



CAN SNOWSHOE RACING GO PRIME TIME?

By Phillip Gary Smith

‘The Snowshoe Warrior’ Coach David Ilg might say “Okay, you who run on water: What do the World Poker Tour ®, NHRA Drag Racing ® and the pristine sport of Snowshoe Racing have in common?”

The answer is . . . a lot more than you might think!

Start with the recognition that each of these events is the fastest growing in its category. Hold off on the debate whether playing poker is a sport or not. If sport is defined where someone is trying to beat you in competition, then poker certainly qualifies. Besides, we can learn a lot from the World Poker Tour.



And while we’re at it, we can learn from growth in other sports. I’ll touch on some of these, but I’m sure you will think of many others.

I have been around the sport of Drag Racing (NASCAR ®, too) since it was dirty-fingernail, greasy t-shirt racing. That’s all changed. With major Coca Cola ® event sponsorship and hours of telecasts on ESPN II, Drag Racing has exploded on the popular scene, with snazzy team uniforms and media stars. I’ve been inside a number of these professional teams, observed the growth, the requirements for the sport’s success, worked with media broadcasts at national events, and watched the development of their internet presence. But all of the time I was learning, watching a sport evolve.

Besides, I found connections at those events aided in finding blessed air conditioning, which at a hot summer Automotive Event is like securing a seat close to a warm fireplace after a long trek on winter trails.

My brother, Paul, has been all over the world, established businesses for multinational corporations, and attended events of all sorts for decades. He’s my favorite partner to attend any function of a sports nature. We tend to tour all of the grounds not only because of natural curiosity, but also Paul doesn’t comprehend the words “No” or “Do Not Enter” or “Restricted Area.”

So we find ourselves behind the scenes a lot. Teaming up to catch the NHRA Tour, we start critiquing everything from the pre-race mail to exiting the parking post event. Little did I know I would see another sport, this time Snowshoe Racing, still early, very early, in its acceptance.

The World Poker Tour (NASDAQ: WPTE) has become the top ranked program on the Travel Channel™. Perhaps you've bought some of their branded products. As a Senior Vice President of Investments of Feltl and Company, I was able to observe and learn first hand of their business plans as we managed their Initial Public Offering of stock in October 2004.

Both of these successes and others I will refer to, and many I will miss, offer lessons on how a burgeoning activity can go mainstream and upstream, creating a bigger and better experience not only for the competitors but also for the sponsors, industry and the affiliated association.

Rest assured, as the sport matures, if the industry and association do not lead the growth and organize it, others will pop up to replace or compete with the current status quo.



So, what are the lessons that can be learned?

DEVELOP A NATIONAL TOUR

A National Championship Event, such as the one held in Bolton, Vermont, in March 2006, is a great start for a tour and portends more events to come. A National Tour would be a series of Association chartered events that would accumulate points, cash, and awards along the way that would lead to a National Championship race culminating the 'official' season.

Just like today you could enter any qualifying event to make it to the Big Championship Race and other than exempted participants, that's how you would qualify. Along the way there would be a tour of selected events that would award National Championship points leading to a Championship.

Kind of like having a regular season championship and then a post championship tournament other sports have. There are regional examples of snowshoe tours competing around the country right now, like the 'Dar Vollrath Memorial' established in the states

of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In 2006's version, the tour had 8 events. Unfortunately it is defunct for the 2007 season.

ESTABLISH SNOWSHOE'S EQUIVALENT OF NASCAR'S DAYTONA

Car racing started in Daytona over a half century ago on the sandy beaches. It was a minor attraction at the time, filled with kooks and crazy people and attracting no money. Kind of sounds like a typical snowshoe event, right?

Just joking, of course, about the people. The money part is correct. If politicians say, "It's the economy, stupid" to be successful, can't we transpose that for our sport to say, "It's the tradition stupid?"



So, how do we identify some of the elements constituting an important tradition like a Daytona event? What are they?

*Return annually to the same venue on the same weekend. Indy for open wheel racing is held every Memorial Day. What would Memorial Day weekend be without the Indy 500? The race has been run on this weekend for decades, it is *tradition!*

*Make it special, unique, decidedly different. There is no other race facility that resembles the Indy 500's Brickyard facility. Likewise, each snowshoe course is different, *unique* in its own right. Promote and celebrate those differences.

