

WINNING ATTITUDE

The form of some NASTAR racers might be lacking, but never their passion. Jack Daniels (really) embraces the moment in the finish area at the Championships at Steamboat Springs, Colo., last spring.



THE NASTAR NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS LURE RACERS
OF ALL SIZES AND SKILLS FROM ACROSS THE LAND. SOME SEEK GLORY,
OTHERS CAMARADERIE. ALL JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATHANIEL WELCH

THE PEOPLE'S WORLD CUP

BY PAUL TOLME



Tommy Shimak—17, cocky and wearing a hot-pink racing suit—slides up to the starting gate at Steamboat and prepares to launch down the racecourse of the NASTAR National Championships. It's the Race of Champions, the culminating event of this three-day everyman's Winter Olympics. And the conditions are just as Shimak likes them: icy and fast, requiring precise turns and split-second decisions. "I want a course where there is no room for error," he says.

Six weeks earlier, Shimak suffered an MCL tear during a race in Wisconsin. Patrollers took him off the hill on a sled, and his dad, Tom Shimak, thought his son would never race again, let alone later that season. Tom often cringes when watching his freewheeling son race. Hoping to incentivize some restraint, the elder Shimak starts every ski season by making a deal with his son: Stay out of the hospital and I'll pay you \$250 (the amount of the insurance deductible). Tommy has yet to collect.

More than 1,000 racers from across the country have joined Tommy in Colorado at the annual NASTAR National

championships. Shimak's home hill is Chestnut Mountain in Galena, Ill. Undoubtedly, some residents of Aspen or Vail have driveways with longer drops than Chestnut Mountain's 475 vertical feet. No matter. NASTAR racers often hail from the vertically challenged ski areas of the Midwest and Southeast, where keeping score by running gates helps fill the ski day.

In fact, NASTAR competitors represent a colorful cross-section of the skiing public. Some are fit, others fat. Some are fast, others—well, let's just say they're fast for their age brackets. But all—like Lisa Ruskin, 55, of Park City, Utah—share a passion for racing. "Some people come just to compete. I come to win," says Ruskin, a longtime racer who will have both knees replaced in several months. "I'm supremely competitive. My doctors say I need a pill for that."

The National Championships begin on a Friday in March, two days before the Race of Champions. Six modified GS courses cover the lower trails of Steamboat, which bustles with excitement as racers stretch, wax their skis, exchange pointers and catch up with old friends. Competitors range in age from 4 to 93, a disparity that makes for interesting pre-race conversations. Entrants in the 75-plus age division squint to read their times as attendants post results. "Can you read that? I can't see it," one senior says, taking off his goggles and leaning closer.

John Woodward, 93, is the oldest competitor. Young racers treat the Sun Valley, Idaho, veteran like a celebrity. They ask for his autograph, shake his hand, reach out to pat him on the back. Woodward says ski racing is a fountain of youth. "It motivates me to stay fit."



The scene is different at the children's races, where organizers attempt to control the chaos and herd the youngsters into a line. Clusters of 4- and 5-year-old boys and girls fidget, sit down in the snow, slide backward and drop gloves. Some are precocious, looking like hardened veteran racers as they prepare to conquer the course. Others, like 4-year-old Lukas Schorr, his face barely visible behind giant goggles and a Superman helmet, look as if the day's full slate of races isn't their first choice of activities. "He'd rather be in the terrain park doing jumps," Lukas's father says. Lukas responds shyly: "I like catching air."

Parental coaching styles run from relaxed to overbearing. "Focus, Billy! Focus!!" one father shouts to his 7-year-old son, who is daydreaming in the starting gate. Some children swim in their too-big speed suits, which sag in the derriere and bunch up like elephant skin around their ankles.

Speed suits are an essential part of NASTAR culture. Nearly every racer wears one. Competitors with muscled physiques look great. Then there are the middle-aged, potato-shaped men. Bellies bulge. Butts loom large. "They make you feel fast," says one competitor with a gut the size of a pork barrel, "but, man, they're tough to get on."

