

SPORTS

Ski racing program hits new Heights

Glen Eden-based club highlights season with South Division J League Tier 1 title

By Herb Garbutt
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Not many sports groups would be thrilled to hear they were going downhill fast. However, the Milton Heights Racing Club is always looking for ways to accelerate its descent.

The club, based out of Glen Eden Ski and Snowboard Centre, offers a wide range of programs for skiers of all ages. The programs — from house league to the Alpine Ontario leagues — allow all its members to enjoy hitting the hills even though there's a wide spectrum of what skiers are looking to get out of the sport.

"I'm not going to lie," said 16-year-old Meghan Greaves, "I enjoy winning."

The E.C. Drury 10th grader certainly wasn't disappointed this season, as her second-place finish helped Milton Heights win Alpine Ontario's South Division J League Tier I championship for the first time in 18 years. The victory by the team, which includes two Burlington skiers and four from Oakville, is a source of great pride for the club.

"It's a real David versus Goliath story," said club president Tom Hayes. "Here's a club that's open to the public on this little bump on the escarpment taking on the private clubs and all their equipment and private lessons."

For many years, the club was largely unknown even to regular visitors to Glen Eden. Brenna Smith, who now skies on the Hershey League team, took lessons for four years at Glen Eden before discovering Milton Heights.

"Had I known about it, I probably would have been in on it a lot sooner," the 17-year-old said.

The new clubhouse, completed last year, has helped overcome that by increasing the club's profile and visibility on the hill.

But Hayes said the club still battles the common misconception that it is a private club. Milton Heights' goal is actually to make ski racing accessible to as many as possible, with registrations for house league under \$200 for the season.

"We don't want this to be an elitist sport. We want to keep entry costs to a minimum," said Hayes.

The club intends to apply for a Trillium grant to upgrade snow-making equipment to prevent delays like it experienced this season. Milton Heights used a previous Trillium grant to train coaches and raise their qualifications.

Current skiers are also passing on their knowledge to help the next generation.

Nine of the 12 members of the champion J League team have gone through the Alpine Ontario apprenticeship program to help teach racing skills to younger skiers.

New club members do have to pass a skills test before embarking on racing.

"It's not a learn-to-ski program, it's a learn-to-race program," said house league co-ordinator Chris Butler.

Glen Eden offers beginner lessons for skiing, something the club has avoided doing because it's a significant revenue stream for Glen Eden.

Hayes said it's important for the club to work in partnership with Glen Eden. Milton Heights also schedules its programs for nights early in the week to lessen the impact on members of the public using the hill.

"It's in our best interest for the hill to be profitable. Without it, we have nowhere to go," he said. "We want to make it the best experience for everyone, in and outside the club."

The club draws the majority of its members from Milton, Georgetown, Burlington and Oakville, although some racers come from as far as Scarborough and St. Catharines.

Twelve-year-old Shannon Schembri makes the trip from Toronto to Milton two or three times a week. She used to ski at Centennial Park in Etobicoke, but came to Glen Eden on a race day and inquired about the program.

"It's one of the greatest clubs I've been to," she said. "They showed great support. Whether I ski good or bad, they're always there for me. They're more than a coach. They're like a friend."

Hayes said because the members come from different communities, it introduces skiers to a new set of friends.

He added that skiing also helps an individual's development and points to the first name on the club's boys championship trophy — Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, who won the title in the club's first year, 1977.

"It teaches life lessons," he said. "Hard work and training gets results."

The club continues to expand beyond skiing. About seven years ago, it successfully branched out into snowboarding and has since spawned graduates Marianne Leeson of Burlington and Claire Merry of Oakville, who each secured medals at the Canada Winter Games in Whitehorse earlier this month.

