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Rolling into cross-country ski season

By John Koziol Union Leader Correspondent
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Nathaniel Stepp of Sutton leads Sarah Glueck of Hanover to the finish at Sunday's Rollins Roll.

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WARNER — An accomplished cross-country ski racer, Art Copoulos traveled from Anchorage, Alaska, to finish near the bottom of the field in Sunday's third annual Rollins Roll rollerski race on Mt. Kearsarge.

And he loved it.

A Massachusetts native who recently came back to the East Coast, Copoulos is the director of a documentary — "Why We Cross Country Ski" — that asks and answers that question.

In his opinion, the question has three answers: to improve health and fitness, to bring families together and to experience happiness and joy.

Those reasons, as well as the chance to do some off-season training, are why the Lyme-based New England Nordic Ski Association (NENSA) holds rollerski races, including for the third year, the Rollins Roll that saw 47 competitors, ranging in age from 13 to 66, tackle the 3.5 mile long course that has an 8.7% average grade and rises 1,738 feet.

"I think I was last," joked Copoulos, "but I enjoyed it."

The Rollins Roll was founded after Kevin Lee, the head Nordic skiing coach at Kearsarge Regional High School for the past 18 years, called his friend, Justin Beckwith, competitive programs director and rollerski race series director at NENSA, to announce that in his backyard, in Rollins State Park on Mt. Kearsarge, "there's a cool road, we should have a race" on it.

That race, Beckwith told racers and supporters on Sunday after the competition, has grown into the Rollins Roll, which in 2023 saw 50% more rollerskiers than last year, some from as far away as New York and New Jersey.

Lee and Beckwith said several things fell into place to make the third Rollins Roll possible, the first most important being the decision by the NH Department of Natural & Cultural Resources to repave the auto road that goes to within a half-mile of the summit of Mt. Kearsarge.

The second thing was the kindness of Mother Nature, who was expected to blast much of New Hampshire on Sunday with powerful thunderstorms, that were nowhere in sight at race time.

Lee said he has long used rollerskiing as a training tool for his co-ed team at Kearsarge High School, adding that some of his skiers view races like the Rollins Roll as a personal challenge, while others deem it as a prelude to the competition they will see next winter.

Like cross-country skiing, in rollerskiing, “You get the sense of your body pushing up and gliding down a hill, of working hard,” said Lee. Rollerskiing shortens the time when cross-country skiing starts, he said, and it brings together a community of people who enjoy “adventures and the outdoors.”

Rollerskiing expands the season for cross-country skiers, he said, and offers a challenge for skiers of all ages, while also stoking the interest of what could be future U.S. Nordic ski team members.

The Rollins Roll is part and parcel of what NENSA is about, said Beckwith.

The nonprofit’s goal is to be “a vibrant cross-country skiing organization that inspires and empowers lifelong learning, development and community-building through the sport of cross-country skiing.”

NENSA, according to its website, is the “umbrella organization for Nordic skiing events in the region” and it strives to provide “the support structure necessary to bring cross-country skiers to their highest potential at regional, national and international events.”

Ellen Chandler, who chairs the NENSA board of directors, said the Rollins Roll was blessed to have fresh pavement.

“We call it black powder,” she joked. She said rollerski races help get more people interested in cross-country and “the more people in the sport, the more (American) champions we’ll have.”

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