

SKIJORING—BEING TOWED ON SKIS BY A HORSE—SEEMS SIMPLE ENOUGH. BUT WHEN YOU ADD GATES, BIG JUMPS, HANGING RINGS, AND 1,000-POUND ANIMALS BLASTING THROUGH SNOW AT HIGH SPEEDS, THE REAL ACTION BEGINS. SOMETIMES, SADLY, IT'S TINGED WITH TRAGEDY.

BY DEVON O'NEIL



Richard Weber (riding) and Jason Dahl showing how it's done at a skijoring competition in Jackson, Wyo., last February.

NINA GALICHEVA

DAN THE MOST GER RIDE ON SNOW? OUS



WHEN JASON DAHL CLICKED INTO HIS SKIS LAST MARCH ON THE NORTH END OF LEADVILLE, COLO.'S HISTORIC HARRISON AVENUE, HE HELD A ROPE IN ONE HAND AND AN EIGHT-INCH BATON IN THE OTHER.

THE ROPE WAS CONNECTED TO A HORSE NAMED MOOSE, RIDDEN BY A 17-YEAR-OLD COWGIRL NAMED SAVANNAH MCCARTHY, OF AZTEC, N.M.

Dahl, a Leadville native who lives in Denver and works as a custom home builder, is as close to royalty as you will find in the high-speed, high-stakes sport of equestrian skijoring, in which quarter horses and thoroughbreds pull skiers down a course of imported snow, seven-foot-tall jumps, gates, and rows of small rings to catch with the baton. Dahl, 34, and his brother Greg, 32, have won the Open division at Leadville more years than they can remember. Every time you win you get a Carhartt jacket, and a

few years back Dahl's wife turned all his winning jackets into a quilt. Last March, Dahl was not just a competitor but also one of the organizers of the annual Leadville Ski Joring races, which began in 1949 and usually run the first weekend in March. He, like more than 2,000 spectators, had watched Saturday afternoon as a horse ridden by 26-year-old J.J. Swirka of Fairplay, Colo., stumbled just before the finish line, pitching Swirka forward into a tangle of the downed horse's limbs that also

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SWISS-IMAGE.CH; MARK FOX

ensnared her skier, Duffey Counsell. The horse, a 13-year-old named Logan, broke his lower left front leg in the wreck and was euthanized by injection a short time later. The unsettling scene sent many onlookers away in tears, and the rest of the day's runs were canceled, including all 14 in the Open class.

