



A skier flies over a jump at last year's Minturn skjoring event. Skiers hit speeds of 60 mph over the course of a run, which usually lasts less than a minute. R Stookey Productions photo.

High-octane skiing and riding

Minturn hosts second annual skjoring weekend.

By Laura Lieff

You think skiing and horseback riding are extreme sports? Try mixing the two together. That's what a group of skiers and riders will be doing in Minturn on Saturday, Feb. 23 and Sunday, Feb. 24 for their second annual skjoring event.

Never heard of skjoring? President of Rocky Mountain Skijoring Sherry Graham describes the sport as "a combination of water skiing, snow skiing and jousting."

Catch the action

What: Skijoring in Minturn

When: Feb. 23 and 24

Kids race: 11 a.m.

Calcutta: noon

Adult races: 1 p.m.

(All times are approximate)

Registration: 8 a.m. the day of the events at the Turntable Restaurant.

Notes: This is an outdoor event so dress appropriately. Lawn chairs are recommended. Alcohol and pets are prohibited.

Parking: Free event parking available in the municipal lot across from the Turntable Restaurant.

More info: Sherry Graham at 970-376-4016.

More specifically, it is a winter sport where a person on skis holds onto a rope in one hand and a wand in another and is pulled by a galloping horse and rider down a snow course. The skier races down the course, trying to catch as many hanging rings as possible, soaring off jumps and weaving through cones. The skier with the most rings and fastest time wins. It requires a combination of skiing skills, precision and guts.

According to Rocky Mountain Skijoring Director Bruce Stott, with the horses galloping full-speed and the skiers whipping around the course and shooting off the eight-foot jumps at up to 60 miles per hour, the event is unique thrill ride that is incomparable to any other sport out there.

"Joring is not like skiing," he says. "No matter what you do, you are going the speed of the horse and turning just increases your speed. I have been in love with the sport the minute I started."



A horse and rider barrel down Harrison Ave. in Leadville, the site of the area's other nearby skjoring competition. Minturn hosts its own skjoring event this weekend. Steve Sunday photo.

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A horse, rider and skier careen down the 820-foot long course at at the 2012 edition of the Minturn skijoring weekend. The adrenaline-pumped event returns to town on Feb. 23 and 24. Zach Mahone photo.

Competitors from all over the Rocky Mountains are expected to gather in Minturn to compete at the event, which benefits the Mountain Valley Horse Rescue – a nonprofit dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and adoption of abused, neglected and abandoned horses. Established in 2004, the organization aims to reduce the number of cases involving horse abuse through community outreach and educational programs.

Off to the races

On both Saturday and Sunday, the fun begins at 11 a.m. with a kids race (they are pulled by snowmobiles instead of horses and do not do the jumps or rings), the Calcutta races at noon (in which people can bet on the skier/horse/rider teams) and the regular adult races at 1 p.m. The adult races will feature three divisions: The sport division for new skijorers, the open division, the professional division and the legends division is for those who have at least 10 years of experience or are older than 40 years. Registration is at 8 a.m. on the day of the event at the Turntable Restaurant in Minturn.

Graham, who is also a rider and will be competing in the open division, expects a large and assorted turnout to this year's event.

"Last year we had 30 people competing, and this year I expect more," Graham says. "The riders are a diverse group of people – we see rednecks, dreadlocks and everyone else you can imagine."

Graham says that dedicated skijorers travel all over the United States to compete at a growing number of skijoring events. She has traveled to Canada, New Hampshire, Mon-

tana, Wyoming and Idaho to compete, in addition to Colorado skijoring events such as Leadville and Silverton.

Horsepower and more

While skijoring might seem like a fringe sport invented by bored mountain folk, it actually began several hundred years ago in Scandinavian countries as a way to travel during the long winters, often using dogs or horses. In the mid-1950s, skijoring found its way to North America, where ranchers turned it into a sport by attaching a long rope to the saddle horn of a horse that was ridden at high speeds down a long straightaway.

Since 1999 the North American Skijoring Association has been organizing races, and the organization's first sanctioned skijoring race took place in 2000 in Frisco. Since then, skijoring has become a highly specialized competitive sport with competitions taking place in more than five states and in several countries worldwide. In some parts of the world, skiers are pulled behind dogs, mules or snowmobiles instead of horses.

Stott, who has been a skier for the sport for 15 years, first competed in the 2000 Frisco skijoring race and won.

"I won \$1,800 dollars and have been hooked ever since," he says. "The sport is amazing. A crazy and talented skier hooks up with a nutty racing quarter horse to race down an 1,000-foot course filled with eight-foot jumps, gates and rings the skier must 'joust.' It's amazing what goes on in 15 seconds."

A two-day event

While skijoring events bring more than enough excite-

ment, the town of Minturn will be bustling all weekend with fun activities going on in addition to the races. There will be vendors, a bake sale and a silent auction featuring items such as chiropractic and acupuncture treatments, salon packages, gift cards from restaurants and more.

For those who are spectating and not participating, Graham suggests arriving at noon to bet on the Calcutta event or 1 p.m. to watch the action. The events will end at approximately 4 p.m. both days, and the awards ceremony will take place on Sunday at Magustos restaurant after the races conclude.

Since this is an outdoor event, lawn chairs are recommended, but alcohol and pets are prohibited. Free parking is available at the municipal lot across from the Turntable Restaurant.

Both Graham and Stott are looking forward to the event and are hoping that it garners more interest in skijoring – especially from those who have never experienced the sport before.

Stott says that spectators need to see the sport to believe it, and that they'll find it thrilling, exhilarating and action-packed.

"My favorite part is the start," says Stott. "A wound-up horse comes up to you, gives you a rope and says ready? Full speed in two strides. Come play or watch!"

For more information, visit www.downtownminturn.com or contact Graham at 970-376-4016. **A**

SneakPEAK writer Laura Lieff can be reached at info@sneakpeakvail.com

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