

Mo Races, Mo Spandex: Skimo Takes Off In Utah

Contributed by Jared Hargrave

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It's the start of the Wasatch Citizen Skimo Series, a weekly event held at Brighton, Utah and evidence of Utah's growing interest in European-style randonnee racing. Skimo, short for ski mountaineering, has found a home in the Wasatch where this fringe sport is becoming a bona-fide revolution.

The Wasatch Powderkeg is the most well known skimo event in Utah, but the success of the new Wasatch Citizen Skimo Series is proving that competitive Utahns are hungry for rando races. And the fast-growing Tuesday-night series attracts everybody from competitive racers to curious backcountry skiers on heavy AT gear.

"People are starting to pick up on the European influence," says Chad Brackelsberg, president of the Wasatch Powderkeg. "Now that gear has made astronomical advances as far as weight and performance, I think that it's had a huge turnover."

Brackelsberg, a skimo participant himself, compares the race to a winter version of running a 5K. "Every mountain town in the U.S. has a 5K race, just like every mountain village in Europe has a skimo race," he says. "I see it as an alternate to the running scene. It's really kicking up to where people want to race more out in the woods and in the mountains."

Andy Dorais, a local skimo racer, agrees. He says the sport is earning more attention because it's easier for people to get involved in "fitness touring" than true backcountry skiing or mountaineering. "People can safely hike up resorts without concern for avalanches, need for partners, or worry about technical skills," Dorais says. "The races are fun, too, and give many people that race bikes or run in the summer a winter outlet for their competitive sides."

The growth of skimo may be new in Utah, but the sport isn't. The competitive randonnee scene first began in 2003 when Andrew McLean, Butch Adams, and Colleen Nipkow started the Wasatch Powderkeg at Alta. Then in 2009, Brackelsberg and his wife, Emily, took over the event and moved it to Brighton.

Both Brackelsberg and Dorais think skimo is here to stay in Utah, and will continue to see growth in the future. The Wasatch plays host to more than a dozen races this season and skimo organizers are talking about hosting a three-day race—the first of its kind in the U.S.

Still, Dorais says skimo will always be a fringe sport. "I think it will become bigger than it is now," he adds. "Backcountry skiing seems to be the only aspect of the ski industry that continues to display growth—it's becoming mainstream and the racing scene is an extension of that."

Brackelsberg agrees: "If you show up in tight pants and skinny skis, you don't quite get the strange looks at the trail head like you used to."

Jared Hargrave skis and writes in Salt Lake City, Utah. While he is fascinated by the emerging skimo scene, he remains firmly in the baggy-pants camp. Find his writing at UtahOutside.com and in the *Utah Adventure Journal*, where a version of this story was first published.