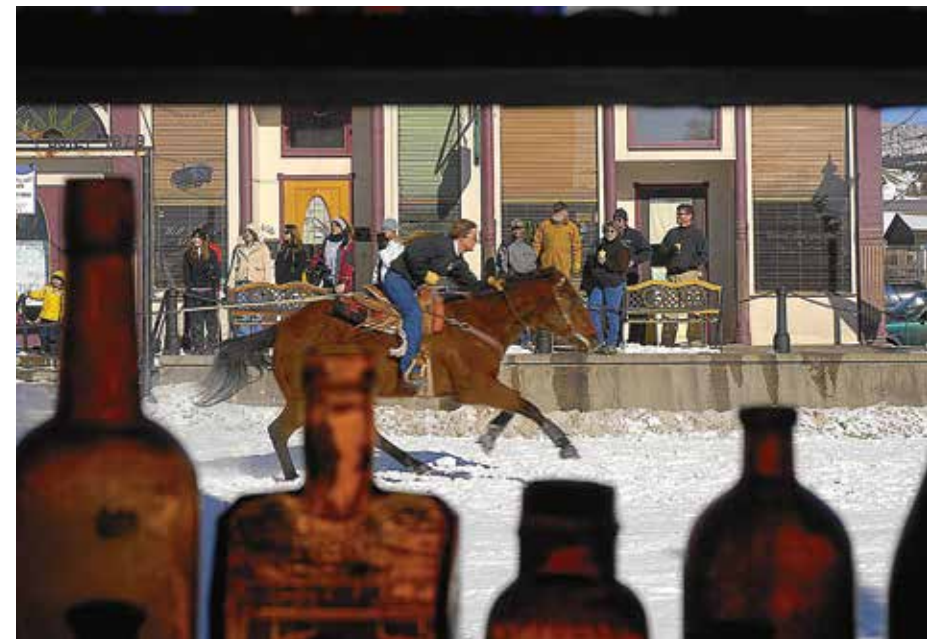
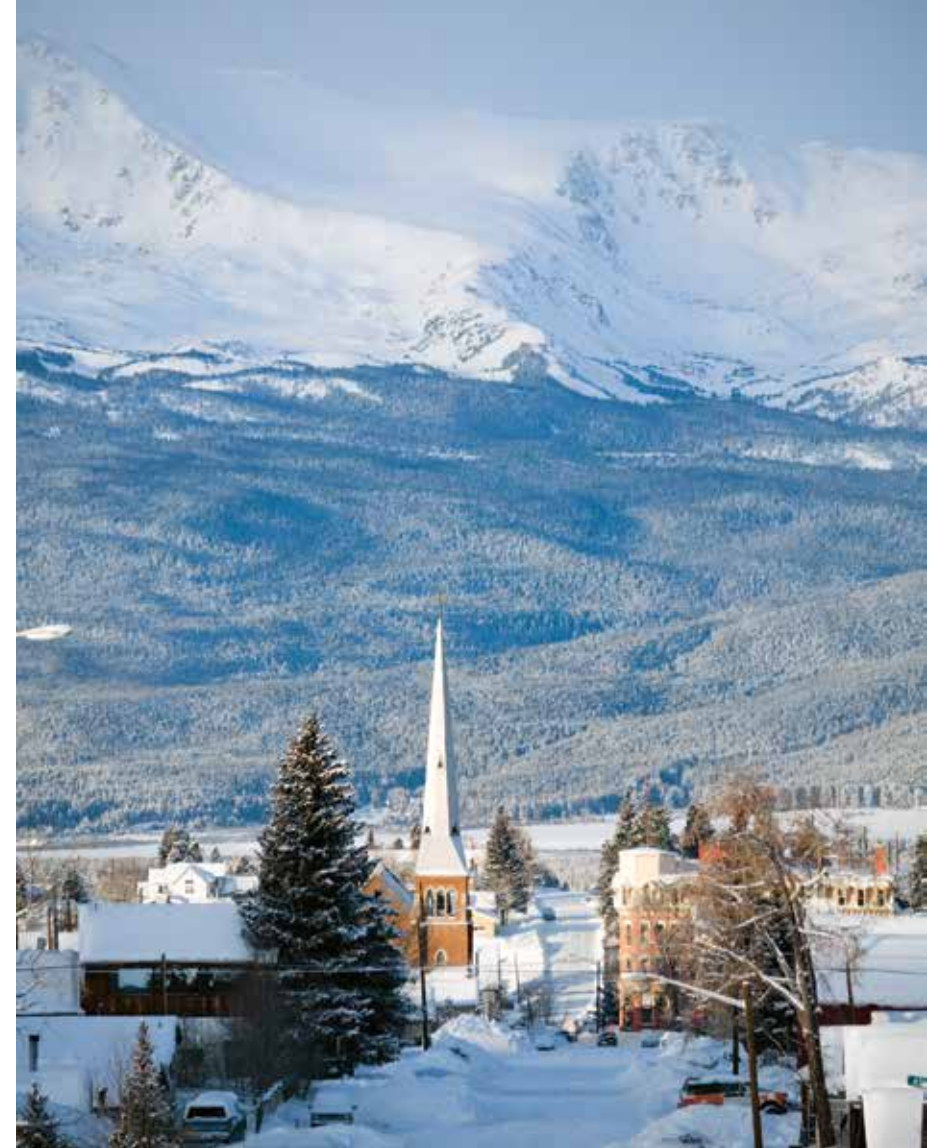
Dahl knew how nervous everyone was when he prepared to lead off the next day's races at noon—a start time that had been bumped up to avoid the same slushy conditions in which Logan had fallen. Just one week prior, a horse named Pepper, ridden by a Wyoming rancher named Lenny Hay, had broken its leg on a soft course in Minturn, 45 minutes north on Highway 24 from Leadville, and had to be put down. Two deaths in two weekends, including one at skijoring's signature event, did not reflect well on the sport. Dahl knew they couldn't afford anything less than a clean day of racing.

