

OFFBEAT SPORTS



Former Italian alpine skiing star Peter Wolfhard gets his wheels on the right track as he sets out on a slalom run down the grassy slopes of Chicopee.

Record Photo by Gerry Bookhout

The slippery art of ski-wheeling

By JOE SINASAC
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In September, the Chicopee ski slopes are a peaceful place. The white business of winter has been replaced by quiet greens and muted golds and reds — the first vestiges of autumn.

But in the last two years fall visitors to Chicopee would have been startled to find slalom flags winding a path down the slopes. If they waited a few minutes longer a greater shock would greet their eyes as a skier in full alpine regalia came into view, hurtling through the gates like a misplaced slalom racer.

More often than not that seemingly confused skier would be Peter Wolfhard, assistant director to Chicopee's Peter Schwirt-

lich, and the high-pitched buzzing sound that accompanied him would be the whirring treads of his grass skis.

To Wolfhard, grass skiing can be used for more than beef commercials on television, where most people have had their only exposure to the relatively new sport.

Labatt's breweries has such a commercial and Feliciano Vinco, promoter for Rolka grass skis, says Molson's has ordered a similar television ad.

"It won't replace snow skiing but it's a perfect way to practise for the coming season and it can be done all year," he said after the recent Oktoberfest races which he won over 10 other competitors.

Vinco, a former member of the Italian alpine ski team, and Canadian distributor for Rolka, says grass skiing began as a practice technique for European teams, but now has been elevated to international competition in its own right.

"It started in the early '70s and now there is a competitive circuit in Europe under the International Federation of Skiing," he said. Grass skiing came to the U.S. in 1975 and Vinco brought it to Canada in 1978.

The first resort to take up the new sport was King City, just north of Toronto, and grass skiing has since spread to five other resorts including Chicopee, which began rentals last fall.

However, the enthusiasm for

the sport in Europe has not been matched in Canada. Schwirtlich, who rented grass ski equipment at Chicopee for the last two seasons, said it has not been a raving success among Twin Cities skiers.

"I think people here are too afraid of getting hurt," he said. "You have to be an awfully good skier to appreciate it."

But Wolfhard has enjoyed racing down the green slopes with the skis that resemble bulldozer treads lashed to his feet. He tried the sport after seeing a demonstration at a Toronto ski show two years ago.

"It's a little harder than snow skiing," he explained. "You can't start these the same way and they won't skid sideways. If

you're a competent snow skier and you let these have a chance, it can be a lot of fun."

Wolfhard is in the minority at Chicopee, however, and Schwirtlich will probably abandon grass skiing next year.

"Unless we can get an alpine slide in operation next year which would mean that the lifts would be operating, then I doubt that we will have grass skiing," he said.

Running the lift is too expensive for Chicopee to rely solely on the revenues from grass ski rentals, he added. And the chances of obtaining an alpine slide are "still remote," which will probably put an end to Europe's "fast-growing sport" before it even plants roots in K-W.