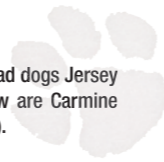


Elizabeth Rankin training with the team at Cotton Brook in Stowe. The dogs (front to back): Lead dogs Jersey (left) and Flash; running point are Eli (left) and Schnee (white); team position and third row are Carmine (hidden) and Munchkin (above Flash); in the wheel position are Dubs (hidden) and Ellie (white).



powered by paws

story & photos / kate carter

She didn't know it as a young girl, but Elizabeth Rankin, now 27, has been on track since childhood to have a career and a hobby that both involve *Canis lupus familiaris*. She's always possessed a natural ability with dogs, starting at the age of eight, when she taught her beagle to pull her on a bicycle. "I used a fishing pole to dangle a treat in front of him. Eventually he got the hang of it," she laughs.

Twenty years later, Elizabeth is Stowe's animal control officer, a position she has held since 2006. She's also a serious contender in New England's dogsled race circuit. Her calm manner, easy-going nature, and petite stature—she's just five feet tall—believe what you'd expect from an animal control officer or dogsled musher, but make no mistake

about it, Elizabeth is fit, strong, and competent. She works out at the gym, runs, cycles, and trains with her dogs. She also packs—on the job and on the sled. As an officer of the law, she's required to carry a handgun; as a musher, she carries a Remington 870 for protection when she's training on trails that go deep into the wilderness. "I see a lot of moose sign," Elizabeth explains. "If I ever have a moose encounter, I need something other than a ski pole for defense."

Elizabeth attended the University of Vermont where she majored in animal science and minored in agricultural and resource entrepreneurship. She earned a small-business degree with a focus on agribusiness. While at UVM she interned in an animal-science program. Her instructor was Ingrid Bower, a well-known dogsled musher in New England. "I learned about dog behavior, husbandry, whelping and raising puppies, worming, vaccinating, vetting, and keeping dogs and puppies healthy," Elizabeth says. She also got her first glimpse of what it's like to operate a dogsled team.





Between her junior and senior years, Elizabeth went to Alaska and worked for Alaska Heli-Mush, a touring company that kennels over 300 huskies and assorted mixed breeds on the West Branch of the Norris Glacier, an ice field outside Juneau. When she returned, she interned with Bower again. As with many mushers, Bower has A, B, and C teams. Elizabeth led the C team of five dogs, and she trained them as if they were her own, mushing with them all winter long.

After graduating, Elizabeth spent another summer in Alaska working for the same company, but this time she managed her own team of 22 dogs, while also helping with another large team. Between the teams and all the other dogs on the ice field she experienced total immersion into life as a musher. The outcome reinforced the desire to build her own dogsled team.

Elizabeth returned to Vermont in the fall of 2005 and worked various odd jobs, including one where she washed dogs in a pet boutique. Though her hands were clean and smelled like puppy perfume, her mind still focused on the more earthy business of how to cobble together a kennel of sled dogs. That's when she got Dubs, a pointer mix, and started training him to skijor. Then her boyfriend Lee gave her the perfect Christmas gift: Jersey, an Alaskan husky and one of the offspring of the team of 22 Elizabeth managed the previous summer.

Then came Flash, another Alaskan husky, and Schnee, a Siberian husky mix. By now, Elizabeth owned four potential sled dogs. "I skijored and ran them on other mushers' teams to give them experience pulling a sled side by side with other dogs," explains Elizabeth. "I'd borrow sleds and equipment, pile the dogs into my Ford Focus hatchback, and drive up to Eden Dogsledding, where I worked for Jim

Blair running dogsled tours. Sometimes I'd put my own dogs on a tour," Elizabeth says. "Then I got my own sled and did my first dogsled race. I was totally hooked!"

Initially, Elizabeth competed in 15- and 20-mile races, running a team of four. Last year she made the jump to 30-mile events. For that, she needs six dogs. Her kennel, called Ta Dog! Racing Huskies, now totals nine dogs and one worried cat that live with her and Lee at their house in Starksboro. All the working dogs live outdoors in kennels; the retired dogs get to hang out inside with the people. "I have a good relationship with my dogs, but it's more of a professional relationship, where we respect each other and do our jobs," Elizabeth says. "I also have a companion dog, and the relationship we have is much different," she adds.

The dogs range in weight from 40 to 55 pounds. At the beginning of winter they consume close to 3,000 calories a day. Once their bodies adjust, they become more efficient at pulling the sled and their fuel consumption tapers to about 1,500 calories a day. Elizabeth estimates she spends \$200 a month on dog food in the winter. She supplements that with road kill donated by people who know her dogs' nutritional needs. "Venison treats are very popular with the team," she says.

Last winter, Elizabeth and her team trained with the dedication of professional athletes. They logged over 750 miles on the snow, sometimes heading out a 3 a.m. to get their workout accomplished before the day began. Elizabeth's training grounds are snowmobile trails in Cotton Brook and Little River State Park, both of which are located in Mansfield State Forest in the Stowe-Waterbury area. By starting at one side, crossing over to the other and coming back, Elizabeth can put together a route of about 23 miles, which takes the team approxi-

mately two-and-a-half hours, depending on snow conditions.