The moment he signaled he was ready, Moose took off down the snow-covered street like a missile. McCarthy kept her steed centered as Dahl wove from side to side, schussing off jumps, arcing around gates, and threading his baton through the rings like a spear—skiing much more nimbly than you might expect from a 235-pound man. He managed one of just three clean runs that day, avoiding the dreaded two-second penalty that gets imposed for missing a ring. His time, 15.17 seconds over 900 feet, would hold off all challengers and secure Dahl yet another Leadville win—and another Carhartt jacket.

McCarthy did not fare as well. A moment after crossing the finish line, the teenager tried to disconnect the rope from Moose's saddle so it wouldn't flap and accidentally spur him to accelerate when he should be slowing down. Moose lost his footing when the course transitioned from snow to asphalt, pitching McCarthy onto the pavement. Moose spooked down a nearby street, while McCarthy, who was one of the few riders wearing a helmet, escaped with just a swollen nose. Bystanders soon corralled Moose. McCarthy withdrew from her next three rides.

Dahl later said his winning run ranked among his best in his nearly two decades of racing at Leadville. But his bigger triumph was restoring order to what is arguably the rowdiest ski race in the world—one in

FROM TOP: ISTOCK.COM/MTNSNAIL; MARK FOX



Opposite: Skijoring has a long colorful history—in St. Moritz, Switzerland, for instance, circa 1910; rider Jeff Dahl waiting his turn in Leadville. This page, from top: Leadville, population about 2,600, tends to be a sleepy Colorado mountain town in the winter, until the cowboys and skiers come to compete, which will be March 4 and 5 this year; Karol Heflin crossing the finish line on Rocket in a previous Leadville race.



which racers can reach 50 mph on a course lined by glass-and-brick storefronts while riding a four-legged power source.

Logan's death—the second in Leadville's 67-year skijoring history, according to longtime event organizer Paul Copper—hung like a pall over Harrison Avenue until Sunday's racing began. "It was on everybody's mind," Dahl said after his run. "But now we're back to what we do."

THOUGH THE BASIC RULES OF SKIJORING

translate to races around the world—a horse pulls a skier through a prepared course as fast as possible—the specifics vary. In St. Moritz, Switzerland, where the first skijoring race took place in 1906, a singular format lives on at the White Turf competition: Skiers race head to head, and their horses don't have anyone riding them. In the American West, the sport brought cowboys and skiers together in a way that nothing else had—a bond that was particularly helpful in Colorado's high country, where brawls between the rival

Top: Jake Berda closes in on a ring as Ozzy Hayes urges Omega Man to pull faster in Jackson. Right: Jim O'Neil, a Leadville race official, makes sure the scoring rings hang true before the course is set.

groups broke out often. It came to Leadville after two locals drove up to Steamboat's winter carnival in 1949, saw skijoring in action, and brought it back to the Cloud City. In 1956, seven years after Leadville staged its first race, Joe Manly took over responsibility for building the course. He has built every course since, including last year's despite improbable circumstances.

On the Saturday morning before the races, Manly stood atop the final jump, spray-painting blue lines on the edges eight inches at a time. He would bend down, spray some paint, stand up, shuffle a couple of steps down the jump, bend, spray more paint, and repeat the process until both sides were marked to his satisfaction. Then he began polishing the ramp with a shovel.



FROM TOP: NINA GALICHEVA; RICK WILKING

Taking a break, Manly, who stands five-foot-five with a hunch, leaned on the wooden handle. His knuckle was bloody from scraping it on a gas pump. He had a walkie-talkie strapped to his chest and wore a ballcap that read "N.A.S. Joe," a poke at the North American Ski Joring Association, or NASJA, which tried and failed to become the sport's governing body. Those who run Leadville's races have always bristled at the thought of

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SO WHAT IS SKIJORING?

FOR A SPORT THAT CAN BE FOUND ALMOST ANYWHERE THERE ARE HORSES, SKIS, AND SNOW, IT REMAINS OBSCURE. HERE ARE THE BASICS.