Shimak—the Pink Stink, as his high school classmates call him—stands out from the crowd. A salesman at Descente

STRATEGIES

Opposite: Katelin Hennem focuses on her downhill line in the starting gate at the top of Christie Peak. Above: Todd Hayne appears to take a less intense approach to his next run.

SPEED SUITS ARE PART OF THE NASTAR CULTURE. **COMPETITORS WITH MUSCLED PHYSIQUES LOOK GREAT.** THEN THERE ARE THE POTATO-SHAPED MEN.

thought Tommy was joking when he called to special-order the outfit. "They said it was the biggest pink suit they have ever made," Shimak says. He's like a gunslinger wearing a tutu: The flamboyant suit is a taunt—a look-at-me display of confidence. If you're going to wear pink, you'd better be fast. "I like being the oddball," Shimak explains. "People make fun of it, but I'm the one on the podium at the end of the day. If you don't like my style, then beat me."

Shimak began skiing at 10 and took up racing a year later. "It's a way that I can go really fast without killing myself," he says. Shimak excelled, and soon his parents were driving 12 hours every weekend to races across the Midwest and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. "NASTAR has changed all of our lives for the better," says Shimak's father, noting that even he and his wife now race despite only learning to ski in their 60s.

While some think of racing as a European obsession, NASTAR is surprisingly hot. Participation has grown about 10 percent per year since 1997, with more than 100,000 racers competing at 125 areas last season, says Bill Madsen, NASTAR's director of operations. "Some skiers never try racing," he says. "But once you do, you're hooked. It's like eating potato chips."



The National Standard Race—or NASTAR—traces its bloodline back to France in the 1950s, when ski instructors were rated by the percentage of time they lagged behind the fastest instructor. This provided a standardized metric with which to compare all instructors.

Inspired by the French system, SKI Magazine's then editor-in-chief John Fry founded NASTAR in 1968 to be skiing's equivalent of a golfer's handicap. Recreational racers can measure their own progress throughout a season and also compare themselves to racers at resorts nationwide. Par Time (a zero handicap) is established every day at every NASTAR resort. After each race, participants earn a handicap in relation to Par Time. As in golf, the lower the number the better. (See

FAST CROWD

Above: Packed opening and closing ceremonies bookend a rousing Championships weekend. For many racers, the appeal is as much about camaraderie as it is competition. Right: The faces of NASTAR—and American skiing.

box.) Racers qualify for the Nationals by earning a top-three ranking in their age and gender division at any resort.

NASTAR, however, is as much about greeting friends as running gates. "It's a social network that brings like-minded people together," Madsen says. "Friendships are formed. Lifetime bonds are made."

Telemarkers, snowboarders and disabled skiers add to the polyglot feel of the annual championships. Several blind competitors race with the aid of guides. Gary Randolph, 61, of Fraser, Colo., lost a leg in a motorcycle accident in 1980 and skis with a carbon-fiber prosthetic. Racing helped him focus on his recovery. "Skiing has been my salvation," he says.

Vladimir Goldin, 75, draws determination from the discrimination he experienced as a young Jewish athlete in the Soviet Union, where he says he was denied a chance to compete in the 1956 Winter Olympics despite being one of the Soviet Union's fastest speed skaters. He moved to Ohio after the breakup of the

Racer Ready

SKI magazine developed the NASTAR handicap system in 1968 to be the equivalent of golf's handicap, allowing racers to track their progress and compare themselves to others. It works like this: Par time (or "0" handicap) is set by national pacesetter A.J. Kitt, a former U.S. Ski Team racer and four-time Olympian. Next, pacesetters from each NASTAR resort attend regional pacesetting trials and compete against Kitt to establish their handicap against par time. The resort pacesetters then use their handicaps to establish par time each race day for their home resorts, allowing racers to compare themselves to a national par. Racers qualify for the National Championships by earning a top-three ranking in their age and gender category. For information, go to nastar.com.







MOTIVATION
Opposite: Ray Heid, 71, a member of the 1960 U.S. Olympic Ski Team, flashes gold (telemark) and silver (alpine) Championship hardware. Above: A young racer edges hard on course.



