

Olympic dreams

State offers many opportunities for lessons in winter sports

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

Admit it.

You watched the Winter Olympics last weekend and at least once saw yourself fearlessly poised at the top of the 90-meter ski jump.

Or you daydreamed about completing the world's first quintuple axel on ice.

Then you imagined struggling into one of those skin-tight luge suits and careening 75 miles an hour down an icy chute.

(Ok, maybe not a real tight suit, considering all the junk food you probably put away while watching those televised games.)

Let's face it. You're a little over the hill to jump over the mountain, around the ice rink and onto the bobsled.

But you can do more than daydream about it.

Private clubs and community recreational facilities in Michigan run private lessons or group classes in just about every Winter Olympic sport.

Here's a guide to a few:

ON THE SLOPES

Alpine Olympic events include slalom, downhill, freestyle over moguls (snow bumps) and combined courses.

But your biggest alpine challenge — if you're new to the game — will be getting on and off the chair lift.

"That opens the door to a world of skiing," said Chuck Gosh, director of the ski school at Mount Holly.

"Everyone is different. But within an hour we try to have people on the chair lift. We have a slower lift — the yellow chair."

That's typical for first-time skiers who take a \$22 an hour private lesson. Most people who take group lessons (\$5 for the first lesson, \$7 after that) practice on the tow rope and bunny hill first.

"You learn far more in a private lesson."

Lift tickets cost \$15 weekdays and \$18 on weekends. Ski rental is \$15.

Advanced skiers who want to polish their slalom techniques, dashing around and through flagged "gates," can enroll in a special program at the school.

Gosh said some novice skiers improve fast enough to try slalom in their first season on the slopes.

"But you have to practice a few times a week. You can't just think about it," he added.

Call Mount Holly at 634-8269 for ski conditions. Pine Knob in Clarkston (825-9800) and Alpine Valley in Milford (887-4183) also offer lessons.

LOOK MA, I'M FLYIN'

Better pack your bags and head north if you want to sail through the air off a 70-meter ski jump.

And by north, we don't mean Mt. Holly.

"It's not something you can go out and learn on the weekends," warns Michael Tonkin, a member of the Ishpeming (YES, ISHPHEMING) Ski Club. "Cross country skiing is different because you keep your feet on the ground."

About 80 percent of club members prefer feeling the earth under their skis and the other 20 percent like air. Tonkin said the club offers both Nordic sports, but no downhill skiing.

Jumping season at the club's facility, Suicide Bowl, (golf) starts after Christmas and ends in March. Members start on 20- and 30-meter hills and graduate to the 50- and 70-meter slopes, using special jumping skis that are wider and longer than downhill equipment.

Serious jumpers take up the sport as kids through the club's junior program. The age range for senior jumpers is 20 to late 30s.

Diehards head for Suicide Bowl every weekend. But Tonkin claims "if you've got it you've got it."

He says great jumping ability is more a matter of "hidden talent" than practice makes perfect.

"You can tell which kids are going to be good," he noted. "It takes a lot of nerve."

Jumpers who want to practice after snow melts can head for Iron Mountain, near the Wisconsin-Michigan border in the western upper peninsula. A 40-meter, plastic covered slope lets jumpers extend the season and continue to polish their techniques.

"Other dry land training? I remember as a kid watching them jump up to a counter. It was about 42 inches high."

The scene took place in a sporting goods store, where regular jumpers would leap onto counter tops and down again.

Don't even think about it.

THE FAST TRACK

You don't need formal classes to take a trip down the luge run at Muskegon State Park, but coaches are on hand at all times to talk you through basic moves.

Olympic sliders rocket down icy chutes, stretched out on four-foot sleds, at speeds of up to 75 miles an hour.

'Everyone is different. But within an hour we try to have people on the chair lift.'

— Chuck Gosh
Mount Holly

Novice sliders can cover the length of Muskegon's smaller, wooden luge run at 15-20 miles per hour.