Though courses and rules differ from host to host, competitions are timed races on set courses that typically include gates, jumps, and hanging rings. A rider on horseback pulls the skier, who must turn at the gate, go over the jumps, and spear the rings with a handheld baton. Time penalties are assessed for missing jumps or gates or for missing or dropping any of the rings. A team is also charged a penalty if a skier drops the baton or if a skier, rider, or horse knocks a ring off the support. A team is given credit for any ring that's displaced during the run, knocked off its rigging by wind, snow clumps from the horse hooves, and so on. A "clean run," without any penalties, is needed to win. The skier must be on at least one ski and holding the towrope, and the rider must be on horseback when crossing the finish line. Protests—you are mixing cowboys and skiers, after all—must be presented to the course director before the next team enters the course.



sanctioning their event, which, they say, runs perfectly smoothly on its own, thank you very much.

Most of that smoothness comes from Manly, who won the Open class numerous times as a skier, including once in the late '70s when six Olympic alpine racers entered. Manly's 60-year course-building streak was in jeopardy after doctors removed 19 inches of his colon to treat stage-three cancer in May 2015. "I'm coming off six months of chemo, damn near died twice, and I couldn't get my strength back," he said from atop the jump. "Then I had a botched hernia operation."

He recovered enough to build the course—with the help of snowcats and 200 dump-truck loads of snow—just after his 84th birthday. (The snow would be reused for a Chrysler commercial the day after the races.)

AN HOUR BEFORE SATURDAY'S OPENING run, racers and locals gathered around the

Left: Race gates, seven-foot jumps, speeds up to 50 mph on snow, and 1,000 pounds of a highly motivated horse add up to another day competing in Leadville. Right: booting up, skijoring style.

grandstand for the Calcutta, a fast-paced auction of the teams set to race that day. Anyone can buy a team; if yours wins, you get a share of the pot. (There is also an informal wager among Open racers that gets confirmed via head nod. The winner earns \$10 apiece from the other competitors, who must bow down when delivering the cash.)

Jason Dahl's team with McCarthy and Moose sold for \$300, which felt like a bargain given the prices Dahl has fetched in the past. One year a rancher from Eagle County bought Dahl's team for \$2,200. "I dropped a ring," Dahl recalled, "and he came up to me after the race and told me how much it cost him, every second that the ring was spinning in the air before it

hit the ground."

Racers pay \$50 per run, with most of their entry fees going to the purse. You can pick your horse and rider for only one run per day; after that, random draws determine who races with whom. With two days of racing, a successful skier or cowboy can bring home \$2,000 in a weekend—even more if you bet on yourself. But veterans know to expect chaos over any semblance of certainty.

"When that horse gets up to speed and he's throwing snowballs at your nuts, and you're full of adrenaline and can't throw in a gate check, you'd better be on top of your game," said Copper, who has organized the Leadville races with Manly since the 1980s.

If you are not on top of your game, you could end up like Jerry Kissell five years ago, the last time he ran the Open course. (Sport and Legends division skiers hit smaller jumps but use the same rings and gates.) "I went off a jump, slid across



Riders and skiers strategizing in the start area before the races last winter in Jackson.

the finish line on my head, got flipped from there, bounced off the asphalt, hit the sidewalk, and bang, right into a fire hydrant, out cold," Kissell said. "It turned out I broke my collarbone in two places and my top two ribs, but at the time, I had another run to take. So I took it."

Kissell, a Leadville native who spent 20 years as a hardrock miner, sticks to the Legends division now. He is one of roughly 600 people competing in skijoring races around the country, according to statistics maintained by Loren Zhimanskova, a race consultant who wants to expand the sport's recreational component and make it a resort activity, like snow tubing. "I really believe if people were aware of the sport, they would be more inclined to go to our races," Zhimanskova said.

Last year 14 towns in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and New Mexico staged professional skijoring races. Longstanding events in Whitefish and

Red Lodge, Mont., often attract 3,000 spectators despite not having the big-jumps-on-Main-Street appeal of Leadville. Still, a divide persists between those who want to unify skijoring and those who prefer the races stay independent.

"For the sport to grow, I think you need to have some kind of governing body," said Toby McIntosh, of Columbia Falls, Mont., who won races in Whitefish and Wisdom last season.

