

Plans afoot to restore historic 1932 bob run

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, July 11, 2003

LAKE PLACID — In 1929, Godfrey Dewey had a dream: to bring the Winter Olympics to Lake Placid.

To win the bid, though, Lake Placid would have to build from scratch a bobsled run — the first in the Western Hemisphere, where virtually nobody knew a thing about the sport.

Today, more than 70 years later, the abandoned channels and curves of the first half mile of Dewey's history-making bob run still snake down the slopes of Mount Van Hoevenberg, still discernible through the brush that's grown up in the course's track.

What would it be like if that bobsled run were cleared of brush so that visitors to Mount Van Hoevenberg could hike its channels and curves, experiencing it for themselves, with interpretive plaques along the way to help them understand what they were seeing?

That's the idea brought to the table earlier this year by Liz de Fazio, executive director of the 1932 and 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympic Museum, and Jonathan Becker, a member of the museum's board of directors. Along the way they gathered support from others interested in preserving the '32 bob run, including the U.S. Bobsled Federation, based in Lake Placid, and the Olympic Regional Development Authority, which operates the Verizon Sports Complex at Mount Van Hoevenberg.

'If you build it ...'

Godfrey Dewey himself deserves most of the credit for the success of Lake Placid's 1932 Winter Olympic bid, since Dewey traveled solo to Switzerland in March 1929 to press the village's case. The Lake Placid Club, founded by Dewey's father Melvil in 1895, had already helped establish the

village's reputation as a winter sports Mecca. Dewey knew that, besides the routine construction of an indoor arena and a speedskating track, all Lake Placid needed to host a Winter Olympiad was a bobsled course.

Before leaving on a steamer for Europe, Dewey was able to win a guarantee from then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt that the state would pay for a bob run's construction if Placid won the Olympic bid.

That left only two problems:

1) Nobody in North America had ever built a bobsled run before — indeed, only a handful of Americans had even ridden in a bobsled by 1929; those who had were expatriate Americans who trained and raced in Europe.

2) The best sites for such a project were on state land in the Adirondack Park, where construction was forbidden

by the famous "forever wild" clause in the state constitution.

Before leaving Europe Dewey solved his first problem by securing the services of famed German bob-run engineer Stanislaus Zentzytsky.

By the time Dewey returned to Lake Placid that summer, however, the second problem was far from being settled. Zentzytsky was asked to develop separate designs for bob runs at each of three potential sites: the Wilmington Notch and Scarface Mountain, both on state land, and Mount Jo, overlooking the newly rebuilt Adirondack Loj, both owned by Melvil Dewey's Lake Placid Club.

As an interim measure, Dewey and Zentzytsky designed a temporary practice run for the LPC's Intervales ski-jump site.

"This would at least enable workmen to become familiar with both construction and maintenance of the walls of snow and ice, and would give Americans a chance to practice the sport," wrote Chris Ortloff in his definitive history, "Lake Placid: The Olympic Years, 1932-1980."

The practice run at Intervales was a half mile long, compared with the Olympic's one-and-a-half miles, with just seven curves versus the 26 that would later be constructed. The



In September 1930 an Olympic official examines the high stonework on Shady Corner, one of the three hairpin curves on the 1932 Olympic bobsled run on Mount Van Hoevenberg.

Intervales course was finished in time for the winter of 1929-30, when the very first North American bobsled practice runs and competitions were held.

It wasn't until March 1930 that the courts finally ruled that the bob run could definitely not be built on state land. Rather than proceed with construction on Mount Jo, however, Dewey wrote Zentzytsky that he'd found another site owned by the Lake Placid Club that was far more suitable: South Meadows Mountain, which would later be renamed Mount Van Hoevenberg for the late, revered LPC engineer.

"On Aug. 4, (1930,) the workmen walked into the wilderness of Mount Van Hoevenberg," Ortloff wrote. "A remarkable 148 days later, there stood a completed bobsled run."

The full length of that original course, which ran for a mile and a half down Mount Van Ho, was in steady use from the winter of 1930-31 until 1939, according to reliable sources. That summer the upper half-mile of the course was shut down for safety reasons, never to be opened for bobsleds again.

The reason: While even a few of the older, lighter sleds (average speed: 46 mph) had shot off the mile-and-a-half course, none of the newer, heavier sleds could handle the long track safely.

While the latest bobsled run on Mount Van Hoevenberg, completed just 3 years ago, follows the course of the old track, with the start house located where the treacherous Whiteface Curve used to be, only a DEC hiking path (No.