*The big traditional races pay the big *money*, generally record setting amounts. The first snowshoe race to really come up with the large purses (relatively) will have a huge leg up. Congratulations to those events already at the forefront of providing purses to winners. The early auto races paid very little to win, maybe \$100's at best. Now they are in the millions.

*Develop and *romanticize* the history and existence of the annual event.

**Promote*, promote, promote. Add more features yearly. Upgrade. Keep it fresh and exciting.

*Get the *stars* of the sport at the race, make it tantalizing where they can't afford to miss, and develop the story lines that emphasize the competition.

For venues where National Championships have been contested, give the opportunity to stage a classification known as a 'National;' for example, the 'Bolton Valley National Event.' The race would still count as a qualifier, but the race itself could hold a higher stature in the sport. It was easy to enjoy Bolton this year, a good location, the course a fun challenge.

Over the years it is exciting when course records fall in any sport, as racers return to navigate a familiar course again and again, whether it is on rubber tires or snowshoes.

MAXIMIZE INTERNET REPORTING

I've observed for years each National NHRA event has major information about the tour event well ahead of time and continues to add to the collected body of information the closer to the event one gets. These include daily reports leading up the race and a host of post race interviews and reports also. Manufacturers and retailers in our sport should be encouraged to announce new innovations at this time, new products, and new things to buy and try. And the sport should publicize those companies' press releases. Maybe they will see the advantages to become involved in a bigger way.

Seek out a dedicated group who would add content for web information for the events as the date gets nearer, particularly National Events and especially the National Championships. Anyone who participates in any of these events will be checking the web multiple times daily in some cases looking for new information, especially as the date gets nearer. So, accommodate them. Have new content so there is a reason to come back, a reason to provide more exposure to those who sponsor the site and the event.

Why not post pictures and short Bios of the national Championship competitors? All of them, not just the stars. So everyone can know who that person is they're lining up next to – at the front or the back.

SELL SPECIFIC RACE SPONSORSHIPS

Just like in motor sports naming rights for events can be sold.

Could you live with 'The Hammer Gel National Championship,' or 'The Atlas Snowshoe National Tour,' on and on, promoting both the sponsor and adding revenue dollars to the association that can fund its further development and expansion? The operative word here, though, is 'sell,' since great opportunities are 'sold' not 'bought.' This is easier said than done, though, as it takes time and effort. Best intentions get waylaid as small things like 'careers' and 'making a living' get priority over the important volunteer activity of Snowshoe Racing.



DESIGN COURSES SUITABLE FOR TELEVISION AND FANS

I was expressing the genesis of this idea to National Snowshoe Team member, Cindy Brochman, when she mentioned her husband, Olympic X-C Skier Kevin Brochman, had the thought of a 10-K course composed of 2-mile loops. What a concept!

Spectators and cameras would have athletes crossing the start/finish line 4 times during the race making it much easier to watch than competition and keep up with the leaders. Then adding seating and access to particularly difficult portions of the course could offer fans and media access to enjoy that action too. All those eyes watching and cheering will make the race more thrilling, more 'big time' for the participants, too.

Maybe in time, getting to a prime viewing location at a snow shoe event could be a little like rushing out to the favorite golf holes at the Masters to secure a spot close enough that one doesn't have to use one of those crazy mirror contraptions to see over the crowds. Maybe. In time.

Granted our sport is yet very little like the fan intensity in Augusta, but sitting all day waiting for Tiger to pass hasn't always been a passion either. Snowshoe Racing can blossom, we just have to feed it imagination and fertilize with money, the organization that is already there. We need to make it easy for crowds and the media to discover it.

ACCOMMODATE TELEVISION COVERAGE

The World Poker Tour film their poker events at the host casino and edit the tape to include the most exciting moments of play, while creating tension and a story about the game being played.



To attract television our sport needs to be able to film an event initially with as low production costs as practical while still capturing and creating the excitement snowshoe racing can provide. It may be that the first snowshoe television broadcast will be on an Internet television channel.

Ours is an emerging sport, Internet television is an emerging media where 'new' may be easier to get a receptive audition. Still, trying to get Television production for the 2007 USSSA Championships in Minnesota became overwhelming cost wise for the still tiny operating budget of the Host Committee and limited imagination of potential sponsors. Come on, Big Guys, invest now, and you can rule Television rights for years to come!

Foot racing works on television, snowshoeing should, too.

