

Vail Daily

There's no plowing this Leadville road

[Ian Cropp](#)
[Vail, CO Colorado](#)
March 1, 2008

LEADVILLE — Pamplona has the running of the bulls. Monaco has the Grand Prix. And Leadville has skijoring.

Renown extreme skier and Vail resident Chris Anthony, gets his first digs as as skijoring competitors Saturday in Leadville. Anthony was filmed by video crews from Warren Miller



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Films, who are preparing a documentary on the sport. The Leadville event, run on Harrison Ave, is one of the most colorful skijoring competitions in the world.

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One weekend a year, Harrison Ave — the main street in Leadville — transforms from asphalt to a snow-covered obstacle course for horses and skiers.

“This is the grand daddy of skijoring races,” said Sherry Graham of Bond.

For more than a half century, Leadville has hosted a skijoring event, brining competitors from all over the country to 10,200 feet, and plenty of fans to cheer them down the historic thoroughfare.

Saturday, the orange “Road Closed” signs adorned the side streets while more than a foot of snow stretched several blocks on Harrison Ave.

“It’s been in various locations,” said Joann Circullo, a life-long Leadville resident who has been to the event every year. “One time it was on the other side of Capitol Hill. Then it was on another road, but this is the best. If you put it anywhere else, you don’t draw the crowds.”

This year, under sunny skies and unseasonably warm temperatures, the sidewalks were packed with cheering fans, while others popped their heads out from second- and third-story hotel windows and some even caught a birds-eye view from rooftops. As the crowds began to line up, competitors took stock of the atmosphere.

“It’s unreal,” said veteran skier Greg Dahl. “Look at the street lights — you’ve got to watch your head when you are hitting those jumps.”

While the Leadville course is wider than most, there plenty of obstacles only feet away from the snow’s edge. And the jumps — 10 feet and higher for the pro racers — are bigger than other courses.

“We came around the corner here this morning and looked down the street, and it was pretty impressive,” said Jack Henderson-Adams, who competed two weeks ago at races in Wolcott. “There’s no screwing around this time. It’s serious business.”

Benchmark



Cain Bibxon, a competitor in the eight-and-over Kid's skijoring event, packs up his ski's and prepares to watch the others in action.

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Geoff Smith, a skier from New Hampshire, came in order to get a first-hand look at the snow on Harrison Ave.

"This is my first time racing in Leadville," said Smith, who runs the North East Ski Joring Association. "It's one we've always looked to as the benchmark. It's such a prestigious and established race. And it's such a great venue — it's fun for the audience and neat being in the old town."

Spectators from across the country also got their first peek at Leadville's marquee winter event.

"I've heard of skijoring, but not of this event in Leadville," said Steve Simmons, who was in town from Seattle. "We came up to this event cold, not knowing what was happening."

Simmons, whose daughter owns a dog sledding business in Maryland, was impressed with the setup as soon as he caught a glimpse of Harrison Ave.

"They trucked in all this snow with the jumps and everything," he said.

While there is a national skijoring circuit, skijoring isn't a lucrative endeavor by any means.

"Before I got a fast horse and started winning, I went to so many races and spent so much money and kept doing it because I loved it," Graham said. "Every once in a while you get lucky and win, but I'm here because my friends are here and it's great people. The people who put on the race, if we didn't have them, we wouldn't have these races. They work really hard and we appreciated what they do."

Miller time

Among the pageantry of Saturday's event, which included Graham dressed as Wonder Woman and a skier she pulled dressed as Superman, was a large film crew from Warren Miller Productions along with Vail extreme skier Chris Anthony. Before the event started, Anthony made a few test runs through the course behind a snowmobile. After Anthony took a spill on one of the big jumps, he took another pass with greater success.

Later on, Anthony took two runs in the open (pro) division and brought in one of the top times.

"It's crazy and so much more technical and ballsy than I imagined," said Anthony, an extreme skiing world champion. "Your technique as a skier is important, but it comes down to so many other things, like rope management.

As the horse enters the finish area, the skiers grab hold of a rope with one hand and hold a wand to grab rings positioned throughout the course with the other hand. When the horse takes off, the skiers go through the start gate and then weave toward a gate on the other side of the street, grab rings, weave back, hit a jump, and repeat twice.

“It’s kind of like a waterskiing course combined with wakeboarding jumps, combined with jousting — you have to get a wand through the hoops going 40 miles per hour that are hanging on a metal bar,” Anthony said. “You get to the end of the course and you are trying to download all the things that just happened, and your brain is on over drive because of all the stimulation.

“I haven’t had an adrenaline rush like this in a long time.”

Sunday, Anthony plans on skiing the sport course with a camera to grab more footage.

Soft stuff

Early into the open competition, with the snow softening up and holes forming on the course, horses began to have trouble running. One horse slipped and fell on rider Dana Stiles, who appeared to be OK, but was taken away in an ambulance for precautionary measures.

After grooming the course a bit, the riders and skiers decided to continue racing.

The competition continues today with the Calcutta kicking off around noon, followed by the sport division and the open division.

Sports Writer Ian Cropp can be reached at 748-2935 or icropp@vaildaily.com

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