USSR and took up racing to fill time during family ski trips to Michigan's Boyne Mountain.

After one day of racing, Goldin is battling for first place in his bracket. He thinks of his wife, Inni, who is ill at home in Ohio. Goldin rarely leaves her side these days, but friends offered to care for her so that he could travel to Steamboat to compete. He wants to win for them. Goldin's rival is Rainer Vanoni, 76, who skied as a child in Germany but gave up the sport to work and raise a family in Texas. Vanoni resumed skiing in his 60s. Now retired, he takes several ski vacations every winter. "It's good to be back," he says. "I never knew how much I missed skiing."

Goldin, however, has the edge today and beats Vanoni by several seconds. The two proud American immigrants hug at the finish line. "You deserve it," Vanoni says. "You raced beautifully." After more hugs and pats on the back, Goldin skis off to pack his bags and return to his wife, to whom he will present a gift: his gold medal.

Music blasts from speakers in Gondola Square for the rowdy Saturday night awards ceremony, when current and former U.S. Ski Team members present medals and prizes—new Descente speed suits—to winners in each age and gender category. Medalists ham it up on stage for the crowd, and several 50-plus female competitors dance provocatively on the podium

KINGS OF THE HILL

Above left: Ben Varner, chills out. Above right: Steven Coulter wins gold in the Race of Champions, with seven-year-old Bridger Harrison taking silver and pink-suited Tommy Shimak bagging bronze. Opposite: Katie LeVan is ready to rock.



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as the crowd roars. "Next year," the announcer teases, "we're going to get a pole out here!"

The party continues at Thunderhead Lodge, where competitors and family members arrive via gondola. Hundreds line up for autographs from U.S. Ski Team legends Phil Mahre, Deb Armstrong and A.J. Kitt, NASTAR's national pacesetter. The autograph line stretches down a flight of stairs and around a corner—testament to the passion of these citizen racers.

"NASTAR is huge," says Armstrong, GS gold medalist at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics. "Families travel across the country to compete together." (Indeed, several families with three generations of competitors are here.) "It's also developmental," Armstrong continues. "There are 5- and 6-year-olds here who we'll be hearing about in 15 years. No matter what anyone says, ski racing is alive and well in this country."

Sunday dawns clear for the Race of Champions, when the 200 or so first-place finishers in each age and gender category compete on the same course. Spectators line the barriers as today's pacesetter—Mahre, winner of 27 World Cup races—rips

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down the course to set par. Next come the racers. At the bottom, the fastest finishers ascend a podium and get bumped off as others post better handicapped times.

Bridger Harrison, 7, with a handicapped time of 25.59 seconds, climbs into the gold medal position. Young racers often medal in the Race of Champions due to the handicap system providing them with essentially a sizeable headstart.

Shimak, whose handicap is much lower than Bridger's, will have to turn in



BRIDGER HARRISON'S PARENTS BEAM AND SNAP PHOTOS AS **THE 7-YEAR- OLD HOISTS HIS SKIS OVERHEAD IN TRADITIONAL WORLD CUP VICTORY STYLE.**

a blistering time to grab gold. He throws his weight forward as he lunges onto the course, skating and poling hard to gain speed before settling into a deep tuck, his hands low and in front, his knees nearly touching his chest. His turns are tight, his lines fast and aggressive.

"Look at this kid go!" says the announcer. The run is good enough to get Shimak onto the podium, but not enough to oust Bridger.

Then 31-year-old Steven Coulter has the run of his life and scores a handicapped time one-tenth of a second faster than Bridger. Coulter grabs gold, Bridger silver and Shimak bronze. Bridger's parents beam and snap photos as he hoists his skis overhead in traditional World Cup victory style.

Long after the race is over, Horst Langer, 80, remains near the finish line to congratulate winners, hug and say goodbye. Langer, who traveled with his wife Brigitte, 77, from their home in Wayland, Mass., finished 41st in the Race of Champions, but winning is secondary to being here. "It's a sunny day. The snow is great. My friends are here and I've made some new ones," Langer says. "What more could you want?" ●

