

NEWS²

The race goes on/Tuckerman Inferno carries on ravine history April 9

By Tom Eastman

Spring means one thing in the mountains of New Hampshire: Tuckerman time!

It's been a challenging season for snow sports lovers, but there has been snow up on Mount Washington these past few days, so the skiing portion of today's 17th annual Tuckerman Inferno Pentathlon is a go, according to Friends of Tuckerman Ravine officials and U.S. Forest Service snow rangers.

The question as of press time concerned what the selected course would be for the concluding ski and snowboard leg of the five-part race. (See updates at www.friendsoftuckerman.org.)

Racers were to get course updates when they registered at 5 p.m. Friday at the Eastern Slope Inn in North Conway. Spectators can learn about the course from FOTR volunteers, from the FOTR Facebook page and the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center (603-466-2721).

After a mix of snow, sleet and rain, the forecast called for partly sunny skies and cold temperatures with wind in the ravine for today, race day.

"We are watching the weather and conditions," sad Jake Risch of Conway, president of the nonprofit Friends of Tuckerman Ravine, which puts on the race as a fundraiser that allows the group to work with U.S. Forest Service snow rangers and augment their programs on the eastern side of Mount Washington.

Risch and veteran head snow ranger Chris Joosen of the USFS' Androscoggin District said Thursday that the skiing part of the course would take place.

Options for the ski course depend on how much snow has fallen throughout the week. They include:

- Ideally, using Left Gully, top to bottom, in the ravine.
- Making two runs on a shortened course in Left Gully, climbing and skiing twice.
- If there was a lot of fresh snow in the ravine, leading to moderate-to-high avalanche danger, moving the course out of the ravine and down onto the Sherburne Ski Trail with a start at the USFS' Hermit Lake Shelter — as happened last year.



A competitor hikes up Tuckerman Ravine in the fifth leg of the Inferno race in 2012. (JAMIE GEMMTI PHOTO)

"We've got backup plans, let alone backup plans to those plans," said Risch, who said the other parts of the pentathlon are in good shape heading into today.

"My brother Matt and I were out on the Saco Wednesday night with Daron Laughland of the White Mountain Swift Water Rescue Team, ," said Risch. "We paddled the race course on the Saco from Thorne Pond down to the takeout at Glenn Ellis Campground, and removed five strainers — trees in the river — using a handsaw. With the rain, the river was expected to rise for Thursday and Friday, but it should be flowing at good levels for the race Saturday."

The race begins at 7 a.m. with an 8.3-mile run departing from the Story Land parking lot, and heads up Glen Ledge Road and travels west on U.S. Route 302 to Attitash. It continues with a 6-mile kayak race down the chilly Saco River to Glen Ellis Campground. Competitors then complete an 18-mile bike race north on Route 16 through Pinkham Notch, followed by the hike up the Tuckerman Trail.

Spectators are welcome at all transition points.

Those hiking to the ravine must be aware of the icy conditions and the need to wear crampons and use ski poles.

At the end of the race, teams will gather at the Wildcat Mountain base lodge for an awards banquet and prize giveaways.

Racers may compete as solo competitors for the TuckerMan and TuckerWoman Elite category, competing in all five parts of the race.

The race also features a Sport/Men's and a Sport/Women's team category, open to teams of two to five people, and a Sport/Co-Ed category.

Back this year is a class introduced last year for top fundraiser. That person will receive a custom-made pair of Parlor skis.

Top finishers will get prizes donated by sponsors.

A total of 210 confirmed racers had pre-registered as of Wednesday. Registration is now closed.

The TuckerMan and TuckerWoman each win a top prize of \$1,000. The field will consist of 31 Elite solo TuckerMan competitors and nine TuckerWomen racers.

"We're happy to report that our defending champion TuckerMan and TuckerWoman are both coming back," said Peter Nelson, FOTR president

They are Andrew Drummond, 34, of Conway and Jessica Marion, 28, of Brunswick, Maine. Drummond's time in 2015 was 3:40:52.62, which would have placed him third among teams, just ahead of the women's class champion Wild Things' time of 3 hours, 41 minutes, 42.90 seconds, while Marion's time was 4:20:23.54.

Top TuckerMan Drummond was sixth in the run (53:23.93), 17th in the kayak (49:57.10), seventh in the bike portion with a time of 1:06:36.20, 13th in the hike portion in 46:22.86, and second in the ski leg with a time of 4:26.53.

Marion, an engineer in Portland, was 25th in the run with a time of 1:01:56.72 compared with the top time of 43:21.4 by Ryan Place of Edward's Van. Her kayak time of 52:32.26 placed her 30th behind the top time of 43:07.78 placed by Robert Flanagan of Wayland, Mass., of the Mothertuckers. She was 31st in the bike leg in 1:20:32.85 compared to Erik Nelson of the local All Stove Up/Tucked Out's top time of 1:02:34.66. In

the hike she was 43rd in 57:22.14 compared to the top time of 28:07:63 placed by the champion All Stoved Up team's Triston Williams. In the ski leg, she was 50th in 7:59.57 behind top finisher Steve Genereaux of the Sandbaggers' top time of 4:26.24.

