



photos by STEVE CANTRELL/staff photographer

A luge kind of a day!

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

I have lugged and lived to tell about it.
I have toured Muskegon — home of the Midwest's only Olympic-sized luge run — during the height of a winter blizzard and survived.
I have careened down an icy-slicked chute, a human bullet out of control, without screaming "OMYGOD, OMYGOD, OMYGOD, I'M GOING TO DIE."

Sound like fun?
Well, you can do it too!
Luge is a cross between sledding and roller coaster riding — not the German term for "death trap."
Europeans excel at the sport. East Germans took gold medals in all three luge events in the 1988 Olympics. Most Tyrolean tots learn to handle a luge sled at about the same time Americans are swinging their first T-ball bats.

During snowy, northern European winters, "slders" of all ages practice informally on mountain roadways (a sport called turbine) or on luge runs specifically built to accommodate the one- and two-person sleds.
Americans have climbed steadily toward the top in the Olympic luge event — Bonny Warner went from 15th place in 1984 to sixth in 1988 — but haven't won medals.

OLYMPIC COMPETITORS head for the luge run built on a mountain at Lake Placid, N.Y., to practice for international events. Novices and some Olympic hopefuls work out on smaller runs built on a sand dune in Muskegon State Park.

The park hugs the Lake Michigan shoreline — a landscape littered with snow boulders and icy surf during the winter — north of Muskegon. Two luge tracks run by a consortium of civic groups, are open from November through February.

Visitors pass by a warming house, snack bar and luge rental facility before setting foot and sled on the icy, downhill tracks that wind with serpentine, gently turning and angular curves through the forest.

Slders speed along at 25 miles per hour on the lower track (if it's icy and well-groomed) or hold on for dear life at 45-55 miles per hour on the upper run. The wooden structure resembles a double log flume and is elevated several feet at the top and about one foot from the ground at the bottom.

Luge coach Jim Rudicell starts novice slders off on a lower section of the smaller run before letting them propel themselves off the take-off ramp. After about 30 runs on the lower ramp they advance to the faster, taller run.

Snow on the tracks cut speeds considerably the day I visited, but turned the surrounding pine forest into a delicate snow shaker scene.

"IT'S REAL PRETTY up here, but as you're going down you don't see anything. I mean, you're looking at the sky, right?" I asked Rudicell.

"Yeah, yeah. It's not a nature ride. You just lay flat the whole time."
And hold onto the 40-pound sled with pinkies and the neighboring two fingers, with head craned up and encased in a crash helmet.

As I zipped a tape recorder into my parka (to capture my blood-curdling screams), Rudicell claimed that although he once cut his eye on a luge run at Lake Placid, the sport is relatively safe.

"Don't worry, we've only had sprained ankles and scraped elbows here."

I lingered inside the warming house, then at trackside, stalling my inevitable first run on the luge. When I couldn't stall any longer, I met my first challenge head on.

"How do you do up the little strap?" I asked,

fumbling with the helmet.

"Everyone has trouble with this. Don't be embarrassed," he reassured me. "This is the hardest part."

All suited up in my head gear and sunglasses, I waited at the top of the entrance ramp.

"Oh, shouldn't I have goggles?" I gasped.

This wasn't the Indy 500, Rudicell reminded me. I just needed to keep snow off my face.

"He cut his eye once at Lake Placid," I ventured meekly, fishing for sympathy from onlookers before heading to the 15-foot ramp.

NEXT CAME A quick coaching session:
Keep your legs extended with feet wrapped around

the ends of the blades, (koufens). Two fingers on each hand grasp the bar on each side of the sled. Head up. Watch the track. Lean with your right leg and left shoulder to go left. Reverse to go right. Stay in the middle of the course. Hit the wooden side walls and you'll ricochet off the sides like a pinball.

DON'T LET GO WHATEVER YOU DO!
Easy enough.

"Just relax," Rudicell coached. "And put your butt here."

"Oh, I think I'm going to scream right now," I said, settling into the canvas seat.

"Ready?"

"Oh God. Oh God. Go ahead," I sighed, tensing every muscle in my body.



