

ski club feature

The Western Interior Ski Association

By Keith Conger

The drone of the Frontier Airlines bush plane cannot be heard until the wheels have nearly hit the ground. A group of excited students huddles behind the lone storage building adjacent to the gravel runway. They rush out from their protected spot when they hear the sound, lean hard into the swirling snow caused by 25 mph winds, and labor purposefully toward the craft that is the only way off their island. They are going to the Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships.

The eight young skiers are leaving their hometown of Savoonga, Alaska, a small Eskimo village of 650 people on Saint Lawrence Island, far out in the Bering Sea. It is about the most unlikely place to find one of the state's top rural ski and biathlon teams.

When they are not skiing, the students help their families lead the subsistence lifestyle that has been Savoonga's means of existence for thousands of years. While the elders have nicknamed their city "the walrus capital of the world," the Savoonga skiers are setting out to make a bid for the title "rural ski capital of Alaska."

Thanks to the Western Interior Ski Association (WISA), cross country skiing and biathlon thrive with the school children from the wind-swept and treeless island that lies nearer to Russia than the U.S., and is as close to "the middle of nowhere" as it gets. The two winter sports are also flourishing in many other Alaskan villages that don't have road connections with the rest of the world.

WISA was created in 1986 by John Miles, a gregarious fellow armed with an infectious enthusiasm for skiing, who sought to unite kids from the remote reaches of Alaska's western coastline



with those of the isolated settlements along the state's interior river systems. The organization's showcase is the Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships; Alaska's rural state ski meet.

Alaska School Activities Association (ASAA), the state's governing body for high school and junior high sports, began organizing state-level ski contests back in 1975. These events were well suited for the larger, urban schools that had access to Alaska's road system. A few years after these competitions developed, Miles began getting kids in small towns on skis. He knew that the low numbers of students in remote schools made it impractical to compete at an ASAA meet, so he planted the seed for the future WISA.

Miles traveled to villages to fit children as young as kindergarten age for boots, skis and poles; and he helped create several amazing ski and biathlon venues. Through his 30-plus years of hard work and dedication, thousands of rural kids, spanning several generations, have learned to ski. Over time, Miles became a local legend — the Johnny Appleseed of rural Alaskan skiing.

While his main goal was to present a healthy winter activity to the primarily Native American youth in out-of-the-way communities, Miles also wanted to expose kids to ski competition. To provide athletes from far-flung settlements a chance to gather, he collaborated with ski coaches around rural Alaska to form WISA.

The pioneers of WISA knew skiers in these secluded villages faced a lack of early season snow, nearly 24 hours of darkness and bitter cold conditions (interior temperatures in mid-winter routinely reach minus-50 to minus-60 degrees Fahrenheit). They saw how urban ski teams start as early as October and November, with the advantage of well-developed ski locales with heated chalets surrounded by miles of professionally groomed, and sometimes artificially lit, trails.

Teams in remote Alaska typically ski on whatever snow is available, quite often on snowmobile trails. Ski conditions in the bush do not improve until February, just about the time the annual ASAA cross country skiing championships take place.

In response, the WISA coaches created a series of races tailored to students in the bush. Since many of the youth were already excellent hunters, the sport of biathlon was added to the event list. This helped attract a lot of kids to ski racing.

The Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships are held in early April, five weeks after the ASAA meet, at a time when urban athletes have traded their skis for bikes and soccer balls. It is the only state sports tournament to be held off the road system.

Over its 23-year existence, WISA has had participation from 27 different rural schools, most of which would never have come together if not for this organization. Since no roads lead to their villages, the only way to attend a WISA event is by small bush planes. This is particularly true for the students from Savoonga, who



often venture as far as 700 miles, one way, to compete.

Because the logistics of travel are so complex, not to mention expensive, the championships rotate between coastal and interior sites each year. A WISA meet transforms the hosting town from a quiet spot to a beehive of ski activity. WISA participants experience a unique sense of community as they eat, socialize and are housed together in schools for the duration of each event.

The Western Interior Championships include ski races and team relays, but the most unique feature is the biathlon competition. Contestants from both the junior high (fifth grade through eighth grade) and high school divisions ski to managed ranges, where they find rifles and range safety officers waiting for them. Affiliated events, like the Bering Straits Regional meet, held annually in White Mountain, typically contain Alaska's largest biathlon race each year, sometimes having double the number of participants of any contest in Anchorage.

"Thanks to WISA, cross country skiing has remained a vibrant sport for rural Alaskan children," says White Mountain's Eric Morris, who has promoted the sport in western Alaska for three decades, and was one of WISA's original organizers. "I'm proud that many of our fine WISA-developed athletes have competed on larger, international stages."

Not long after WISA's inception, its

championship biathlon race became a qualifier for the Olympic-style Arctic Winter Games, which occur every two years. Race winners earn spots on Team Alaska's ski or snowshoe biathlon squads, and compete against kids from Greenland, northern Canada, northern Russia and northern Scandinavia.

"The WISA ski program has brought our kids lots of pride," says Savoonga teacher and ski coach Matthew Stark, who consistently keeps his skiers on the podium. Stark, who also manages the organization's website adds, "Travel is always a positive thing for our kids. WISA provides not only competition, but also affords them amazing life experiences. Last year, a Savoonga skier traveled to the Arctic Winter Games in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, to compete in snowshoe biathlon. He got to visit another country, meet people from around the world, and had the added bonus of seeing trees." 

Keith Conger has lived and worked in western Alaska for 25 years. In the winter, he teaches first grade and is the head coach of the Nome Ski and Biathlon Team. When he is not with the team, he is out with his dogs skijoring. In the summer, he runs the local bike shop and does wilderness kayak guiding. Keith is currently the president of the Western Interior Ski Association.