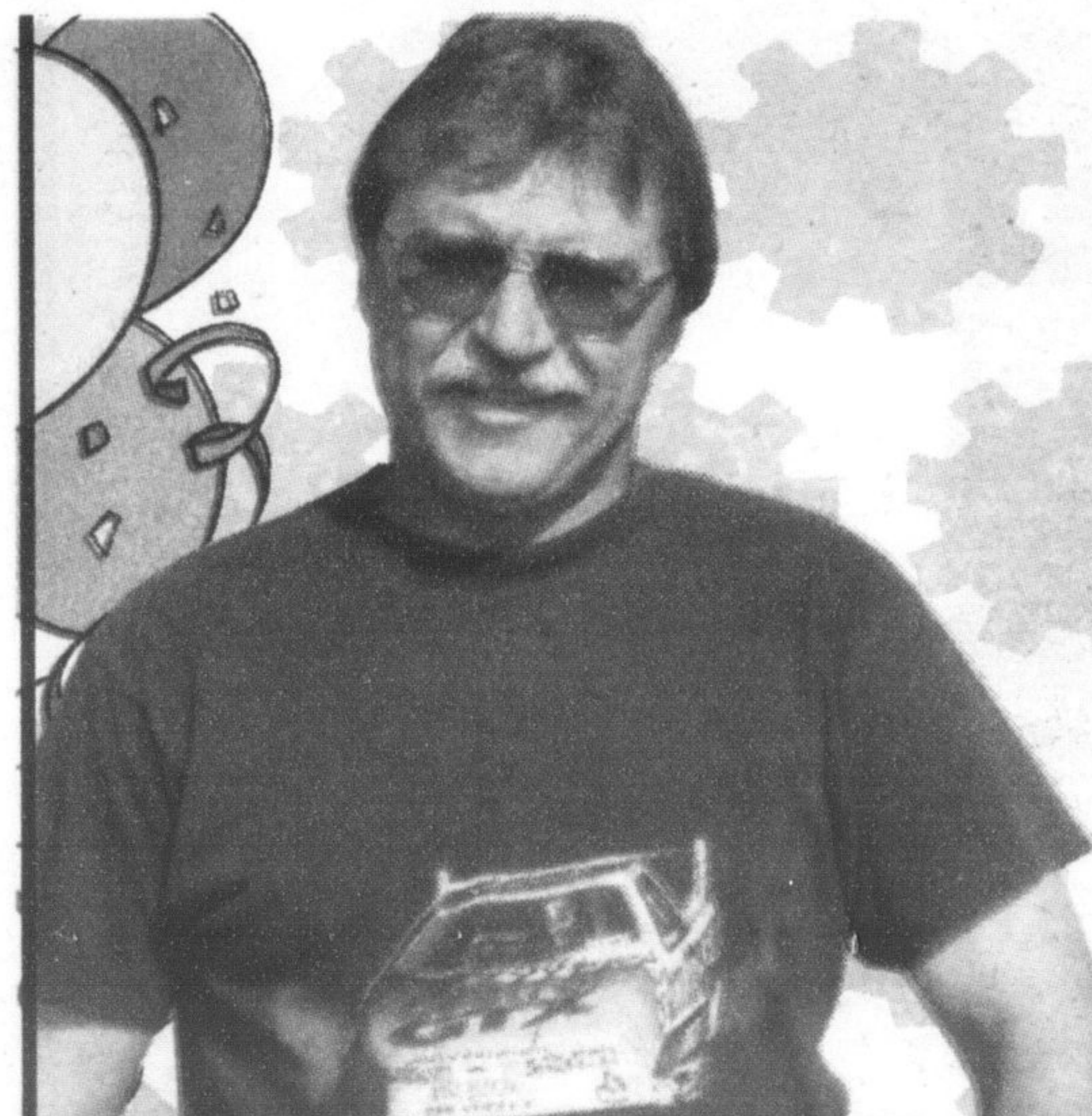
Now it has added freestyle skiing, a program that is being guided by Michael Bourdages. The 18-year-old Lester B. Pearson student won the Ontario Freestyle championship in February and is glad to see his sport gaining popularity.

"A lot of the racers have twin tips (freestyle skis) and on breaks you see them switching skis," he said.

The new discipline may just help the club reach even greater heights.

Milton's Latie Laur, 14, competes in giant slalom racing recently at Glen Eden.

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