

Making Tracks: the History of the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club

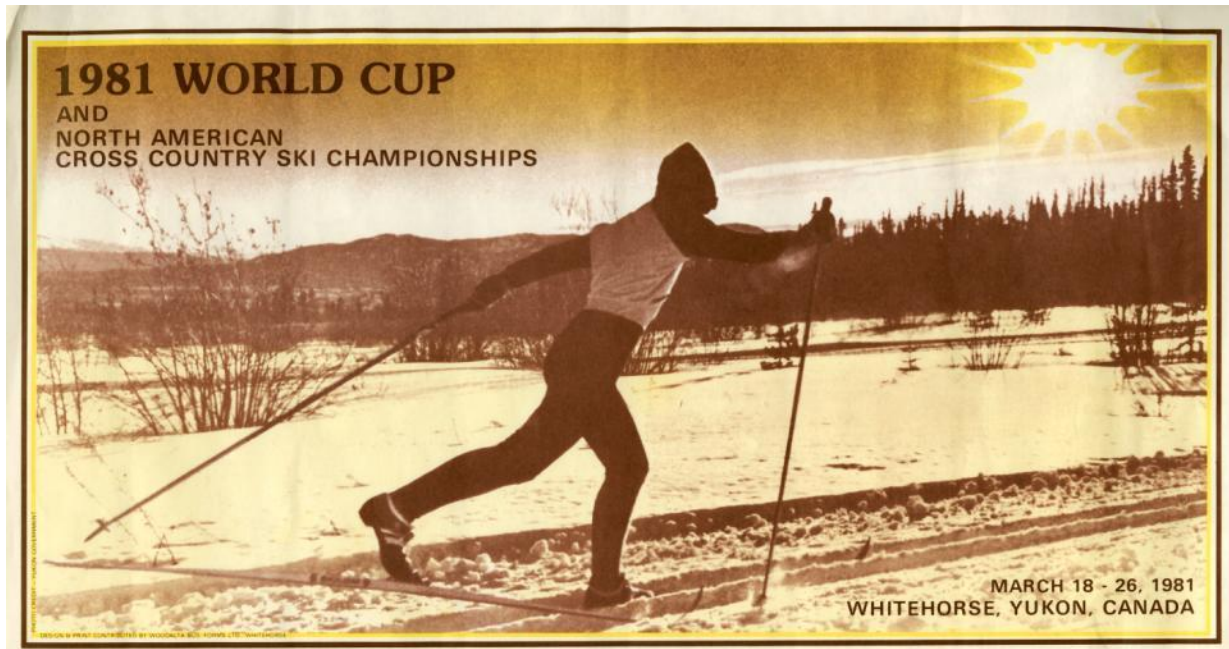
The World Cup and the Formation of the WCCSC

As the 1970s came to a close, there were major developments afoot in Whitehorse's cross country skiing community – some of which played out on an international stage. At the local level, there was a movement towards the development of a competitive cross country skiing program that expanded beyond school aged skiers to address adult skiers. At the international level, after having hosted the 1977 National Championships, Don Sumanik got the idea that Whitehorse should host a World Cup race. These two developments merged to see the fledgling club host the first World Cup race ever held in Canada.

The dream of the World Cup

When the snow settled after Whitehorse had hosted the Canadian Senior Shell Cup Championships in March 1977, Don Sumanik made the astute observation that the trails and facilities improved each time a competition was held in the city. His thought was to host another event in order to improve the facilities further. However, rather than set his sights on yet another national event, he believed the city could host an international event. Sumanik believed that Whitehorse could host both the North American Championships *and* the World Cup. Hosting the World Cup had been a dream of his. Given the many obstacles that he, and others who joined in the cause, would have to overcome, it initially appeared as though hosting a World Cup in Whitehorse would remain an unrealized dream.

After working with Ed Schiffkorn and Yukon Ski Division president Bill Reid to encourage improvements to the trail system in Whitehorse, Sumanik turned his attention towards the national and international sport governing bodies: the Canadian Ski Association (CSA) and the International Ski Federation (FIS). The application to hold the race in Whitehorse was endorsed by the CSA, while the FIS had reservations. They felt that the flight would be too long and the trip too expensive. The cooperation of CP Air helped allay the concerns of the FIS regarding the length and expense of the trip. This included discounts of almost fifty percent in the airfares in order to encourage spectators to make the journey. Following this, Bjorge Pettersen, the Canadian FIS delegate, recommended that Sumanik attend the Lake Placid Olympics in order to further allay their concerns. Sumanik also received the assistance of accountant Merv Miller in preparing the bid for the World Cup. Moreover, Sumanik managed to get Cyprus-Anvil Mining Corporation on board as a sponsor for the race. However, an additional challenge faced by Sumanik was the fact that he was putting in a bid for the much coveted World Cup finals.



Credit: Yukon Archives, 1981 World Cup and North American Cross Country Ski Championships: March 18-26, 1981, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, PAM 1981-0342.

