was in my early twenties (let’s just say I’m in late middle age now). More importantly, it has been an important part of my family’s life for 40 years. We are living proof that cross-country skiing is truly a sport for all ages; it is great exercise and can be enjoyed in many ways, from the challenge of competitive racing to a leisurely ski out the back door.

I began cross-country skiing years ago, when I was living and working in New Hampshire. I’m from Buffalo, so winter to me is something to be enjoyed, not feared. I grew up skating on the local pond, sledding down “snow mountains” left by plows, and photographing the beauty of new-fallen snow in fields near my home in Elma, Erie County. I had been interested in trying skiing for a while. My mother was a downhill skier in the 1940s and early ’50s on the hills south of Buffalo. Unfortunately, she broke her leg while on a rope tow, so when I asked about joining my school’s ski club, she said “No.” To this day, I’m not sure if that “No” came from the expense of downhill skiing for four kids or the fact that she had broken her leg doing it.

When I graduated college and was on my own, cross-country skiing looked like a reasonably priced, fun way to enjoy winter. Everyone said you could just put on a pair of boots and some skis, grab some poles, and away you go! So, I went to the local sports shop and got fitted with a brand-new cross-country ski package: boots, skis, and poles.

During that year-and-a-half I lived in New Hampshire, I learned to ski on my own in a local park situated along the Bellamy River near Dover. It was beautiful, and right behind my apartment. I could ski from my front door. Well, ok, I had to walk across the parking lot first and then put on my skis, but you get the point.
Then I moved back to New York State to attend Syracuse University for grad school. I continued to ski, in Oakdale Cemetery and Heiberg Memorial Forest with friends. I thought I was getting pretty good, until I met my soon-to-be husband. He lived two hours northeast of Syracuse. We met through work, at a meeting in Canton, and he suggested that we go skiing sometime. I told him that I skied too, and that it sounded like fun.

When the snow finally came in January, we went skiing for our first time together, in the Adirondacks. When he saw me ski, he said “I thought you said you could ski—you’re walking on skis.” Turns out that he had learned to ski in a class in college and was already doing citizen races and even marathons. I had taught myself to ski so I had some learning to do if I wanted to keep up.

Thus began my indoctrination into the world of serious skiing, and eventually, cross-country ski racing. I spent that first winter learning how to kick and glide, climb hills without sliding backwards, and control my speed on

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Cross-country skiing is a great winter family activity. The author’s son started coming along at 3-months old on his father’s back before graduating to his own skis the next year.
downhill slopes—all while trying to keep up with several experienced skiers. By March of that first winter, I was deemed to have progressed to the point where I was ready for a pair of second-hand racing skis. Well, maybe not ready, since I nearly ran over another skier on a long downhill trail at Mt. Van Hoevenberg. However, my racing career began that March as I managed to complete 35k of the 50k Tug Hill Tourathon (a Nordic Ski Race that has been held in Winona State Forest for 32 years, now named the Winona Forest Tourathon).

From that point on, skiing was our winter activity. We discovered backcountry trails in the Adirondacks, groomed trails at ski centers in the Adirondacks and the Capital Region, and we skied inn-to-inn in Jackson, New Hampshire. We entered some local, shorter races and I eventually managed to finish two marathons—the Tug Hill Tourathon and the Chautauqua Overland Ski Marathon.

After we had children, things changed, but it did not eliminate our winter skiing. We continued to race during the winter after having our first child, but quickly found that changing weather and race schedules did not always work with the availability of babysitters. We found that when you bring children along, a ski center with a lodge and groomed trails was better than backcountry trails. At three-months old, our eldest son rode on my husband’s back in a child carrier. He was swaddled in a snowsuit and wearing a pair of my husband’s goggles for eye protection. He thought that was great fun, until the day my husband did a faceplant and our son pitched forward. Because the child carrier was sturdy and he was strapped in, he didn’t fall out; but he wasn’t happy, and he let us know it!

The next winter, our son was ready for his first pair of strap-on skis. He didn’t go far—we still carried him when skiing, or he played in the lodge—but he thought that the skis were great fun. As he grew, he gradually skied a little farther each time, and we were careful to keep things fun and make sure these adventures were not too long. We often alternated skiing and childcare so that each of us could get some longer, faster skiing in.
Then baby number two arrived. Our favorite ski center near us—Lapland Lake Resort in Northville, Hamilton County—had “pulks” (sleds you can put your little one in and pull them behind you). Our daughter thought the pulks were the perfect place for a nap, so we were able to keep skiing as a family. By now our son was four and could ski easy, shorter trails on his own.

Around this time, my mother retired and became interested in a local senior citizen cross-country ski program in Orchard Park, south of Buffalo. So, I gave her my first starter package of skis, poles, and boots, as I had moved on to more specialized, faster gear. She had a ball for a couple of years getting back into skiing—without the rope tow!

Throughout elementary school and middle school, our children skied with us, or occasionally participated in a Bill Koch youth ski league race if there was one nearby. Our son started getting interested in racing. Our daughter, not so much. Competitive endurance sports are not her thing, but she continued to ski with us as a family.

By the time our eldest entered high school, my husband and I had long stopped racing ourselves, but our son was now skiing for the Guilderland High School Nordic ski team. His coaches—Barb Newton and Jon Mapstone—espoused a no-cut philosophy, believing that in addition to fielding a competitive team, they were introducing their athletes to a lifelong sport. We became active ski team parents, hosting all 45-plus skiers for the annual pasta dinner at our home and cheering them on at races.

Today, my husband and I are retired, and still skiing. We continue to enjoy skiing fast (albeit for short distances) on groomed trails at the Western Turnpike Golf Course in Guilderland, and at our old favorite, Lapland Lake Resort. We also enjoy skiing on off-track trails in the Adirondacks and the Albany Pine Bush Preserve.

If you are looking for a way to enjoy winter, beat cabin fever, and get some healthy exercise while you’re at it, consider cross-country skiing. As you can see from our family’s story, it doesn’t matter how old you are, and it’s not expensive. Trail fees and equipment rentals at ski centers are a fraction of the cost of downhill day passes, and if you have your own gear (or rent some from a local shop), you can often find beautiful, free trails in parks or local nature preserves close to home.

See you out there!

Karen Williamson is a freelance photographer and writer from Guilderland and Saranac Lake. Before retiring, she was a writer and photographer with NYS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for more than 30 years. You can see her photography at karenwilliamsonphoto.photoshelter.com.