PIZZAZZ TIME

Excitement, fanfare, big dollars for the winners, banners waving in the breeze, merchandise marts, programs for the fans! Just because running in the snow can be quiet, as opposed to the roar of an 8,000 horsepower Top Fuel Dragster, doesn't mean we have to stage low-key events. When competing at a Qualifier or the National Championship Race the excitement generated by all of the activities surrounding the event should rival, at least on scale, all other major national sporting events.

Events need to capture the spirit of big time while still working with small time budgets. Little things like press releases, plenty of banners, signs and flags at the event location, concessionaires selling clothing with event insignia, plenty of food and drinks available for the spectators, photographers at the finish line, all of these combine to create an exciting venue. Cindy Brochman is doing a fantastic job of making this 2007 Event a Big Time Show – and she is accomplishing that with little help. I know, I'm one of those who fell off the active committee to a consulting role because of the 'job.' How Cindy is able to accomplish everything she does -- job, family, life, Snowshoe Race Chairwoman – is phenomenal. And she trains for triathlons, too! Another Major Company is going to discover her and her fantastic work ethic and double her salary, just watch.

WHERE ARE OUR PERSONALITIES? OUR CELEBRITIES?

What are we, shy? Who is going to step out and be the Tiger Woods of our sport, the NHRA's John Force force of personality, the Michael Jordon of Performance? Just because we race in chilly temperatures doesn't mean we have to hide our character under polypropylene.

One observation is that snowshoe racing in running shorts and singlet has already made Jim McDonnell of Minnesota the most photographed racer yet. At the Bolton Nationals there were lots of photos of Jim wearing very little but with earmuffs. I wore fairly standard but a neat looking outfit (it's important since I'm slow, at least look good doing it) and appeared in exactly zero images. Even the course photographer managed not to snap my photo.

The first sponsor to get Jim to wear their logo is going to be rewarded. Maybe we should have an event where everybody has to wear shorts, which given the warm weather might not be too much of a stretch.

Then there is ultra-snowshoe racer at all the Poles and marathoner on all the Continents, Brent Weigner. His story of teaching geography and actually 'touching' geography with his international running and snowshoe exploits is a natural to promote, and he tells a good story, too.



There must be countless other stories in our midst waiting to get out. Invite the press, make competitors available with their stories for interviews, create biographies, do the things necessary to create and support our 'characters.'

COMBINE RESULTS WITH A STORY

The mathematics of a finish is important and interesting, but that's not the story. The story is the heart and soul of the competition, what actually happened to create the results. Record times need recording and recognition, specific achievements 'back in the pack' need highlighting, story lines that create drama and entertainment should be developed.

We need to foster emerging talents and publicize them. We need to be including quotes from and information about participants. Before we can get media coverage, the sport has to give the world of publications something to cover.

WHAT ABOUT YOU, COMPETITOR?

Don't think for a moment that you cannot have an influence.

You can and do. The odds are high that within the snowshoe racing population the collective group knows many contacts that can be helpful in the sport. From sponsoring events to bringing recognition, you can talk about snowshoe racing and snowshoeing in general. There is a value package this sport brings to those who will invest their sponsorship dollars in this fashion. And the opportunity to be on the ground floor of an emerging popular sport! The sweet deals are cut at this stage of development; the sponsorship costs are considerably more as the sport matures. Organizers and Associations remember those who paid attention to their activity when they needed it the most.

Races in Europe can have 10,000 entrants. That day is coming here, and those marketers who recognize this demographic and participate in it as...title sponsors will be rewarded.

Where you, Mr. and Ms. Competitor, come in is making your contacts aware of the opportunity. Doesn't mean they will always 'get it and heap praise on you for showing the opportunity, but you will be doing a disservice by not giving the opportunity to participate in an event or sponsorship. And since many of our events raise funds for worthy causes, you are accomplishing a double win.

Who has contacts for the media, sponsorships or other constructive help? You do. Get involved. Contact the USSSA, your local snowshoe race organizers, Snowshoe Magazine or other winter sport publications. Let them know of your ideas.

And, for sure, contact Cindy Brochman and get involved in the 2007 event.





What resort or ski area have you contacted to suggest hosting a snowshoe event? I'm trying to introduce the sport to locales that never considered it. Unsuccessfully thus far, by the way, but so what? There's no reason not to make the attempt.