If Sharon was looking for a place to relax after her quick trip down the luge run, the shore of Lake Michigan at the Muskegon State Park wasn't the place. In the dead of winter, it was none too inviting.

Want to luge? Here's how

Muskegon State Park is about a 3½-hour drive from Oakland and Wayne counties. Take I-96 west to the Muskegon-Ludington exit at US 31.

Go north for about two miles. The road will veer to the left toward North Muskegon. Go one mile. Stay to the right. You'll pass two traffic lights and a flashing light. At the next traffic light, Gies road, make a left turn.

Follow Gies to the stop sign and take a left onto Scenic Drive. The winter sports activities entrance is about 1½ miles into the park from that point.

The telephone number for Muskegon State Park is

(616) 744-3480. The number for the lodge at the luge and ski rental site is (616) 744-9829.

The Muskegon Harbor Hilton Hotel offers a cross-country ski weekend package in conjunction with the park. The \$90-per-day (\$130 for two days) rate includes a one-day park pass and discounts toward food purchases at the hotel.

Reservations can be made by calling the hotel (616) 722-0100.

The Muskegon Chamber of Commerce, (616) 722-5751, has a list of other hotels, inns and bed and breakfast facilities in the area.

When it comes to lugging, Sharon Dargay found tightening the chin strap of her helmet the hardest part. As for the ride . . . AUGHHHHH . . .

He gave the sled a shove and yelled "Here we goooooo!"

Seventeen seconds later I coasted to a stop.

"I couldn't see daylight between you and the wall," noted an onlooker.

If the track had been icy slick instead of dusted with snow, I wouldn't have seen daylight again. I probably would have killed myself. There was just enough fresh powder falling to cut the speed of my glide.

AND JUST ENOUGH weight from the sled (40

pounds) to slow my walk back up.

At Lake Placid, a truck transports luge slders from bottom to top of the mountain. At Muskegon, you walk.

"Hey, this is the worst part of the ride," I yelled, lugging my luge sled to the ramp.

I tried the run again, this time launching myself by holding two fixed poles and pulling myself over the top of the incline.

The ride was fast, thrilling and a challenge to keep on course. Steering the sled by shifting my body, using subtle leg and shoulder movements, I never completely lost control, although I edged up the wall on "Kiss and Tell" curve.

Rudicell said no one has flipped over the run walls or capsized, although there have been other kinds of "close calls."

A dog jumped onto the bottom of the track last year, but was rescued by a bystander seconds before colliding with a sled.

Another time, a slider's down jacket ripped when it scraped the wooden wall, spewing feathers over the icy hard track.

"We've got plastic on the side walls now that kind of take care of that," he said.

But he suggests that slders leave designer parkas, high heel boots and heavy snowmobile pants at home.

TENNIS SHOES with heavy socks or casual leather shoes, lightweight insulated clothing such as stretch pants, padded vests and ski shells worn in layers, won't feel as bulky and restrictive as thickly-padded snow gear.

The park provides the coaching, crash helmet and sled for \$10 a day. Rudicell says that's a bargain compared to Lake Placid's \$10 per run admission.

He said 50-120 people of all ages use the luge tracks daily during the season, which runs from November to early March. With sleds making a run about every 13 seconds on each track, the longest wait to go down is about 15 minutes on peak days. The average wait is five minutes.

"That gives you a chance to rest up."

And to muster enough courage to try again.

Rudicell said the sport demands more brain than brawn, more mental focus than dare devil bravado.

"It does take some coordination. It takes more brain power to operate the sled than physical ability. The heavier you are the faster the sled will move on the ice," he noted.

Heavier slders are permitted on the runs "as long as they fit on the five-foot wide" sleds, Rudicell noted. Shorter sleds are available for youngsters.

"IT'S A FAMILY sport," he said.

And a group activity as well. Corporate leagues compete 6-9 p.m. Mondays and Tuesdays and school leagues race 5-9 p.m. on Wednesdays. Races also are held on Saturday mornings.

The luge is open to the public 5-9 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays and 2-9 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

"At night it's a whole different feeling. You see the formation of ice and the lights," Rudicell said. "You can see everything at night."

The park also rents cross-country skis and boasts the longest — six miles — lighted trail for night treks.