1932 bob run facts

- Bobsled racing, even in Europe, is a relatively new sport. The first artificial bobsled run was built in 1904 in St. Moritz, Switzerland.
- The Mount Van Hoevenberg bob run was the only such course in the Western Hemisphere until a second run was built in Squaw Valley, Calif., for the 1960 Winter Olympics.
- The original MVH bob run was 2,350 meters (about 1-1/2 miles) long, with an average drop of about 10 percent. The run was shortened in 1939 to 1 mile because greater speeds by heavier sleds had made the longer run unsafe.
- In 1930 engineers moved 27,374 cubic yards of earth and stone to build the original MVH run, which was literally dug and blasted out of rock and forest.
- On the straightaways the run is 2 meters (6-1/2 feet) wide, while on the curves the width varies from 10 to 22 feet.
- Some of the curves are 22 feet high, their towering banks of stone running up almost at right angles to the bottom. Of those from the original track, the only such curve that still survives is the No. 2.
- The original MVH bob run contained 26 curves. Most altered the straightaway only slightly, but the course had three hairpin curves (the old No. 2, Whiteface and Shady) and the famous S-shaped Zig-Zag curve.
- To re-ice the run at the end of each day, 8,000 feet of pipe were run four feet underground from a huge reservoir at the foot of Mount Van Hoevenberg to the top of the run. About 20,000 gallons of water were needed every 24 hours while the run was in use.
- In 1931 the Saranac Lake Red Devils held the world bobsled record with a 52-second run down the 1-1/2-mile MVH track. That team's average speed was 46 mph. Today the passenger bobsleds run by ORDA down the MVH track regularly exceed 70 mph.

79 in the latest ADK guide to High Peaks trails) now follows the old top half-mile. The trail runs parallel to and about 20 feet uphill from the overgrown contours of the abandoned Olympic relic.

Reviving the '32 run

"I've been thinking about restoring that run for years, ever since I first read about the (bobsled) track and its condition in the Ortloff book," said Jonathan Becker, a member of the Lake Placid Winter Olympic Museum board of



At left, the starting platform of the 1932 bobsled run, completed in the fall of 1930. At right, the remains of a stone containment wall along one of the upper stretches of the 1932 course, near the starting platform.

directors from Guilford, Conn.

“Last year I asked Steve Vassar to take me up there,” Becker said. Vassar, a former amateur bobsledder, is an administrative assistant at the Olympic Museum. “He knows that thing like the back of his hand.

“It’s basically intact. All we need to do to bring it out again is to clear the brush out, dig out the moss and soil from the stoneworks (on the curves), and anyone can see it.

Becker and Liz DeFazio, Olympic Museum executive director, agreed that “it’s a natural for the Winter Olympic Museum to be involved in this,” Becker said.

The first half-mile of the original bob run “was so historical that we needed to start preservation on it as soon as possible,” DeFazio said.

The two organized a first meeting of museum, ORDA and Bobsled Federation officials with community leaders early this year to generate ideas.

“Right now, we envision it (the restored bobsled run) as a hiking and walking experience,” DeFazio explained.

From the start house at the top of the new bobsled run, an existing trail to the starting point of the 1932 track would be cleared and improved. Then the channel itself would be cleared of vegetation, opening up that even, half-barrel-shaped course as a walking path. Interpretive markers along the way would explain the history and engineering of the run, helping visitors better appreciate what they were seeing.

There has been talk of possibly relocating two of the warm-up buildings constructed for the 1932 Olympics back to their original sites, if the logistics can be arranged. One of the small buildings is now the post office at the Cascade Acres trailer park, in Lake Placid; the other is being used for storage in the ORDA maintenance yard at the foot of Mount Van Hoevenberg.

Ultimately, the half-mile curated historic walk down the old, abandoned portion of the run would be extended, said DeFazio, to a path running the length of the modern bobsled run.

“But for right now, we’re focusing on the most immediate need: the original

half-mile,” she said.

At a May 29 meeting of the group discussing the old bob run’s possible restoration, Tony Carlino described in greater detail the work that will have to be done to open the abandoned course to heritage hikers — as the manager at ORDA’s Mount Van Hoevenberg facility, Carlino should know.

“It (the course) is not considered an archaeological resource, so there are no restrictions on that count,” Carlino said. “The track was allowed to be reforested (after its abandonment), and 100 or more trees have grown up in its path. With the vegetation there now, I figure it will take six people 10 days to clear. It will be quite a volunteer project.”

Carlino reminded the group that the project would require several layers of approval before even the simplest work could be started.

“After it goes to Ted (Blazer, ORDA CEO), it’ll have to go to the DEC (the state Department of Environmental Conservation) and maybe the APA (the Adirondack Park Agency, which serves as a regional zoning agency),” Carlino said.

“If we can’t get the DEC permit, can just clearing the brush (from the exist-

ing start house to the beginning of the old run) do something?” Becker asked at the May meeting.

“Well, it’s been 80 years,” Carlino replied.

Sandy Caligiore, ORDA spokesman, elaborated Monday on Carlino’s cautions.

“There are a variety of necessary measures that have to be taken before anything can be done, starting with approval to clear the access path and the run itself,” Caligiore said, “and there’s a good bit of money that will have to be raised to pay for the work, too.

“No timetable has been set for the project, though we’re thinking in terms of the next couple of years.”

Given the necessary funds and official clearances, however, Caligiore expressed enthusiasm for the project.

“Our long-range intention is to make the entire 1932 track accessible. We want people to know what happened there, and we want them to be able to appreciate its significance.”

According to DeFazio, the group exploring the ’32 bob run’s restoration plans to hold a combination educational meeting and fund-raiser early this fall.



This former warm-up building for the 1932 bobsled run now serves as a post office for the Cascade Acres trailer park in Lake Placid. It was moved from its original site.