INDUSTRY INNOVATION

It's not that current offerings haven't become better, they have, in a big way, become much better. We're

seeing more experimental materials, shapes, and designs. It must continue, though. Runners probably thought the best shoes worn 20 years ago were eureka, never to be improved. Wrong! You pick up today's designs, and some are really out there. And they perform for the owner.

Drag Racers thought the max speed was reached decades ago at 200 MPH in the quarter mile. Top Fuelers now regularly expect to top 330 MPH in that same distance! They didn't do this by just pressing harder on the accelerator. They innovated.

There have been massive refinements in auto racing, innovation that still goes on race-to-race, 24/7/365. The snowshoe manufacturers and industry suppliers of all types of gear and supplements need to create better, more exotic products. Even whole new categories that haven't yet been considered. We've all seen this push to creativity in other sports, and we need to see it here, and bolster it with our buying. We need to support as consumers and racers these industry Research and Development efforts, experimenting with what can improve our personal performance and enjoyment of the sport.

Some ideas could include:

*Creating the best 'shoe' to fit in the snowshoe cradle, one that's light, warm, dry, gaiters and everything, stylish. A shoe every racer will kill to have.

*Designing jointly a snowshoe/running shoe combination where companies from both industries team up for a dynamite combo. (Kahtoola announced their revolutionary new 'Flight System,' which leads the industry in this category). This is exactly the kind of leading edge creativity our sport needs)

*Optimizing and promoting the next generation snowshoe that minimizes running drag while maximizing better hill cleating.

*Personalizing choices for 'my' snowshoe.

*Lighting the snowshoe with LED bulbs for safety in metro areas or just because the look might be dazzling.

SOLVING THE 'M.O.' PROBLEM

The ingredient missing for growth, the fuel, is the 'Money Obstacle,' or M.O. One can have a terrific idea for a business, but without capital it will sit there and wilt. Initial Public Offerings we accomplish at my firm raise capital for companies so they can grow lest someone else seizes the opportunity.



What are some ideas for the industry to overcome 'M.O.?'

Easier to say than do, that is granted, but:

- * An aggressive, forward thinking National Sponsor, given certain naming rights and title rights, could provide funding.

- *Ownership stakes in the governing body could be sold.

- *Participant fees, particularly for National Events, could be raised. USSSA dues, too.

No doubt there are many other ideas, but my experience is that the money is there for the right ideas presented with a value proposition for the funding provider. It requires effort and work on someone's part, but dollars are available.

Serious funding at the Association level will likely require an acting Board of Directors exhibiting business experience. Differing from the elections currently held these Directors will be there to oversee and provide guidance to the Association on business and growth strategy.

WHAT NEXT?

As the gangster says to Butch (Bruce Willis) in the movie classic 'Pulp Fiction,'

"What next? I'll tell you what next. There is no me and you . . . You've lost your (snowshoeing) privileges."

The Wonderful World of Snowshoeing has evolved a long way since the days of rural winter mail delivery with homemade snowshoes. We don't want to lose our 'privileges.'



It is exciting to see the sport evolve to this level, and it has only happened because of the effort and diligent work of the USSSA Administration, Borad, competitors, general membership and other snowshoe enthusiasts. All are realizing the physical fun and competitive advantages that the sport of snowshoeing provides.

One cannot forget the local organizers of snowshoe events and qualifying races throughout the country who have worked hard to put on events often with little financial support.

And what of the effort made by industry publishers such as 'Snowshoe Magazine' and Internet sites dedicated to our addicting sport. Can't you and I subscribe to the myriad of publications, supporting them, reading them, logging-on to web sites related to the sport, seeing what they have to offer today?

Recognize all of these with your talents (enter and race) and your interest (subscribe, upgrade equipment, try new things). These ideas are far from an exhaustive list. They are, however, some of the keys that can have Snowshoe Racing and the Sport in general be prime time excitement and on prime time media.

Just think, all the while you are there, participating, watching it happen, being 'in' on it, and having a lot of healthy fun and personal experiences at the same time.

Now that's living the Snowshoeing life in Prime Time.

Copyright© 2006. Phillip Gary Smith lives and snowshoes in Edina, Minnesota. In addition to his position with Feltl and Company, Phillip writes and is a public speaker. He has just published "ULTRA SUPERIOR," a book chronicling adventures in the Superior Trail Ultra Run held in the Superior National Forest, Minnesota. Many of the local crop of snowshoers have run in this race. Proceeds from the book go to the Superior Hiking Trail Association to build more trail. www.ultrasuperior.com

