Barefoot Nationals- A Big Hit in Waco

Contributed by Dave Tombers
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Barefoot waterskiing may trace its roots to a small lake in Winter Haven, Florida, but the folks in Waco, Texas have played no small role in helping the sport grow. This past weekend, barefooting was taken to new heights at the Barefoot Ski Ranch, just outside of Waco.

Back in 1947, theory met reality when 2 young men, A. G. Hancock and Dick Pope Jr. stepped onto the water behind a boat, without skis and propelled across the water with only their bare feet. Speed matters on the water, but surely they had no idea the kind of speed that would launch this, then “new” phenomena into an International sporting event.

Over the decades athletes continually took the sport to whole new levels- introducing barefoot jumping, surface turns, backwards barefooting, and so much more.

The first U. S. National Barefoot tournament was held in Waco in 1978, and it returned to Waco for the 2011 U. S. National tournament, August 10-13th. The venue may have changed from the banks of the Brazos River to the state of the art Barefoot Ski Ranch facility, but that good ol’ southern hospitality was what made the weekend special.

“I enjoyed watching everyone else enjoy the place,” said Stuart Parson’s, who is the founder of the Barefoot Ski Ranch, along with his wife Jennifer, and co-founder Aaron York.

Long time locals of the Waco area, and avid supporters of the sport, the Parsons had a vision to turn a 400-acre, overgrown hayfield into a barefooting paradise. Skiers and spectators alike would probably agree that the Parsons managed to turn that field into what can only be described as a one of the premier barefoot sites in the country, if not the world. “I wanted a skier to be able to look over at the shore and say, ‘wow, look at that deer,’” Parson’s said.

More than one man-made lake has been carved into the landscape, providing some of the best skiing around. The 3,500’ by 200’ main lake contains 35 million gallons of water. Texas has been dry for awhile though, so the Parsons will be digging a 3,000 foot well to help replenish the water lost to evaporation every day.

Surrounded by tall trees, the natural surroundings provide more than just protection for the water. The Barefoot Ski Ranch also provides protection to many varieties of wildlife in the hundreds of acres of paradise just outside of Waco. Visitors to the ski site were treated with sightings of elk and deer wandering down by the waterside on a regular basis. The preserve is home to over 150 Whitetail deer, 70 Black Buck Antelope, and 20 Axis (an exotic deer).

The water will barely have time to calm down from this years events though, as the Barefoot Ski Ranch has been selected not only as the site of the 2012 U. S. National tournament, but the 2012 World Barefoot tournament as well. Supporters in Waco will have their work cut out for them next summer, but they have prepared themselves well.

This years’ tournament not only broke world records, but gave dozens of athletes the chance to shatter their own personal and national records as well.

Elaine Heller may have set a new World Women’s Jump record by reaching a distance of 21.2 meters. World Champions David Small and Keith St. Onge continued to ski neck and neck toward bigger and better records. KSO beat Small’s trick record both at a tournament in May, and again this weekend (pending review).

Braving 100+ degree temperatures were over 100 skiers from around the country, and even some international barefooters making a much appreciated appearance at the U. S. Nationals.

Here are a few highlights:

Carol Jackson, skiing as a Woman’s 5 competitor, set 2 national records for scoring 5.9 points in wake crossings, and 910 points for her trick run. Sharon Carlson set 2 new records as well for the Woman’s 7 division. She broke the old slalom record of 2.25 points, by scoring a 2.5, and she also hit a new record in tricks of 705 points, beating the old record by 155 points.

Joe Knapp, skiing in the Men’s 5 division, broke a national slalom record by scoring an 11.8, only to have Jimmy Taurus beat that record a few minutes later by scoring a 12.0.

All in all, there were over 100 skiers competing for medals, records, and bragging rights. The complete list of results can be viewed here.

The 2011 Jump Jam also drew in over 1,000 residents from the surrounding area. Barefoot Jumpers thrilled the crowds late into the evening, but it was David Small that captured the $5,000 cash prize for the longest jump, reaching 26.4 meters. Landen Ehlers won the other $5,000 prize for the largest percent increase over his personal best jump, going from a 6.1 meter to an 11.3 meter jump, an 85.25% increase.

The water was near perfect, the site was remarkable, and Parson’s said, “It went about as good as it could go.”

Athletes attending the 2012 Nationals at the Barefoot Ski Ranch will be pleased with some of the changes Parsons has in store. “I’d like some waterfalls, and an elaborate entry, some green grass and some shrubs, for starters,” Parson’s remarked. No matter what gets accomplished in the next 12 months though, anyone who was fortunate enough to attend this years’ event would agree that the Barefoot Ski Ranch is a world class facility already.