The dogs stop training once the snow disappears. They swim, eat, and rest all summer long. In September, Elizabeth fires up their training regimen with bikejoring. "I start working with them one-on-one, while I ride a mountain bike. They are in a harness, pulling me along. It's a huge confidence builder for them," she says. "Sometimes I will run next to the dog while someone else is on the bike. It gets me in great shape, and it helps the dog get used to running next to something, while also getting comfortable with the equipment," she adds. Once the dogs are in shape, Elizabeth starts training them as a team, hitching them up to a 500-pound Foreman ATV and having them pull against the gears. By the time winter arrives, they are ready for the real deal.

While all this sounds incredibly time consuming, Elizabeth is still able to hold down a full-time job as an employee of the Town of Stowe. Part of the time she's the animal control officer, a position that requires more people skills than its moniker implies. She is also a part-time law-enforcement officer, serving as a village police officer, which mainly involves bike and/or foot patrol. Juggling full-time work and dogsledding is challenging, but Elizabeth finds that her vocation and avocation complement each other.

Last winter, Elizabeth placed well in all the sled-dog races she entered, including the Can-Am Crown in Fort Kent, Maine, where she raced the 30-mile distance and placed twelfth out of 31 teams, running six dogs in the five- to six-dog class. This winter, she plans to attend a handful of New England races, but her main objective is to do well in the Can-Am 30 again. "That was the best race, it was very well organized,

Previous page, clockwise from top left: Elizabeth rubs Paw Tech into Jersey's feet to prevent snow balls from forming between her toes. Elizabeth at her real job as animal control officer for the town of Stowe. Puppies in training: Henry (left) and Suzie are the newest members of TaDog! kennel. This page, clockwise from top left: Ellie checks in with Elizabeth before heading out for a run through Little River State Park. Elizabeth takes a break to straighten the harnesses on Eli and Flash. Elizabeth's rig is a pick-up with a giant box that fits over the truck bed. The box is divided into individual kennels, each holding one dog and big enough for the dog to stand up and turn around. This is Marl, who runs for another team.

Elizabeth blogs at tadogracinghuskies.blogspot.com

the town was great, and the trail was totally different than anything I have ever been on, with a lake crossing, tight tree trails, wide open snowmobile trails, and a tunnel to go through at the end!"

In a few years, Elizabeth hopes to compete in 60-mile races, and for that she will need extra dog power. So this August she got two puppies, Henry and Suzie. With all the training they will get from Elizabeth and the other dogs in the kennel, Henry and Suzie will surely become brilliant members of the team, performing the job they've been bred to do for hundreds of years.

If Elizabeth and her team stay healthy this winter, they have a very good shot at bringing home a trophy, which doesn't mean a thing to the dogs, but would be a great reminder for Elizabeth that her dedication and hard work culminated in a successful winter of racing. ■

McLeod on the Mountain



Two fused ankles never kept Jim McLeod from his lifelong love affair with skiing

by Melvin McLeod

When I go up the Mansfield quad with skiers of a certain generation, and I learn they are long-time Stowe regulars, I sometimes ask, “Did you know my late father, Jim McLeod?” “Oh, Jim. He was my hero,” those who knew him will often say. Or, “Jim was such an inspiration. If he could do it, I know I can overcome my obstacles too.” Let me tell you why Jim McLeod was not just a legend of the mountain, but a bit of a hero too. And why such a superb skier needed those strange, homemade boots of his own design that are now part of the collection at the Vermont Ski Museum in Stowe Village.

Born in 1926 in a small town in northern Quebec, my father learned to ski in the days when you climbed up and telemarked down. When the family moved to Montreal (to get my father away from a bad crowd, I’m told), he went to McGill University to study dentistry. He couldn’t afford the time or money to join the ski team, so he wrestled instead. But skiing was his lifelong passion. When he and my mother started a family, we became a skiing family. They strapped on my first pair of skis at 26 months.

In the 1950s we skied in the Laurentians, but at a dental convention Dad met Bob White, a longtime Stowe dentist, and he invited us to his house. It was the beginning of a love affair with Stowe that lasted almost 40 years.

We built our own house in Stowe in 1964. I mean that literally: my father built it himself, with help from family and friends. The house was in a new neighborhood called Sylvan

Park, then being developed by the late Herbie Sachs, and right next door to Dad’s close friend, Morty Pesner. From then on we spent every weekend and holiday on the mountain, often going up the chair before it officially opened on the so-called “milk run” that carried the day’s supplies up to the Octagon.

An outstanding all-around athlete, my father was, I would say, the best non-racer, non-instructor on the mountain. He had been the only North American recreational skier to win the elite skimeister pin in Lech am Arlberg, and he skied with the beautiful, centered Austrian style of the day. He was also an early powderhound, and we prefigured the adventure skiers of today as we roamed the woods in search of uncut powder.

