

CCSAA MOVES INTO THE FUTURE



**POWERED BY NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REESE BROWN,
THE XC ASSOCIATION IS STAKING OUT AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA.**

BY JONATHAN WIESEL, NORDIC GROUP INTERNATIONAL

Photos: Reese Brown

Of all the changes taking place at regional and national ski associations across North America, none are as sweeping or urgent as those at the Cross Country Ski Areas Association (CCSAA). Cross-country faces many of the same issues as alpine skiing and snowboarding, plus some issues unique to itself. The parallels and occasional divergences are illuminating.

CCSAA has existed since early in the life of XC areas. Johannes von Trapp founded the world's first cross-country ski center at Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vt., in the late 1960s, just about 50 years ago. By 1973, he had inspired the launch of enough other centers that they created a regional trade organization, Northeast Ski Touring Operators Association (NESTOA). Despite changes in name and priorities over the years, the Cross Country Ski Areas Association (CCSAA) remains a force in the Nordic industry today.

CCSAA has exerted a quiet but profound influence, initially in the U.S., but ultimately in Canada as well. The organization has been cutting-edge on many issues, and the Nordic business wouldn't exist in its current form, or even be viable, without it. There have been plenty of challenges, of course. But today, with a dynamic new executive director and an energetic, focused board of directors, the organization seems to be entering a new era, targeting major growth.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

To understand this rebirth, it helps to know a bit about CCSAA's early years.

By 1977—a decade after the Trapp center opened—there were dozens of XC areas between the coasts, and NESTOA went countrywide. After further iterations and acronyms (National Ski



Fat biking is a potential new revenue stream for CCSAA members.

Touring Operators Association, Cross Country Ski Areas of America) and several chief executives, in 1988 the organization became the more inclusive Cross Country Ski Areas Association (affectionately known as “KISSA”), covering both the U.S. and Canada. Its scope is broad in another way as well: it represents “member ski services providers,” not just areas, with the twin goals of increasing member numbers and improving the quality of operations.

Chris Frado guided CCSAA from 1986 to 2016, as executive director and then president. They were tumultuous years, initially seeing substantial growth in visits, followed by a plateau and then a drop-off in participants.

Recently, area operators have had to deal with the morale-sapping issues of long-term climate change and economic fluctuations. Frado oversaw an era of constant change, providing continuity and a smoothing presence in establishing priorities, coping with changing boards, and overseeing entry into the age of the internet.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

CCSAA has never been well funded, but thoughtful leadership and generally active boards have been foresighted about establishing goals and deciding what is most important, so it currently runs in the black. Under the leadership of David Ingemie, Snowsports Industries America (SIA) was both an ally and partner for many years, subsidizing specific projects, and providing guidance in receiving non-profit status. NSAA's Cal Conniff and Michael Berry helped with public lands issues and D.C. legislative agendas.

One of CCSAA's constant aims has been raising the level of professionalism in the sport. Among early achievements were creating guidelines for trail marking and developing a signage system—much like some of NSAA's early achievements. Basic amenities had to be identified, such as maps, plowed parking, and toilets. Another accomplishment was persuading many operators that recreational trails are more important than racing courses. This has been a difficult realization at times, as many area founders were elite skiers.



Another parallel with NSAA: Developing an endorsed liability insurance policy was a vital priority in the early days. In the '80s, cross-country areas worked to separate themselves from their alpine counterparts so that they wouldn't be lumped with alpine in determining premiums—a definite threat at the time. Alpine-like premiums would have rapidly put areas out of business. "The insurance program exists because of CCSAA, and it's been a great recruitment tool," Frado says.

Yet another NSAA-like issue that affected dozens of XC operators was negotiating with the U.S. Forest Service, so that permits would be issued on reasonable terms. This predictability allowed more investment and some assurance of better ROI.

CCSAA has taken a more aggressive approach with consumers to serve as a resource. It has developed a consumer website and is producing and distributing a member *Directory* in cooperation with *Cross Country Skier* and *SkiTrax* magazines.

EDUCATION IS JOB #1

Member education, though, remains the top priority. The organization continues to emphasize its meetings as a way for operators to interact with each other as well as suppliers and media.

As with many associations, the organization introduces members to new ideas, often discussed and refined at the annual April conferences. CCSAA has been instrumental in fostering a number of innovations and trends: skate technique, snowshoe trails, ski joring

with dogs, and most recently, fat biking—with e-fatbikes on the horizon. At the same time, CCSAA has kept insurance underwriters informed, so that innovations haven't resulted in higher premiums.

