

Erich Sailer has turned tiny Buck Hill, Minn., into a legendary capital of American ski racing.

Big Little Buck



It's not what you have, but what you do with it: eight U.S. Ski Team members produced on 306 vertical feet.

BY READE BAILEY

By any ski area standard, Buck Hill—which rises just 306 feet above the suburban clutter of fast-food hangouts and car dealerships a dozen miles south of Minneapolis—is a mere bump. Buck is squeezed so close to Interstate 35 that road signs warn drivers of slick spots caused by its snowmaking guns. And it's so small that skiers in a no-turns "Iowa tuck"—named for the favored technique of that state's skiers—can schuss top to bottom in less than 10 seconds.

But, as the saying goes, it's not what you have, but what you do with it. And what tiny Buck Hill has done is build a reputation as a hotbed of American junior ski racing. The area has produced eight U.S. Ski Team members (including reigning national slalom champ Joe Levins) and nine collegiate champions. The suburban ski area is also home to a slew of nightly high school and recreational league races.

"It's a zoo," admits Chuck Stone, the president of Buck Hill, as he looks out his office window at the brightly lit slopes forested with race course gates. "It's a bamboo jungle out there."

2^{PM} Erich Sailer, head coach of the Buck Hill junior race team, maneuvers his sleek black Volvo into the Buck Hill parking lot. He ignores the NO PARKING signs near the entrance and puts his car in his usual, illegal spot at the top of the stairs that lead to the headquarters of the Buck Hill Ski Racing Club. The "Club Room" is tucked underneath the main base lodge, a gray, A-frame-style building that huddles between I-35 and the ski slopes.

Sailer, who likes to tell his racers that he came to the U.S. from Austria in 1954 with only \$38 in his pocket, is at Buck Hill early on this late-January day to coach the ski team from St. Olaf College. Before Sailer began coaching at Buck Hill in the late Sixties, the local collegiate and junior racers had achieved little.

"There was nothing at Buck Hill before me," he says, his English tinged with his native German. Sailer is a strange mix of cockiness and sincerity. He is so elusive about his age (about 65 as near as anyone can figure) that he has even instructed his 13-year-old daughter, Martina, not to divulge it. His brown hair is neatly parted to one side and his teeth gleam—"They're all mine, y' know," Sailer tells a photographer.

2:30^{PM} Like a college football coach, Sailer sometimes uses a public address system to orchestrate practices from his warm perch in "The Tower," an elevated, wood timing shack at the bottom of the Ballroom run. But on this clear, cold afternoon he is out among the two dozen college racers as they dance through a pair of slalom courses set on Ballroom, which is slightly bigger than a foot-

READE BAILEY

ball field and rises about 200 feet. "Keep your hips forward!" barks Sailer, as the skiers slap through Break-A-Way gates with precision. "Don't lean in!"

Although his coaching may help the racers go fast down the hill, Sailer says that part of their success can be attributed to the way they go *up* the hill—with an old-fashioned rope tow. The arm-straining transportation is so fast—30 seconds to the top compared with three minutes on a nearby chairlift—that only racers wearing special leather glove guards, which prevent the rope from burning through to their hands, are allowed to use it. Riding the rope tow means 30 or 40 runs in a two-hour session. Says Sailer: "You can't do that on the big mountains."

4 PM As afternoon fades into evening, Buck Hill's lights twinkle on and the parking lot fills with yellow school buses. Six high school teams, each with 20 racers, have arrived for their twice-weekly competition.

The chatter of teenagers brightens the drab base lodge cafeteria. They chow down heaping platters of french fries and chocolate chip cookies before heading to the slalom course on Milk Run.

"Hey dude," calls one racer to a friend. "You have number 23. It was good to me last week."

"What d'ya mean," his friend shoots back. "You *fell* last week."

Up in "Race City," a room in the rafters above the base lodge, Gabe Cyr, the 68-year-old, gravelly voiced grandmother who handles logistics for Buck Hill's race program, settles in for a long night. In addition to scheduling all the high school and recreational league races—"sometimes I have to use a shoe-horn to fit all the racing in"—her duties include timing and announcing the events. Cyr adjusts the makeshift foam pad that cushions the hard plank bench she is sitting on, lights a cigarette and squints through the small window up at the course her crew has set.

