



## What Puts the Great In the Race?

North Shore's annual Nordic ski competition lives up to its name.

Last year's Great Ski Race pulled in more than 1,000 participants.

Nineteenth century statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke posited that "greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime." If true, then it would follow that the annual Tahoe to Truckee Great Ski Race, with its 30 arduous kilometers of remote terrain, 1,600 feet of vertical gain, 1,000 participants, 2 soup stations and 14-keg finale, is nothing short of transcendent.

The Great Ski Race is certainly without peer: it's Tahoe's most storied, strenuous and entertaining endurance event.

And the numbers don't tell even half the story.

Envisioned by Tahoe Nordic ski entrepreneur Skip Reedy, the Great Ski Race shoves out of Tahoe Cross Country in Tahoe City and eventually slides into Truckee by Cottonwood Restaurant. It's a point-to-point adventure—really a back-country tour on meticulously groomed track. And as with all great epics, its narrative arc is rife with plot twists: unrelenting climbs, brutal descents, summits, defiles and a plunge to the journey's terminus. And if not for the fact that they've

### TRAINING FOR THE GREAT SKI RACE

If you want to do more than just survive the GSR, read on.

**First**, start with a good base level of fitness. If you've been inactive for a while, ramp up slowly. The common rule of thumb is to start modestly, and increase no more than 10 percent of mileage—or time—per week. Before you undertake the following, you'll want to be able to run/jog continuously for about 90 minutes.

**Second**, skate—that's what the other fastniks do. Even if you think you've got your V strokes down cold, take a lesson: skating is incredibly easy to do wrong. You'll need a strong V1—that's your uphill gear, which you'll use in abundance—and solid downhill technique to finish strong. If you can learn to V2 on uphills, go to the head of the pack.

**Third**, learn to train. If you want to set a personal record, or even eclipse two hours, you'll need to ski 30 clicks at or close to your lactate threshold (LT), the point at which your muscles produce more lactic acid than your body can remove. The goal of your aerobic training will be to

increase your LT; the higher your LT, the better your performance.

**Fourth**, know the course. Tahoe Cross Country grooms the climb to Starratt Pass a month or more ahead of the race. Ski it regularly, if you can. Plus, Tahoe XC runs technique and GSR strategy clinics through the season. You might just want to avail yourself of them.

Ben Grasseschi, head coach of the Far West Nordic Ski Team, offers the following weekly training 'scrip (his Day 1 is a Monday) to get you out of the middle of the pack:

**DAY 1 Long and Slow:** Grasseschi recommends adding an hour to your race time for this core workout. So if you'll be on the course for two hours, then train for three—whether it's skiing, running, hiking or cycling. Go slow to go fast. If you're breathing hard, throttle back on your effort. This is a "conversation pace" workout.

**DAY 2 Very Short, Very Hard:** Once a week, Grasseschi asks his athletes to put on the hurt. After a 15-minute warm-up, he starts cracking the whip. Whether skiing at race pace for 10 minutes at a stretch,

already been invited, racers often crash their own party—literally—with phenomenal ass-over-teakettle acrobatics on the challenging downhill that crosses the finish line.

The Great Ski Race draws parallels with San Francisco's famed Bay to Breakers: the cast is large (it's the most attended ski race west of Wisconsin) and its leading players include past Olympians and national team skiers, elite master skiers, a sub-two hour crowd—and then there's the rest, which include off-the-couch novices, recreational snowshoers and skiers clad in skivvies, tutus and other neo-Nordic impedimenta. Finish times range from under 67 minutes to over 7 hours. For many, just crossing the finish line is a tremendous victory. And though no one hides from his or her results—times are posted in local newspapers and online—the Great Ski Race is just as much about community as competition.

"It's all about locals getting together and putting on a wonderful event," says Reedy. "The race draws people from all over the state and country, and even a few foreign countries," he says. "And it's really the only event that ties the two communities of Tahoe City and Truckee together."

In fact, The Great Ski Race is all about community, namely protecting it. Race proceeds support Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue, an all-volunteer cadre of roughly 70 backcountry experts and logisticians who serve as the area's go-to group when outdoors people are in extremis.

In the early seventies, no such group existed. Due to the number of backcountry users, it was not a matter of if but when the capabilities of local first responders, primarily trained for front-country emergencies, would be insufficient to deal with the rigors of tracking and navigating technical terrain in extreme conditions. And then in 1976, 12-year-old Lance Severson went missing when skiing the backside of Northstar during a blizzard. By the time an improvised search team was mustered and deployed, Lance had perished. Larry Severson, his father, acted swiftly to stave off future tragedies: he cofounded TNSAR along with Reedy and backcountry stalwart and Carnelian Bay resident Doug Read. In those early days, the fledgling group's volunteers used their own gear and raised just enough for the organization to survive.

