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Walking with Olympians

By Jim Braham Special to the Turnagain Times

Recently, I had the opportunity to walk the route of the new Girdwood Nordic Ski Club trails through the forests of Girdwood valley. Little evidence of human activity could be detected except for old tree stumps that resulted from long ago logging, and a couple of ski trail signs placed on trees 42 years ago during the construction of the Nordic ski trails for the 1969 Junior National Cross Country Ski Championships.

On the day that Deb Essex and I walked, we were accompanied and guided by Olympians Dick Mize, who blazed the 1969 trail and nailed the trail signs to trees, and Jim Galanes who had designed the new trails now under construction.

The 5-kilometer loop now under construction will provide Girdwood cross country skiers with some really fun skiing in an environment that promotes appreciation for the beautiful valley we live in, while helping to make it accessible. Since the portion of the forest where the trails are being constructed is off the beaten path, most Girdwoodians never get a chance

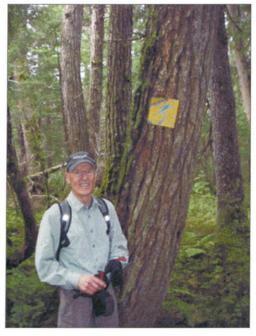


Photo courtesy of Deb Essex

Olympic biathlete, Dick Mize, located a 1969
Junior Nationals ski trail marker on a recent
walk in the Chugach National Forest in
Girdwood. Dick helped set the race course
and may have nailed this marker to the tree 42
years ago.



Vol. Thirteen, No. 18 September 16, 2010



CURRENT ARTICLES

Timothy Carter
Marijuana Growing
Kayaking in Katmai
Around the Arm
Paddy Waggin'
Letters to the Editor
Out of the Town
Hope Happenings
Cooper Landing News
Moose Passings
Mountain News
FVCS News
News Briefs
Migrating Birds
Dynamite Road
Between the Pages
Trooper Report
Walking with Olympians
Ask Shirley

Frontpage | Home

to experience it.

The trails are wide to accommodate skate skiing as well as classic technique, yet will not interfere with existing trails. And, though portions of the new trail are in close proximity to the Winner Creek Trail, they won't be readily noticeable from the Winner Creek Trail.

The trails are designed to be relatively convoluted to take advantage of terrain features that include uphill and downhill sections as well as turns and some straightaways. This type of design packs a lot of trail into a relatively small area, yet the out and back segments of the trails don't interfere with each other.

In Tuesday's Sept. 7 issue of the Anchorage Daily News, a feature article about another Olympic Nordic skier, Jim Mahaffey, told how he had designed and built the Nordic trails at Alaska Methodist University (now Alaska Pacific University). The article pointed out that creating ski trails in the '60s and '70s was much simpler than creating them today.

The permitting process is rigorous but necessary. The process of obtaining permits for Girdwood's trails was carefully followed by GNSC President, Deb Essex. In addition to the red tape, the cost of creating Nordic ski trails has increased tremendously. Funds were raised through GNSC memberships, grants and donations. Of course, donations are accepted year round. To donate or join up for the 2010/2011 ski season visit the the web site: http://skigirdwood.org/participate/membership.

It was a pleasure to traipse around the forest with Olympic skiers Mize and Galanes and to see the care with which the new ski trail system and summertime multiuse system has been designed and is being constructed. For safety reasons, please avoid the trails until construction is complete. Then, go out and walk the trails during the summer months and ski them when the snow arrives to enjoy parts of the forest you may never have visited.

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