Peter Ashley, former Fischer Nordic vice president, says of the conference, "Operators are crazy if they don't go and take the opportunity to network with people in the same business. These meetings should be part of everyone's budget every year. It's an opportunity to try to get better, and you can easily pay for attendance by what you take away."

Attendance, however, has tracked the fortunes of the overall business. Attendee numbers have fallen considerably since the late '80s, from as many as 120 participants then to perhaps 60 now.

The overall XC business, according to data from SIA, peaked around 1988's 5.8 million skiers (*Ed. note: take that total with a grain of salt; SIA figures for alpine skiing are double those reported by NSAA*). Par-

ticipation has fallen since then, though visits plateaued at 5.2 million in 2016-17. The number of cross-country operations in North America has also stabilized or dropped. Understandably, CCSAA area membership has been flat recently, at around 150.

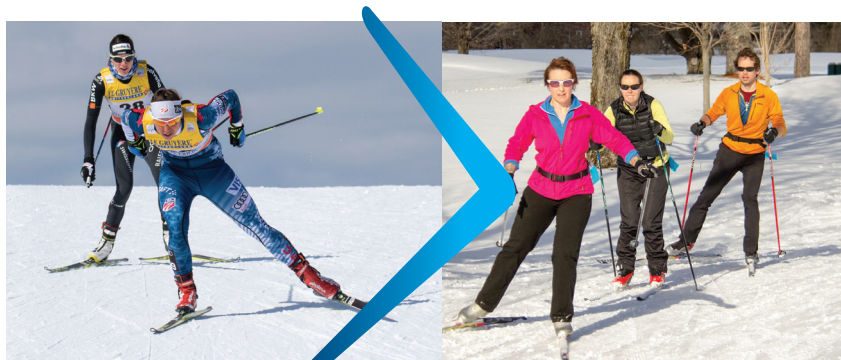
WAVE OF THE FUTURE

More change is on the horizon. The makeup of Nordic area owners and managers continues to evolve, much as it has for alpine resorts. The pioneers have mostly moved on. The following generations of operators, suppliers, and retailers haven't been as familiar with what CCSAA has contributed to their bottom line. So there's a natural tendency for them to ask, despite all the ongoing benefits, "What have you done for me lately?"

CCSAA's new executive director, Reese Brown, and his board may change that. Brown is thoroughly connected in the snowsports industry: he is also Nordic director for SIA as well as the cross-country communications manager for the U.S. Ski Team. Brown also has a well-defined series of projects and priorities. The executive transition has been smooth, partly because he had already served as an industry representative on the CCSAA board.

In 2016, CCSAA began a campaign to increase its relevance and become a major resource for industry and public. Aims were to not simply increase membership, but also to create a structure for long-term operational stability for its members. This includes growing participation, of course, and also improving the quality of guest experience. Sound

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In its early years, CCSAA persuaded many XC area operators to emphasize recreation over racing—though racing remains a PR plus. Left photo: Julie Kern at the 2018 World Cup finals.

nal URL (www.xcski.org) is dedicated to consumers, and a new site (www.ccsaa.org) to industry, so that CCSAA provides “one-stop shopping” to everyone interested in Nordic skiing. Both sites will be actively promoted.

- Brown is building both the number and substance of membership benefits, including discounts for all members, and new member incentives. These include conditions reporting via TrailHUB (www.trailhub.org) and initial free consulting from member professionals.

- Supplementing earlier efforts, CCSAA is collaborating on development of a reliable Nordic area database for North America. Thus far the project has identified more than 150 golf courses with groomed trails and—with help from NSAA—at least 100 alpine areas offering XC. The board may also reach out to the golf industry to explore possibilities for more new winter operations.

- CCSAA is vigorously backing plans to develop areas’ marketing skills. It

is also supporting a proposed Nordic Ski Conversion and Retention Kit from member consultants.

- CCSAA has re-designed its end-of-season operations survey, resulting in many more respondents compared to prior years. Results may be particularly useful to suppliers and media. It’s likely there will eventually be a separate survey for Canadian areas.

- Meetings will continue to be a linchpin for building membership, sharing information, and encouraging professionalism, featuring short sessions and a hands-on approach. There are also plans for a new

educational video series that will be accessible for areas not attending meetings.

- CCSAA is initiating a major push to find project sponsors. For example, a backer is being sought for creating a handbook to answer questions on how to build a cross-country ski area, as well as provide a resource center for the products and education needed to achieve best results.

This agenda is formidable. A lot should be in play by next April’s 2019 Conference, hosted by Mt. Van Hoevenberg, N.Y., and the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA). ■



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