

Harnessing Winter

The growing sport of skijoring combines cross-country skiing and dog sledding for exciting snowy adventures

By Dianna Stampfler

An experienced skijoring enthusiast enjoys the sport on trails at Keweenaw Mountain Lodge in the Upper Peninsula.



Dating back hundreds (maybe thousands) of years as a mode of winter travel, skijoring is picking up momentum as a seasonal sport in Michigan.

A combination of cross-country skiing and dogsledding, skijoring — a name derived from the Norwegian word *skikjøring*, meaning “ski driving” — involves a person actively skiing while being connected to a dog (or dogs), for recreation or competitive racing. The skier wears a skijoring belt connected to the dog via a line, while the dog wears a pulling-specific harness. The dog is motivated to run solely by responding to the skier’s voice commands.

Lindsay McWebb, owner of Atlas Skijor Kennel in Negaunee and founder of Noquemanon Skijor Club, based in Marquette, taught herself the sport about 15 years ago with her first team of Alaskan huskies, Bubba and JoBeth. Seeing a need for skijoring education and trail etiquette, she began offering private lessons and clinics, banding together with other similarly ambitious winter athletes.

“This has been a passion of mine for many years,” McWebb says. “I mostly offer private lessons, and have taken out many people with little ski experience.”

The length of a ride varies, as everyone is at a different level and is looking for their own personal experience. “A beginner skier may be happy with a mile,” she notes. “I prefer longer skis with terrain for a challenging, more advanced skijor. My ideal skijor is around five miles — even 10 miles, on occasion.”

Skijor trail access remains limited, as most Nordic areas do not allow dogs.

“It’s tricky because trail etiquette is so important for dogs to be allowed on ski trails,” McWebb says. “There’s not much out there that will allow it. We’re fortunate here in Marquette to have nearly 25 kilometers of groomed trails available to skijor. We’ve also worked very hard locally to educate trail users with dogs.”

Marquette residents Frida Waara and her husband, Ron Thorley, have been skijoring for over a decade. Waara says her



Above: Adventurers gather for a fun day of skijoring around Grand Island near Munising. **Right:** With a little instruction on skijoring techniques, most beginners are ready to harness up and hit the trails at Keweenaw Mountain Lodge.



lifelong love of the snowy season drives her to experience it to the fullest. Her fascination with dogs on the snow trails began in 1990, at the start of the U.P. 200 Sled Dog Race in Marquette.

“I learned about the remarkable bond between working dogs and the musher,” shares Waara, who proudly admits to skiing five of the seven continents, including Antarctica’s South Pole, as well as being the first woman from Michigan to reach the geographic North Pole on skis. “I could never handle the responsibility of a sled dog team, but I could harness up one or two dogs and ski.”

Beyond the rush of the sport, it’s the lasting memories and experiences that stick with Waara and keep her hitting the trails.

“I have to say a starry night in March some years back on the skijor trail, running two of Lindsay’s dogs, Fossie and Lyra, from County Road 510 to the Noque-manon trailhead in Forestville, was the most memorable night I’ve ever had on skis,” she recalls. “Another notable experience with the skijor club came when we crossed frozen Lake Superior, from Sand Point in Pictured Rocks to Grand Island.”

Both Waara and McWebb lead skijoring clinics at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources’ annual Becoming

an Outdoors Woman (see Get Outdoors story) winter retreat each February at Big Bay, near Marquette. The program introduces women to the sport’s techniques and then gives them an opportunity to harness up and hit the trail if they wish.

Farther north, the Keweenaw Mountain Lodge in Copper Harbor invites well-behaved, leashed dogs on its winter trails. The 2.1 km Perimeter Trail is ideal for skijoring, as it’s groomed flat and has good visibility. Other trails are open to obedient dogs, as long as they run outside the classic tracks on the groomed trails.

In 2021, the resort hosted its first Dawg Days skijoring event, a timed trial race called the Perimeter Dog Derby, as part of the larger CopperDog 150 dog-sled weekend. A costume contest is also part of the festivities, slated this winter for Saturday, March 2. Both the skier and their dog(s) are encouraged to dress up, and they’re judged for their creativity.

Among the participants in this family friendly event are members of the Lake Effect Skijoring Club, which is open to

competitive, recreational, and introductory skijorers. The group also coordinates informal skijor meetups and training sessions, while working to raise awareness of the sport and promoting responsible trail use.

In the Lower Peninsula, backcountry access can be found near Grayling in Crawford County, where more than 70 percent of the land is undeveloped and state or federally owned. The ungroomed areas of the Mason Tract Pathway, Rayburn Property, and Wakeley Lake (federal sticker required) are ideal for skijoring. Certain areas of Hanson Hills Recreation Area, Forbush Corner Cross Country Ski Area, and Hartwick Pines State Park (passport required) are also suitable sites to tie up to the dogs and hit the trails. ☹

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