They receive a "luge license" and permission to use the larger run (clocking speeds from 40-45 miles per hour) when a coach decides they are ready.

That takes "at least one day," according to Kelly Vacek, sports complex manager.

"When we're open to the public, we have two coaches working with people at all times."

The first-time \$10 admission fee (\$7 for subsequent visits) includes helmet, sled and coaching. The complex, which includes luge runs, lighted 7.5 kilometer cross-country ski trails and a warming house with snack bar, is open from 5-8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays and from 2-9 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays. The season runs from Dec. 26 through March.

The staff also organizes twice-monthly races for the public on weekends.

"Only the bunny hill is open because of the snow. We've had to haul it in from town just to get open this year," Vacek said. "We're hoping to get the other one open next week. It's supposed to be cold the next few weeks. We'll definitely be open if it's cold."

Sliders attach wheels to their winter sleds and practice steering on hilly park roads in spring and summer.

But Vacek suggests trying out the real thing on the icy luge track, first.

About half of the park's weekend luge crowd lives in the Detroit metropolitan area. Call the complex at (616) 744-9629 for weather conditions and directions.

MAKE THAT A TRIPLE

Figure skating looks so-o-o easy when Kurt Browning lands a quadruple axel. Or when Kristi Yamaguchi glides elegantly into a dizzying spin, doesn't it?

But you could do that with a few easy lessons, too? No!

So start simple, ok?

Just about every municipal rink offers at least one adult class and open skating sessions for practice.

Birmingham Ice Arena's half-hour

classes are under way and cost \$33 (\$42 for non-residents) for an eight-week session. Adults use the smaller, studio rink from 8-8:30 p.m., and 8:30-9 p.m., Wednesdays. Call 645-0731 for registration information.

Arena staff members also give individual tutoring. Cost varies, but lessons average a half-hour.

Ron Holbrook, manager of the Detroit Skating Club in Bloomfield Township, suggests taking group adult lessons before hiring a private teacher (unless you're beyond the basics).

The club runs adult basic skills (including freestyle) classes year-round. The next session starts March 9. Classes cost \$48 and meet from 9-9:50 a.m., Saturdays or 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Thursdays.

Registration is from 3:30-6:30 p.m., March 4-6 and 9:30 a.m. to noon, March 7 at the club, located on Denison, just north of Secure Lake Road and west of Franklin.

If you'd rather wait than wait jump, you might consider ice dancing classes at Berkley's Ice Arena. Classes meet for an hour at 5:30 p.m., Fridays. Call the rink at 546-2460 for a schedule of its next series.

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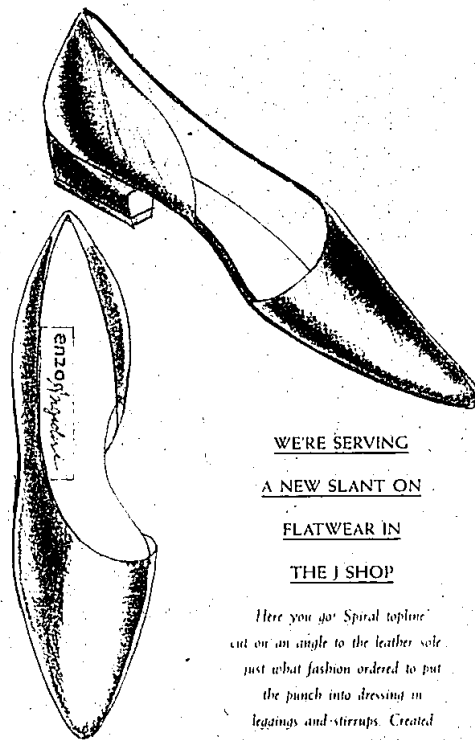
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photos by JIM RIDER/staff photographer

Michelle Curtis, 5, of Birmingham keeps a close eye on her shadow as she makes her way around the Birmingham Skating Rink. She was practicing a one-legged glide.



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