"I'm not the kind of person who can just play bridge and go to lunch," says Cyr, who has been at Buck Hill since 1978. "I have to keep busy."

A crowd of about 75 parents and friends watches the race from the bottom

of Milk Run. They stomp their feet and clap their hands, more to keep warm in the zero-degree weather than in an attempt to cheer. They gasp when a racer tumbles, then sigh in relief as he bounces back up.

6:30 PM The high school race is winding down and most of the kids have straggled back into the cafeteria. Boots and bibs are pulled off, and the place's musty smell grows noticeably pungent. Some kids are hunched over



Sailer: "I believe in the American Dream—always think big and try to be the best."

textbooks doing homework. A food fight breaks out in the corner.

Lisa Ringus, a 15-year-old freshman racer from Orono High School, has more pressing concerns. It seems that the bus to a race the next day will be leaving at 5:30 a.m., which means there's no way she'll be able to go out with her boyfriend after his basketball game later tonight. In the end, of course, she decides to go to the game anyway.

7 PM The guard changes. Lisa and the other high-schoolers have left, emptying the cafeteria. Meanwhile, the Club Room downstairs has filled up with nearly 100 teenaged racers from the Buck Hill Ski Racing Club—the best young local skiers. Before they pull their ski boots on, they must sign in on a log sheet on Sailer's old, wooden desk, which is wedged into a corner. Most of the racers are in their early teens and they sign

their names with childish scrawls.

"I'm more motivated with the young ones—they're the most fun to coach," says Sailer. He is perhaps most motivated when coaching his daughter Martina. She is one of America's top young racers and triumphed last winter in an Austrian junior championship race, which she was eligible to enter because of her dual citizenship.

Tony Olin, who started racing for Sailer in 1971 at age 10 and is now one of his two full-time coaching assistants, says Sailer has been rejuvenated by coaching Martina.

"He has new life with his daughter," says Olin. "He's more interested in the young kids now."

Sailer has also mellowed over the years. "He used to rule with an iron fist," says Olin. Remembers Buck Hill president Stone: "Erich was a real tiger."

Still, Sailer remains a perfectionist. "There's a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things," says Olin. "We have to do it the right way. We have to have flags on the GS gates even during training. And we train with starting gates and starting wands. Erich is very particular, and he has a system for everything."

7:30 PM On Ballroom, an army of blue-jacketed Ski

Club racers is yo-yoing down through the gates and back up the rope tow. Four slalom courses are squeezed side-by-side, and the racers rocket within inches of each other.

Sailer's loudspeaker-amplified voice can be heard everywhere on the slope. "Remember to finish every run!" he shouts. His two full-time and seven part-time assistant coaches have each course covered. Virtually every run that the racers make is seen by a coach and then critiqued.

"It's a slalom factory," says Bob Tengdin, a 61-year-old masters racer who Sailer lets run gates with the youngsters. Tengdin's 35-year-old son, Dave, also trains—and races—with the Buck Hill Club even though he is 20 years older than most of the racers.

"As long as you can still beat them, you don't feel out of place," says Dave, who has been coached by Sailer since 1969 and was 9th in GS at the 1974 U.S. National Championships. "This is the best local program anywhere in the country." He gives almost total



credit to Sailer for Buck Hill's success. "Erich is indispensable to this program.

Besides," Tengdin says, "he taught us how to yodel."

Austrian trappings aside, the results of Sailer's coaching career have been remarkable. Levins, the 23-year-old national slalom and combined champ from White Bear Lake, Minn., was followed in 3rd place in both events at last year's National Championships by former Buck Hill teammate Tim Hanson, from Afton, Minn. Another Buck Hill alumnus, Tasha Nelson, is on the U.S. Development Team, as is current Buck skier Kristina Koznick, who, as a 15-year-old, took 6th in last year's national slalom championship and was the youngest U.S. racer at the World Junior Championships.

Despite his successes, Sailer has his critics. They say that his skiers race too much, too soon, and they barely get a chance to free ski.

