

## Doug Moe: Madison Ski Club nears finish line

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Courtesy of Pat Bruden

Maybe it should have been a solemn occasion, but it wasn't. There were too many stories, too much laughter.

Bill Breuch remembered the year he served as president — 1968 — and the club mounted an ambitious trip to ski in Austria. They chartered a Swiss Air plane out of Chicago for \$28,500. It was a Madison Ski Club operation, but Breuch, as president, was on the hook if anything went sideways.

He mentioned that technicality to his wife, Treva. “We are absolutely out of our minds to put our name on that contract,” Breuch said. Still, he signed. As often happens for those willing to embark on an adventure, things worked out. It was a night flight to Austria. “We sat up front with the captain and drank Courvoisier,” Breuch said.

The skiing was good but not great — the runs in Europe weren’t groomed in those days — although that hardly mattered. The camaraderie was exceptional.

Breuch, 78, was drinking coffee Friday morning with two old friends, Pat Bruden, 81, and Larry Hurley, 76, and recalling their glory days in the Madison Ski Club, which formed in 1963, and is now in the process, 52 years later, of officially disbanding.

The club newsletter — the Schussboomer — last summer listed four reasons for ending the Madison Ski Club, at least officially: declining membership (down from 124 in 2006-’07 to 66 in 2013-’14); decreased skiing among those who are members; an inability to attract new, younger members; and a problem finding members to serve the club in leadership positions. The club’s current board of directors will host a past-presidents dinner in May, and that will be the final event of the Madison Ski Club.

“It’s sad,” Hurley said. A former travel agent, he arranged many of the club’s trips to the American West and overseas, two or three a year across the decades. Hurley stopped skiing a few years ago, as did Breuch, but Bruden is still at it. She went with the club to Snowmass, in Colorado, in December.

Bruden said people note her age, and ask, “What if you fall?”

Her answer? “I could walk out the front door and fall.”

Although club records date the Madison Ski Club to 1963, a Feb. 20, 1965, story in The Capital Times suggests the first meeting of the club was in November 1964. In any case, it was an immediate hit.

“So popular is the club,” the story noted, “that it has had to close its membership at 125 families (over 600 people), until a larger meeting place can be found.”

Photos for the Cap Times story were taken at a ski hill that in 1965 was called Norway Basin, outside Mount Horeb. (By the following year, the hill had changed its name to Tyrol Basin.) In February 1966, the Cap Times had another story on the club, indicating membership had grown to 150 families, and spotlighting a bus trip the club made that winter to Big Powderhorn in Bessemer, Michigan.

Over the years the club had summer picnics to keep in touch with members, and a fall lift-off party to help plan trips. The lift-off party in 1992 was particularly memorable, because seven members of the Stroebe family — three generations — modeled new ski wear during a dinner at the Chalet St. Moritz. The Stroebe name is important in club history; some early members got their start on what was called Stroebe’s Hill, a property near Riley equipped with a rope tow.

The trips themselves were the heart of the club. Hurley started keeping a record of them in 1979, and the number and variety is impressive. Most years there was both a trip to the American West or Canada, and one to Europe. They were popular. A trip to Zell Am See, Austria, in 1988, drew 110 members.

Some years there were three trips. One winter, 1999-2000, the itinerary included Deer Valley, Utah; Bad Gastein, Austria; and Big White, British Columbia. Bruden was particularly taken with Big White, the snow-cruisted trees referred to locally as “snow ghosts.” At Deer Valley, the great Norwegian ski racer Stein Eriksen played host, and each morning his wife would dress a mannequin outside the lodge in the newest ski apparel. “Yours for just \$500,” Breuch said.

Breuch recalled a trip to Austria that occurred during the famous carnival known as Fasching. Servers in costumes offered trays filled with shot glasses containing a mysterious elixir.

“The first one burned you all the way to your kneecaps,” Breuch said. He grinned. “The second one wasn’t bad.”

“It sounds like Slivovitz,” Bruden said, referring to a strong plum brandy.

Certainly sightseeing and socializing were a significant part of it. A 2009 trip to Alaska included watching the start of the Iditarod sled race and attending the mushers’ banquet the night before.

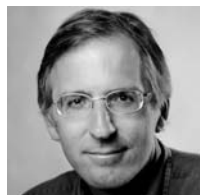
But that is not to suggest that the skiing was unimportant. It’s an exhilarating sport. For Bruden — whose early ski venues included Bascom Hill — and many others, it was a chance to enjoy being outside in the winter.

It was more than that, too. “When you’re standing on top of the mountain,” Breuch said, “it’s glorious.”

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## Doug Moe



Doug Moe writes about Madison and the people who make it a unique place. His column runs Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in the State Journal.

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