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doing track intervals or cycling up hills—each effort followed by rest—he doesn't advise exceeding 30 minutes of intensity.

**DAY 3** See Day 1

**DAY 4 Kinda Long, Kinda Hard:** Grasseschi puts his athletes through the paces of a 90-minute aerobic workout each week that incorporates 5 to 15 bouts of quick intensity; usually less than 1 minute each. Plan on active rest of approximately 3 to 5 minutes between each output. Try to make each burst as fast as possible yet still maintain good, solid technique.

**DAY 5 Get Twisted:** Grasseschi recommends 90 minutes of power yoga to strengthen core muscles, refine balance and improve technique. This ain't no rest day (which you Ashtanga adherents already know).

**DAY 6** See Day 4

**DAY 7 Power Lounge:** Once you're feeling fit, it'll feel so wrong to relax. Believe Grasseschi when he says it's the right thing to do. You'll appreciate it on your next Day 1.

—B.R.


## GSR RACE DAY STRATEGY


The rivalries sparked by GSR are the stuff of legend; Reedy cites the internecine warfare amongst workmates from the Truckee Tahoe Medical Group (names need not be mentioned) as particularly juicy.


To have a great race, a panoply of variables must sync up: gear, wax and conditions, to name a few. Of course, those who ski poorly can choose from the same variables to explain their lackluster performance.


"Scratch a racer and you will hear many horror stories of missed waxes and excuses of being out of shape," says Reedy. "One year, I even posted a big black excuse board at the start so everybody could write why they wouldn't do so well."


Don't be caught out in the cold. Here are a few tips from Kevin Murnane, general manager of Tahoe Cross Country, to help you bring it all together.

 The race organizers employ a wave start based on anticipated finish times; place yourself in an appropriate group.

 Once you've cleared the starting line, use the first five kilometers of relatively narrow trail to find your rhythm. Don't worry about passing; your efforts will at best be incremental, unless you can double pole uphill. Wait until the Fiberboard Freeway at the top of the climb to blow by the competition.

 Think about pacing, and figure that it will take you about as much time to ski the last two thirds of the course as it did the first 11 kilometers. Work on your climbing, but have plenty of reserves for the downhill, which can tax the quads.

 Get the wax right: the snow up on Starratt tends to be colder than the snow you'll find in Truckee; there's some alchemy involved in dialing the hot sauce. Tahoe XC offers a wax clinic a week or so before the race—attend it.

 Stay on your skis—work on your downhill technique. If your strong suit isn't the ups, you can make time on the downs. Develop your step-turn and parallel skid; try to avoid snowplowing or, worse, sitzmarking. The s-turns in the middle of the course are particularly insidious; the less energy you expend on them, the more likely you'll pick up some places.

—B.R.



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Enter the Great Ski Race. Within a few years of its 1977 maiden voyage, participant numbers had doubled, and Reedy leaned on his TNSAR mates for logistical support. By 1982, the race had doubled again, and with the entire rescue team undertaking race planning and execution, Reedy thought it appropriate to bequeath the Great Ski Race—and its proceeds—to TNSAR.

"When we took the race over, we didn't have a clue about how much we'd eventually raise," says Read, who has served as the race's organizer ever since. "All we knew was it was going to be a lot of work."

The work's paid off. Now in its 34<sup>th</sup> year, the Great Ski Race is supported by more than 150 volunteers, plus the entire staff of Tahoe Cross Country. It's become a boon to TNSAR, in some years covering its annual budget—despite its modest entry fee of \$45. Events of similar magnitude elsewhere fetch \$80 or more.

"We're not into making millions," Read says. "The race is great for the sport and it's great for TNSAR—and anything that can help a sport like Nordic skiing is a wonderful thing," he says. "Cross-country skiing can help people live longer, enjoy their lives more, make them more thoughtful and thankful."

And that, in a nutshell, is what puts the Great in the Race. **TQ**

*This year's Great Ski Race takes place March 7. For more information or to register, go to [www.thegreatskirace.com](http://www.thegreatskirace.com).*

Reno resident Brad Rassler's excuses last year included lack of training, the wrong wax, not eating breakfast and lining up in the wrong wave, but he still managed to get to the party in under two hours. He'll return until he gets it right.