Competing in the TuckerMan class this year is former U.S. Ski Team three-time Olympic cross country skier Kris Freeman, 35, a past "Climb to the Clouds" Nordic champion up the Mount Washington Auto Road and now director of the Waterville Valley Nordic Center.

"I think Kris will add some excitement and ought to give Andrew a good challenge," said Nelson.

Defending their team title is Matty Burkett's local team, All Stove Up/Tucked Out. Last year, they put in a top time of 3 hours, 22 minutes, 41.10 seconds, placing them ahead of the second-place team, Edward's Van and the Athletic Heroes (3:23:52.16).

Last year's women's champions, Wild Things of North Conway, had not registered as of the deadline, according to Risch.

He said Carrie McLane Burkett, Matty Burkett's wife, has entered an all-women's team, the Tuckerlettes. McLane's late grandfather, Malcolm McLane, was one of the founders of Wildcat Ski Area. Other all-women's teams include the Valley Girls and the Fortified Females.

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As Risch and Nelson noted, Friends of Tuckerman Ravine seeks to preserve and protect the unique alpine and sub-alpine eastern slopes of Mount Washington; and to work with the Forest Service to sustain the traditional uses of the distinctive natural area. FOTR has provided financial support for organizations such as the Mount Washington Avalanche Center and volunteer support for trail maintenance and site rehabilitation projects around the Cutler River Drainage on Mount Washington.

In 2015, Friends of Tuckerman Ravine began soliciting donations towards the rebuilding of the iconic outdoor deck structure located at Hermit Lake Shelter located just below Tuckerman Ravine. The deteriorating deck at "HoJo's", as it is affectionately called, is a gathering point for thousands of spring skiing fans and was badly in need of repair.

Working in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service, and using proceeds from the 2015 Inferno, FOTR purchased the material for the deck and transported it to the ravine via a USFS Snowcat in April, 2015. Later in November, construction of the deck began and over a three-week period, more than 20 volunteers, working under the direction of Snow Ranger Frank Carus were successful in demolishing the old deck and constructing the new one.

Risch said several volunteers who participated in that effort will be recognized at Saturday's awards dinner. Also recognized will be longtime USFS snow rangers Chris Joosen and Jeff Lane, both departing at the end of this year's Tuckerman season.

(Joosen and Lane were profiled in last Saturday's cover story by Erik Eisele. Joosen has served as lead snow ranger for 26 years while Lane has served for 10 years.)

Joosen plans to finish out the 2015/2016 winter season, and then head west as his wife, who also works for the Forest Service, has taken a job in Oregon.

Lane, who is married and lives in Conway, plans to spend time at home caring for his and his wife Erin's two young children.

Joosen said this week it will be hard to leave his post as lead snow ranger, as the mountain has become part of his soul.

"I don't feel like I am an old person," he reflected, "but when you stop and think that I have been up there on the mountain for 26 years, that's a long time.

"I still feel like I m developing as a person. I feel the mountain and the ravine have really had an influence on everything I have become. Working with visitors and helping them to safely enjoy the ravine experience is a big part of that."

He added: "You are constantly learning, but you can never learn it all. As I remember (former lead snow ranger) Brad Ray in his last year telling me he was still learning things. That's what's fascinating about avalanche forecasting. It really makes you humble about what the world is throwing at you."

He said he was pleased to see FOTR and all the volunteer group's work with the Forest Service over the years, noting that FOTR in the past has worked on replacing slat boards that spell out the day's conditions at the entrance to the ravine at Hermit Lake shelter, and on the new deck at the shelter this year.

"Those are exactly the kind of projects that we want to see more of in the future," said Joosen.

His comments were echoed by FOTR's Risch and Nelson, who said FOTR is planning a series of work weekends this summer and fall on the Sherburne Trail with such groups as the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Friends of the Mount Washington Avalanche Center and the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol.

Both have been skiing in Tuckerman since they were children and share Joosen's awe and respect for the ravine.

"I love the ravine and Mount Washington," said Risch, 38, a former Army captain who served as a logistics officer in Iraq and later as a civilian consultant in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "My brother Matt and I were just up there today (Wednesday), along with Matty Burkett, who was up there checking out conditions, looking for any edge he can get. We we were the last ones up there. It was a pretty unique experience and a very special moment."

Sons of FOTR founder Al and Alison Risch of Madison, the brothers are carrying on the family's ardent love of the backcountry Mount Washington experience.

"I want to preserve it for my kids — whenever I have kids," said Jake.

Added Nelson, 58, an information technical consultant in Newington: "I have been enjoying trips to Tuckerman and the Northern Presidentials since I was a kid. My three boys have all skied Tuck's. Like everyone else, there are stories about the ravine and its heritage as one of the first backcountry ski centers in the country. With Friends of Tuckerman, it's a way to give back."

From the ghosts of Toni Matt (1920-1989), who first schussed the 800-foot Tuckerman Headwall in the top-to-bottom American Inferno of April 16, 1939, in 6 minutes, 29.2 seconds, to the skiers and snowboarders of today, the Inferno keeps the Tuckerman experience alive.

See you along the five-part race course — in the valley and on the mountain.

It's a rite of spring here in the mountains, regardless of the whims of Mother Nature — and ol' Agiochook, the god whom Native Americans said dwelled on the summit of the 6,288-foot mountain. Long live Tuckerman!

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