

WINTER IN

ASPEN & SNOWMASS

— 2023 —

FAST & EXTREME



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WINTERSKÖL
GUIDE

KIDS' PLAY

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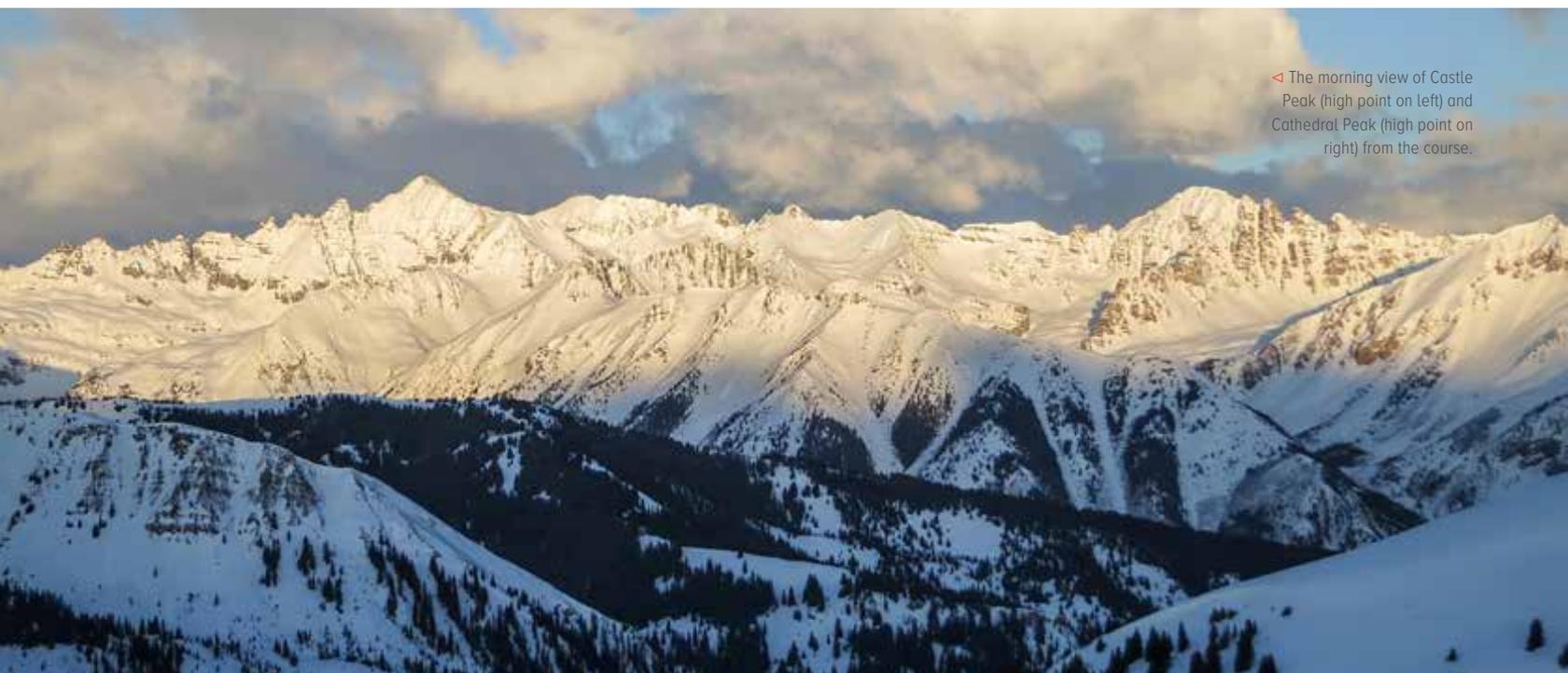
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FEEL YOUR BEST

GRAND TRAVERSE CELEBRATES ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY

The tradition, fundamentals and challenge remain the same,
but equipment has come a long way



◀ The morning view of Castle Peak (high point on left) and Cathedral Peak (high point on right) from the course.



by Ted Mahon

Minutes before midnight, as racers step into their skis, switch on their headlamps and make final tweaks to their equipment, the Reverend Tim Clark begins reading his Blessing of the Skis. “Hearken all ye conquistadors of cornice, corn-snow and couloir. Blessed be thy expedition into the dangers of night ...”

His carefully crafted words are offered as a pre-race prayer to participants about to depart Crested Butte on a monumental adventure known as the Grand Traverse.

As the prayer concludes, spectators cheer, and the race director counts the final seconds to the start. When the gun goes off, several hundred skiers start climbing the hill under the light of their headlamps and head off into the darkness.

Their destination is Aspen, some 40 miles away through remote valleys and over snowy passes in the mountainous backcountry between the two towns. If all goes well, the racers will ski across the finish line at the base of the gondola later that day.