"We've been putting on this race since 1949," countered Copper, a former competitor and Leadville native. "We really don't need someone telling us how to put on a race. Know what I mean?"

NEARLY THREE DOZEN SPORT TEAMS HAD already run by the time Swirka and Logan lined up for what would be Swirka's fourth run of the day and Logan's second. The

temperature was 53 degrees, leaving the course mushy but by no means dangerous, Swirka and other competitors would say later. Racers said the same thing about the Minturn course where Pepper died the week before, stumbling just after the finish line on the last run of the day.

Counsell, a Leadville local who sells real estate at Copper Mountain, looked to be in contention for a podium spot when he accelerated up the final ski jump behind Swirka and Logan. But just before Counsell got airborne, Logan's hoof dragged in the slush, and he tripped. He tumbled and veered to his right, ejecting Swirka from her saddle. Horse and rider landed directly in Counsell's path. Counsell ejected from both skis upon impact, cutting Logan's muzzle. The three of them slid to a stop in the snow.

It is said that skijoring crowds come for the crashes, but at that moment, 2,000 spectators turned silent.

Swirka was the first to notice Logan's

fracture, and her wails pierced the sunny sky like those of a mother mourning a child. She tried to keep Logan on the ground but he overpowered her and stood. Someone wrapped a white towel around the horse's bleeding face. Spectators began to leave in tears. "Why are you watching this!" one of them shouted. It was hard not to grieve with Swirka, who held Logan's head in her arms, sobbing.

Jeff Dahl, Jason and Greg's cowboy father, who has ridden horses in the Leadville races for 23 years, walked over to where Swirka and Logan were standing. He said a prayer for Logan, who by then had received a painkiller and calmed down. Eventually Swirka and a few others accompanied Logan into a trailer, where he was euthanized. Dahl and his sons helped clean up the accident site with shovels, then Dahl yelled, "Cowboy up! Let's roll!"

The decision to cancel the rest of the runs came a few minutes later. There was little dissent voiced.

LOGAN'S AND PEPPER'S DEATHS WERE

hardly the first in skijoring. Racers and organizers don't like to talk about it, but Copper said he knows of three other horses that have died through the years. Almost to a person, horsemen and skiers agree such accidents are inevitable when you deal with large, explosive, fragile animals. Nevertheless, the back-to-back timing and close proximity shone a spotlight on skijoring unlike anything in recent history. Suddenly the sport was on the news not because it was wild, exotic, and spectacular, but because it was killing horses.

One voice missing from the conversation was Swirka's. She didn't do any interviews after the accident, in part because she worried people might twist her words and misunderstand how much she loved Logan. It took her nearly a week to respond to an interview request for this story, and when she called, three months after the accident, it marked the first time she had talked about it publicly.

Swirka said she has revisited March 5 over and over again in her mind, trying to find something she could have done to prevent Logan's death. Eventually she concluded it was random, no different from a lightning strike: An otherwise healthy, happy horse that had been skijoring for three years simply took a wrong step.

"There were other horses that tripped

Right: Rider J.J. Swirka and Logan's final embrace last spring before Logan was put down due to a leg injured during a Leadville race. Below: Ebbie Hansen and Zeek the Greek pull hard as Aaron Griffen takes a tight line around a gate.



and they got up and were fine," Swirka said. "That was my fourth run of the day. And that's what Logan loved to do. He was a total deadhead at home, but when you took him skijoring, he came alive. You could not tell him you were leaving without him."

Swirka struggled to move past Logan's death for much of the spring. She kept wishing she could have traded places with him and broken her own leg instead of his. "I would do anything for my animals," she said through sobs.

"My main focus is working through all the anxiety and other mental things that go on in your head, to move forward and learn from it, and not forget it," she said. "I'm trying to function and keep going in life."

Thinking long-term overwhelmed her, and she hadn't decided to return to Leadville this March. But she hadn't ruled it out either. "I will most likely be back to skijor. I'm not afraid of the sport," Swirka said. "But there is definitely a bigger respect for it, and a respect for healthy runs." ●

FROM TOP: KURT BREWER; NINA GALICHEVA

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