All of this travel and effort paid off when Don Sumanik and Dan Lang, the Yukon's Minister of Tourism and Economic Development, had the pleasure of announcing on 17 June 1980 that the bid was successful. Now that Whitehorse had won the bid for the World Cup, the Whitehorse cross country skiing community had a great amount of work to do and a tight timeline to complete it in.

The Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club is Born

While the name Whitehorse was gaining recognition in international cross country skiing circles, there were developments on the ground that were leading to major changes to the face of skiing within the community. Through the late 1960s and 1970s, TEST had been responsible for many of the sport's developments within the community. This included the expansion of the trail network as well as the administration of various programs. However, as the sport grew many felt that TEST was not adequately meeting their needs. Since TEST was focused on recreational skiing, those who wished to compete did not fit within the program. Additionally, the TEST Program catered to younger skiers. Finally, there were some concerns that TEST was becoming too exclusive. Consequently the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club (WCCSC) was formed.

With this new emphasis on competition, the ski club needed racing coaches. Part of this need was met through the use of volunteers. However, the ski club also imported national level coaches from outside the Yukon. When one coach left – for whatever reason – another was brought in. This established the tradition of high level coaching in the territory, which continues

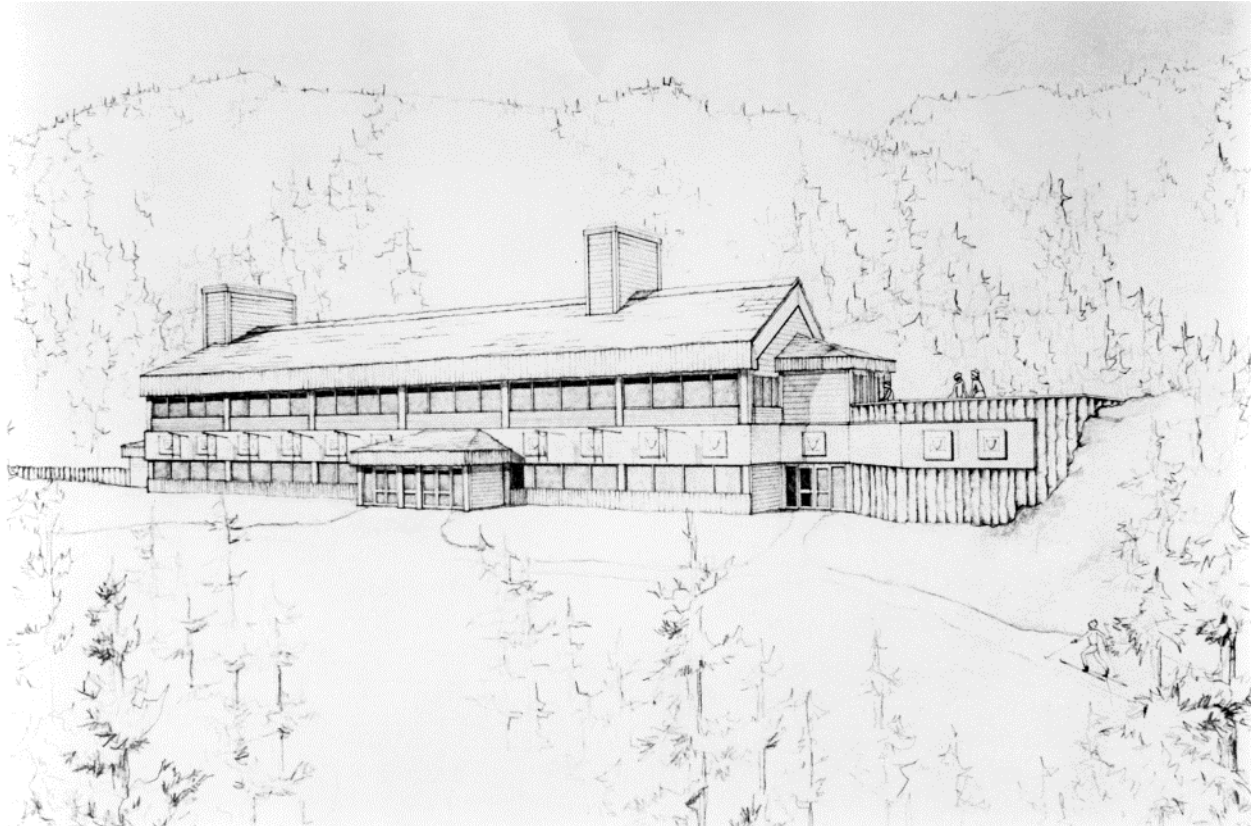
to this day (building, of course, on the legacy of Father Mouchet and the other TEST coaches). The first president of the new club was Dirk Templeman-Kluit.

Although the club was born out of the desire to see the emergence of a competitive ski program, the WCCSC sought to promote cross country skiing in all of its facets. As a result, both racing and touring divisions were developed.