On April 1, 2023, the Grand Traverse (GT) celebrates its silver anniversary. Now 25 years old, the ski race is arguably the longest-running and largest field of any backcountry ski race in the country.

Back in the late 1990s, a group of Crested Butte locals conceived the idea. Modeled after a similar town-to-town race through the Swiss Alps, they laid out a course through the Elk Mountains that loosely followed historic mining and mail routes that connected the two towns.



Due to the risks involved with backcountry skiing, participants needed a partner, racing in teams of two. Additionally, a midnight start was deemed necessary to get everyone through the hazardous avalanche areas before the heat of the daytime sun increased the risk. They also required teams to pack a lengthy list of emergency equipment in the event of gear failures or an unplanned night out on the course. Warm layers, a stove and fuel for water, a sleeping pad, shelter and repair and first aid kits were some of the mandatory items. Along with food and water for the effort, backpacks typically weighed around 20 pounds.

I still remember seeing the poster taped to the window at the Ute Mountaineer announcing the inaugural event. I was intrigued, so I skinned up Aspen on the morning the racers were scheduled to arrive, hoping to see some of them come by the Sundeck before continuing to the finish.

Before I reached the top, around 8:30 a.m., Pierre Wille and Travis Moore flew by as I skinned up Silver Bell. They were en route to the finish — and the win — making turns as best they could on their long, skinny, edgeless cross-country skis.

Twenty minutes later, the second team came through: two Crested Butte locals on lightweight telemark setups, including skis with metal edges.

As the day went on, teams continued to finish. I couldn't have been more impressed. So when organizers announced the race the following year, I rallied a partner and signed up, as I did countless times after that — 15 in all.

Now, 25 years later, the race is all grown up and is more popular than ever. And in a nod to the organizer's vision, not a lot has changed.

There have been minor tweaks to the course, and the field has expanded to around 200 teams. The race manual, once delivered in print by mail, is now a pdf, but its contents read much the same as they always did.

The most significant change in recent years is the ski gear.

The best option for racers in the early days was a cross-country ski setup. Alpine touring and telemark rigs were just too heavy, so racers opted for classic skis, skate skis or slightly sturdier backcountry models with partial metal edges. Nordic skiers sometimes used kick wax or klister, and others preferred skis with fish scales. Everyone used low-glide nylon skins — the only kind available — for the steep climbs.

The skis and the soft nordic boots, while light and comfortable, weren't designed for downhill skiing in variable conditions, as their performance regularly confirmed. Skiing down from the 12,500-foot Star Pass in the dark on a breakable crust or frozen sastrugi was challenging, if not terrifying, even for the most adept skiers.

Bindings broke, as did skis on some occasions. Descents weren't a time to rest and recover; they were exhausting and often ended in spectacular crashes.



▲ Preparing to ski from Star Pass.

◀ A team near Taylor Pass.

In the late 2000s, the super-light skimo (short for ski mountaineering) race gear arrived on the scene and changed the game. Plastic boots with carbon fiber cuffs are both lightweight and stiff and can steer the shorter, sturdier skimo race skis through all conditions. As a result, descents are more manageable and less tiring, and the field moves more efficiently than it once did.

Along with the improvement in ski technology, backpacks and race suits have evolved to be functional and allow easy access to everything you need. Skins are proprietary blends of mohair and nylon that grip well on the hills and glide like they're nonexistent when it's flat.

Anyone who has experienced the GT through both eras would likely agree that the new gear has changed the race — I'd say for the better.

But despite these improvements, the challenges that first defined the GT are still the same today. Advancements in ski gear matter little when the wind, weather and snow conditions don't cooperate, which is often the case. You're still on your own, exposed to the elements and engaged in an extraordinary physical effort. In any given year, you can still expect sub-zero temperatures and high winds that stir the snow into a ground blizzard.

Taking fluids and calories on the go in the cold darkness is always challenging. Hydration tubes still freeze and lead to a cascade of issues, from cramps to frostbite and mental fatigue.

The midnight start and lack of sleep always affect everyone's mental game. Snow conditions on a cold spring night might range from refrozen corn to breakable crust to slide-for-life hardpack. On a warmer night, slushy snow could result in wet skins, and failing snow bridges through Brush Creek might leave you with wet feet.

You can be seriously humbled out there, and no amount of carbon fiber, mohair or electrolytes will come to your rescue.

But that's also part of the attraction. And it might explain why, 25 years later, the GT is still a favorite event for so many. No matter the challenges, when you're out on the course, as the sky brightens, the sun slowly rises and your body warms, you realize that this moment of Type II fun is what a lot of us live for.

And when you finally see the finish line as you make your way down the Little Nell ski run on a sunny spring afternoon, the struggles disappear. All that remains is the satisfaction of tackling this inspiring annual event. ♦

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