

A Brief History of The Canadian Masters Cross-Country Ski Association

By Bill Gairdner

When I began cross-country skiing there were almost zero opportunities for an older skier to race. Sometimes, a ski competition would offer a half-hearted event for those of us somewhat pejoratively described by race officials as “Old Boys” – skiers 40 and older, who were thrown into ten-year age groups to race. But it didn’t seem right for a skier fifty, say, to be racing against a skier forty. And the name “Old Boys” made us feel like rejects. So very few older skiers came, and we competed a bit lackadaisically, feeling as if we shouldn’t be racing at all. This had to change.

We knew there were lots of men and women who would enjoy racing again if they were encouraged much younger, say at age thirty, before they quit skiing altogether for lack of opportunity to race against their peers.

The larger problem was that by the 1970s the Government of Ontario was expanding into every walk of life. “Sport Ontario” had a collection of tax-funded offices and staff in Toronto from which every sport in the province was being administered. But it was clear there was no way government was going to be organizing ski races for older men and women. So I thought: here was an opportunity to create something ourselves on the model of Masters Track and Field, which by then was highly organized in places like the USA.

So I grabbed an art pen, created the first logo and letterhead, and opened a bank account for “*The Canadian Masters Cross-Country Ski Association.*” Why not? And I named myself the President. That made my wife laugh. “You made yourself President? That’s funny.” It was. But why not? Someone had to do it! I also drafted a simple Constitution providing some basic rules and a Director for each Province of Canada. Our main function would be to organize an annual Canadian Masters Cross-Country Ski Championship, with races starting at age 30 instead of forty, and up to 80 in five-year age groups. The Masters Championship was to be rotated among willing provinces, and each provincial Director’s job would be to stimulate Masters skiing competitions within their own province. This was all prior to the internet, so it was done by word of mouth, and snail mail.

To test the idea of starting at age thirty and using five-year age-groups, and with a few willing helpers including my office secretary, who was to type up results on the spot and hand them to each racer right after each race, we organized the first-ever “Canadian Masters Cross-Country Ski Championship” in spring of 1980 to be held at Dagmar Ski Resort, northeast of Toronto, and held our breath. Over 120 men and women showed up from across Canada. Carling-O’Keefe Brewery had been persuaded to act as our sponsor, and they made a half-hour movie of this event featuring many former national champions like Kauko Riihiahho, who were very excited to be back in shape and competing for Masters medals. Our Association has been active now for over 40 years, and as Jack Sasseville said about thirty years later, “it has changed a lot of lives.” You can see it as it is today, here: <http://canadian-masters-xc-ski.ca/about/>