

Got A Need For Speed? We've Got Ski Racing

Citius, Altius, Fortius -- Swifter, Higher, Stronger. That's the essence of sport. That's also one of the beauties of our particular sport. It has something for everyone. Some people have a need for speed, to challenge themselves to see how fast or how long they can go.

Towed water sports provides just such an avenue to speed enthusiasts – ski racing, also known as marathon skiing. There is a hard core group of Canadians who enjoy this variation of the sport and who engage in friendly local, inter-provincial and international competition, even competing in the World Ski Racing Championships organized by the International Water Ski Federation.

For newcomers, here's an overview of what it involves and where you might be able to try it.

What is ski racing? It is a combination of speed, strength, skill and agility. Skiers are towed behind a boat at high speeds ranging from 100 km/h to 175 km/h, and for marathon distances from 50 to 260km. These events were first held in Quebec in 1980 and were incorporated into a circuit in 1984. There are two types of events: distance marathon and closed circuit (specified course, with multiple laps). The marathon involves a one-way or return run. These runs require two teams, one to ensure a smooth start and a control boat for officials. The team works together to provide the best conditions possible for the athlete by following speed indications made by the athlete or observer, foreseeing a lack of control or fatigue that could cause a fall.

Although the world's top skiers can reach speeds of 175 km/h, the most important objective is to maintain a speed that the skier can control. It is not a boat race. The athlete must be able to sustain the conditions, elements and duration. Balance of these variables is the key!

Competing. There are two classes of competition. A social class is defined by skiers using conventional equipment such as a 23-metre towline and two skis or a slalom ski. In the second category skiers use speed skis (a longer, wider and thicker ski designed to reduce flexibility that hinders passage through rough waters) and a longer rope of up to 75 meters in length. All towropes have two handles, which the skier can hold behind his/her back for support with one hand while using the other hand to hold the rope in front to maintain balance and absorb slack.

Safety first. All crew must wear life jackets, helmets are compulsory in all classes and safety goggles are recommended. The long rope lengths are designed to keep skiers far from propeller wash at high speeds.

On your mark, get set, ski. The start on a speed ski is difficult so control is important. Starting rules vary based on the stretch of water and type of event. In marathon events the starting signal is given to the classes at the same time, whereas in closed circuit event

skiers can start at different times. Starting positions are chosen through a draw. Boats line up at the 5-minute mark when the blue flag is raised. A yellow flag indicates the 3-minute mark when skiers sit on the freeboard side of the boat. At the 30-second mark, the green flag is raised, skiers are in the water and the driver and observer work to make the rope taught and averts tangles. When the green flag goes down, the skiers are up and off. If a skier begins too early they will receive a 1-minute penalty.

Basic Rules. It is forbidden to pass on the inside in closed circuit events. Passing is only allowed on the outside. A team cannot take the inside line unless the skier is 100 meters ahead of other boats. An illegal pass warrants a 3-minute penalty and any dangerous or inside passes result in disqualification. No passing is allowed in turn. Boats must remain 10 meters apart at the start. This distance is reduced to two meters on the course. However, in turns the outside boat must prevent its towline from touching the other boat. Therefore, the distance between the boats should be increased to ten meters to avoid contact and a penalty. Should the skier fall, the observer immediately raises the orange flag. The driver stops the boat and returns on its line to retrieve the skier. The driver in the boat behind raises an arm to signal the fall to all other drivers. The judge at the closest turn raises the yellow flag. Should the observer not raise the orange flag, the team will receive a one-minute penalty. The flag is lowered when the skier resumes the event. More detailed rules can be found in the rulebook published by the International Water Ski Federation Racing Council (www.iwsf.com).

Where do I sign? Want to test your skills at marathon? Help develop the sport by participating in the upcoming Le Marathon Montreal/ Sorel / Longueuil of 140 Kilometers, or the Demi-Marathon Montreal/ Sorel / Longueuil of 70 Kilometers on August 29th, 2003. For more information contact Louis Simard at 514-655-0512 or louis.simard7@sympatico.ca.