The Chalet

The emergent ski club faced great challenges as it came into being. It was to host a World Cup in March of 1981 and needed to somehow construct a ski chalet by then. When it was announced that Whitehorse would be hosting the World Cup, it was also announced that the Yukon Government would contribute \$900,000 towards the construction of a new chalet while the ski club would contribute \$300,000. The government's share of the cost was provided for through the Canada-Yukon Tourism Agreement. TEST had agreed to take on a tourism role when applying for this grant. Beyond its use for the World Cup races, the government wished to expand the tourist season beyond the summer. Meanwhile, the ski club canvassed various companies in order to raise its share of the bill. A Project Committee was created, consisting of Hiram Beaubier – who served as Chairman – and Merv Miller. Additionally, the ski club appointed Al Heiland (Project Manager) and Peter Densmore (Construction Manager) to represent its interests.

The timeline to complete the chalet before the World Cup was tight and was exacerbated by numerous setbacks and issues that arose throughout the project. For instance, at a August 7, 1980 meeting of the Ski Chalet Project team, it was decided to terminate the employment of one architectural firm and hire architect Bob Witherspoon to complete the project. Additionally, as the project went forward the Yukon Government and the ski club came to realize that they had different ideas of what the final product should look like. While the government wanted the chalet to be a tourist attraction, the ski club has more local needs in mind. Members of the ski club expressed concerns as to whether there was a sufficient market of cross country skiing tourists to sustain the proposed chalet. Finally, while there had initially been plans for the ski chalet to house the squash courts, these plans fell through.



Credit: Yukon Archives, Yukon. Public Affairs, 90/51, #338.

The chalet was completed largely due to volunteer efforts. On 9 March 1981, the *Whitehorse Star* reported that over four hundred volunteers had contributed to the construction of the chalet in an effort to complete the structure prior to the World Cup races slated for 21 March. Nevertheless, the completion of the chalet came down to the wire. The chalet's carpeting was being laid one week prior to the races and club members such as Peter Steele were pounding nails in the banquet hall the night before the banquet that followed the World Cup.

Community Involvement

While Don Sumanik worked tirelessly in order to prepare for the World Cup, he reaped the benefit of a great amount of community involvement. Many people donated what they could to the cause, whether it was a shovel, a chainsaw, or money. Additionally, he received a great amount of assistance from a number of civil servants within the Yukon Government. While Sumanik was in surgery prior to the World Cup, the square dance club (which Sumanik was a caller for) came out to shovel snow onto the race course. Another notable contributor was Ed Schiffkorn, who took two months of holiday from work in order to work full time in preparing for the races.

The World Cup Arrives to Melting Snow

As volunteers hurried to ensure that the ski chalet would be completed by the time Whitehorse hosted the World Cup, forces beyond their control put the competition in jeopardy. Whitehorse was experiencing mild weather, leading to speculation that the race would either be cancelled or relocated elsewhere. In spite of the warm weather, the CP Air flights arrived with the competitors, media, and spectators and the stage was set for the first World Cup in Canada. At the opening ceremonies, MP Erik Nielson, Government Leader Chris Pearson, and Senator Paul Lucier arrived by dog sled which made its way through the mud.

The men's World Cup final race was won by Swede Thomas Wassberg, while the Soviet Union's Alexandre Zavalov finished seventh – good enough to win the overall World Cup. Meanwhile, Pierre Harvey posted what was then the best result from a Canadian skier in a World Cup, placing fifth. Two Yukon skiers, Ron Sumanik and Scott Fraser, were given the opportunity to race against the best skiers in the World. They finished 47th and 55th respectively.



Credit: Syd Horton.

Norwegian skier, Berit Aunil won the women's race, while Soviet skier Raisa Smetanina won the overall World Cup (without even showing up to the final race!). Meanwhile, Shirley and Sharon Firth finished sixth and seventh. Yukoners Tara Paulson, Monique Waterreus, and Michelle Schiffkorn finished 32nd, 35th, and 39th in the field.

Following the World Cup was the banquet. With the racing season over, a feeling of congeniality prevailed over the banquet as each team began making paper airplanes out of their napkins and threw them at other teams. For years afterwards paper airplanes were stuck in the rafters of the chalet! As a show of gratitude for his efforts in organizing and hosting the event, World Cup winner Zavialov gave a picture of himself to Sumanik.

Sober Reality

With the conclusion of the World Cup finals and the North American Championships, the Whitehorse cross country skiing community faced an uncertain future. There were now two clubs, the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club and the TEST Program, and an expensive ski chalet and extensive trail system to maintain. As a certain amount of animosity had grown out of the WCCSC's split from TEST, efforts were made over the following years to rebuild bridges. The two clubs also needed to determine a workable arrangement for the ownership and use of the infrastructure that had primarily been built up by TEST.

With the exception of the ski track by the Takhini School, the newly formed ski club inherited the trail system. Additionally, the club took ownership of the newly constructed chalet. However, as stated in a memorandum of agreement between the two organizations, "the Test skiers and coaches would continue to have liberal access to both the Mt. McIntyre and Water Resources trail systems for the purpose of training and racing. The parties hereto agree that this access is limited to the trail systems only and does not include access to either the Mt. McIntyre chalet or the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club Chalet." As the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club focused on competitive and adult skiing programs, TEST continued to work with the schools.