In defense of racing his charges all over the country at a young age, Sailer

says, "You have to expose them or they won't be ready." And what about burnout? "If a kid burns out, he didn't have it in the first place."

Then, almost in the same breath: "Never think only local. Always keep a national and international view. I'm not an American, but I believe in the American Dream—always think big and try to be the best."

8 PM While the Ski Club racers are training, a modified GS has been set on Milk Run for 100 racers in the Twin Cities Ski Challenge, a co-ed league with 1,200 skiers from 120 teams. The teams compete at five local areas, including Buck Hill four nights a week. Racers in the league, which began six years ago with only 50 skiers, range in age from 21 to 68.

Up at the start house, the ability range—novices to ex-college racers—is evident before any of tonight's racers even cruise through the course. While some strip down to skintight GS suits in the below-zero cold, others snowplow over to the start house, shivering even in heavy parkas.

Down in the rafters of the base lodge,

Cyr hasn't left her perch and her ashtray is crowded with cigarette butts. During the Ski Challenge race she has even more to juggle. Because the league's scoring is based on the NASTAR formula, she has to use a calculator to figure each racer's NASTAR handicap—as well as announce and record times.

9 PM Maybe 40 runs and 600 gates after they started, Sailer's young Ski Club racers are getting sloppy—either from exhaustion or the bitter cold. Some of the youngest have sought the warmth of The Tower, joining the handful of moms and dads who turn out almost every night to watch practice. Parents are always welcome—after all, they pay for the program, and The Tower was built gratis by a local contractor who had three children racing in the program.

Sailer, back down on the snow again, senses that the kids have had enough for tonight. "OK, that's it," he says. "Everyone can go home."

10 PM Music blares, ski movies play on a half-dozen TV's ringing the room, pitchers of beer flow. The racing part of the adult Ski Challenge is over, and the skiers have moved to the Sports Bucket bar, 100 yards north of the base lodge.

"Because the hills are small and it's so cold, people here need a reason to go skiing," says Patricia Lecy, co-operator of the Ski Challenge. "This has a little bit of competition and a lot of socializing." Then Lecy leaves to hand out awards.

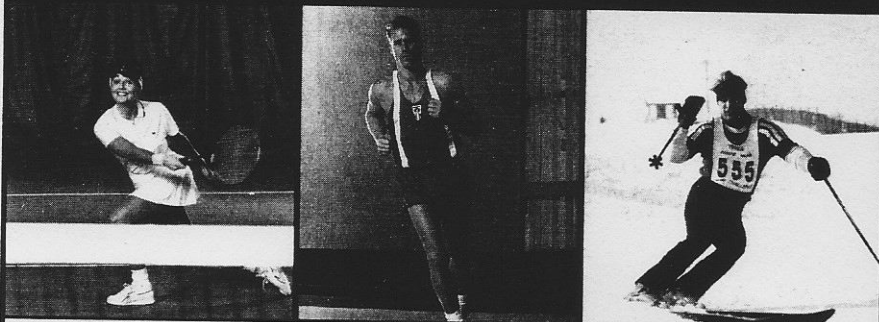
NASTAR medals are presented, but the winner of the bizarre "Golden Head" gets the biggest cheer. Each week, the racer who "does something outstanding" is given a mannequin head to take home, adorn with hair and make-up, and then bring back the following week. Tonight's winner is Don Johnson, who somersaulted across the finish line.

11 PM The last of the Ski Challenge racers has headed for home, and the Sports Bucket bartender is stacking chairs. Cyr has finally climbed down from her post behind microphone and clock, and is sipping an orange juice.

"It's amazing what you can do with 306 vertical feet," she says, reflectively. Then, suddenly, she looks at her watch and announces, "I have to go home and feed my dog."

After all, there is really no need—or time—for Cyr to contemplate the day's nearly 400 racers or the day's 4,000 runs. She'll be back tomorrow to do it all over again. ♦

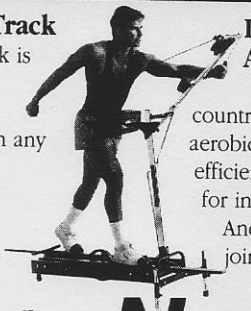
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