But in 1966 tragedy struck in one of those shocking instants that changes lives forever. Commuting to our summer cottage in upstate New York, Dad’s car was hit head-on at highway speed. Only because of his superb physical conditioning did he survive, but both of his legs were shattered, one into 114 pieces. The orthopedic surgeon said he might never walk again.

My father refused to accept defeat: he was determined not only to walk again but to ski. Few believed he could.

The years of rehabilitation that followed were full of pain and tears, courage and hard work. While he was still using crutches to walk, he took up golf. At first, he would fall down at the end of every swing, then pick up his crutches and go on. He didn’t really like the game—for him, it was just rehabilitation—and he never touched a golf club again after he returned to skiing.

But all the will in the world couldn’t heal his damaged legs, and eventually he conceded that the pain in his shattered ankles was unbearable. The answer was to have both ankles fused—in effect, welded solid. Typically, he tried to convince the orthopedic surgeon to fuse the ankles at a forward pitch—better for skiing—but the surgeon, although a skier himself, refused. The ankles would be welded at 90 degrees, straight upright. But it turned out even worse—when Dad woke up from the operation, his ankles had somehow been fused at more than 90 degrees. He was actually pitched backward, even worse for both walking and skiing.

Jim McLeod skiing as a young man on Montreal’s Mont Royal.

On Montreal’s Mont Royal.

Rehabilitating after the accident that shattered both of his legs, one into 114 pieces.

On Mt. Mansfield, the mountain he loved, with his wife Pat Claxton.



At that point, there was no one in the world who skied on two fused ankles. That's not surprising, since skiing is a sport of shock absorption. And there was the problem of the angle—he had to figure out a way to pitch his weight forward. All this was complicated by the loss of flexibility in his knees from the months in casts, and the fact that one of his legs was now an inch and a half shorter than the other.

But my father was not only a determined man, he was a skilled one. He started to design a binding that would allow him to ski again. The first version was an old ski of my mother's, with a wooden wedge under an old bear-trap binding. The effect was to lift his heels about two inches off the ski, pitching him far enough forward to ski. With help from Stoweite Mert Nichols, later versions were made of aluminum, some of which he machined himself. Eventually, with help from Chris Mask, he designed ski boots that incorporated the necessary pitch. He took a pair of his custom-made leather walking boots, then fiberglassed them for stiffness and added a ski-boot sole.

Some people cried the first time my father went back to the mountain. A man who should not have survived the car accident, who should never have walked again, was making his first tentative turns down Little Spruce.

He had been a beautiful skier; he became one again. He skied everywhere on the mountain, under all conditions. He helicopter-skied in the Cariboods in British Columbia and took on couloirs in France. After my mother's death in 1980, he married Patricia Claxton of Montreal, herself an excellent skier, and for years they were fixtures of what the Mansfield staff liked to call the "10 by 10 club"—ten runs by ten a.m. Dad retained his elegant Austrian style, and when I returned to skiing after 30 years away from it, I was astonished that at his age, and after all he'd been through, he was still a beautiful skier to watch.

There is only one way for this story to end. I think you know what it is. My father was a smart skier, but skiing is an inherently dangerous sport. He hit a tree and cracked a vertebra in his neck. He was struck with the butt end of a ski pole, and lost most of the vision in one eye. Old damage from the car accident and the wear and tear of a lifetime of athletics required two knee replacements. Still, nothing stopped him.

When the revision of one of the knee replacements seemed to require a season off skis, he once again refused to accept defeat. With the help of Stowe instructor

Cynthia Needham, he experimented with one ski and outrigger poles. But that didn't satisfy him, and eventually he and his surgeon agreed that his knee was strong enough for him to ski again.

On March 29, 2008, he had a bad accident skiing at Smugglers' Notch. His left femur was shattered. He was 81 years old, and the surgery was complicated by problems from the car accident so many years earlier. He died after a little more than a month in hospital. The last real conversation I had with him was about the new pair of skis I had just bought.

Dad's memorial was a testament to the love and admiration so many people felt for him. Old ski friends spoke, longtime Stowe skiers like Mark Rosenthal, Morty Pesner, and Midge Tozowski. On a bitterly cold day the following January, family and friends gathered above the Nose Dive trail on Mansfield to scatter my father's ashes on the mountain, as he had requested.

Some people think it's impolite to say that he died doing what he loved. It's not. He loved his family, he loved skiing. Both were with him to the end. A less determined man—yes, a less stubborn man—would have died differently, and perhaps later. But he would not have been my father.

Melvin McLeod is editor-in-chief of Shambhala Sun magazine. A member of the Mt. Mansfield Junior Team in 1967-68, he recently returned to skiing after 30 years and loves it more than ever.

From an article in the *Montreal Star*, a closeup of the specially designed bindings and boots developed by Jim that first allowed him to ski with two fused ankles.

Jim tries out the modified equipment.

Shortly after Jim's return to skiing, in another photo taken for the full-page *Star* story.

Jim later constructed special boots, now in the collection of the Vermont Ski Museum, which allowed him to ski on conventional bindings.