



# *Skiing Behind a Galloping Horse in Retro Neon—Is this the Most Outrageous Race in Winter Sports?*

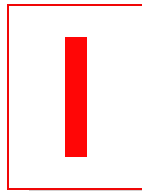
| YEEHAW |



**Canadian cowboys and thrill seekers have added a colorful and outlandish twist to a traditional Nordic winter sport and turned it into one of the region's must-see events.**

Carol Patterson

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n the foothills of western Canada where Stetsons, horses, and cowboys are common, winter sun is not. But perhaps these cowboys have the cheesiest way of beating mid-winter blues. I set out to see if Skijordue, a one-day event combining Nordic tradition of skijoring, afraid-of-nothing cowboys, and cheese fondue in the foothills southwest of Calgary, could make winter fun.

At the Anchor D Ranch in a roomy log cabin I studied the glass eyes of bull elk and several deer staring down from the walls. I was unplugged—no TV, Wi-Fi, or cell service—and unsettled. Snowy silence wrapped around me. Out the front door 113 horses and real cowboys roamed, out the back grizzlies and cougar wandered Alberta's Kananaskis Country.

I could see how cabin walls could close in on you come February. Southern Alberta horse trainer Sam Mitchell thought a race day combining skijoring (a horse pulling a skier), western and Eurotrash fashion for both competitors and spectators, and Swiss fondue would be the perfect antidote to cabin fever.



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She threw the first Skijordue in 2016 as a private get-together but so many people crashed the party, they took the event public the next year. Every year since, attendance has doubled. This year's event was moved to the Millarville Racetrack to hold 150 competing teams and 4,000 spectators. One team—with leprechaun-green snowsuits—came all the way from Ireland to compete.

My evening entertainment was sorting through fake fur and down-filled items I'd found for Skijordue's fashion contest.





“The first stop when you come to town should be a thrift store to pick up clothes that are Skijordue-style—where old west meets new retro,” competitor Claire Perks had warned me a week earlier.

The morning of Skijordue dawned clear with temps slightly below freezing. Driving the rural roads I saw pump jacks sprinkled among stubble fields and cattle herds. This was where Canada’s oil and gas industry started. A small cairn beside one road described the early oil and gas town of Little Chicago where natural gas was so plentiful it heated homes and outhouses (although lighting a cigarette could blow you through the biffy wall). Little Chicago is long gone but small towns remaining in this area—Black Diamond, Turner Valley, High River, Longview—are still influenced by oil and gas fortunes.

I stopped at Black Diamond’s Westwood restaurant, next to a neatly-coiffed gent in a Stetson sat a guy who looked like a ZZ Top cover band member. Owner Erin Kendrick was icing 300 doughnuts made the night before and sold only Saturday mornings.

I chowed down on fried eggs and arugula as Kendrick explained how she’d moved here from Australia with her husband, bemusing local ranchers with her desire to add greens to the menu. “It’s an Australia thing!” She quipped. Not put off the culinary shake-up, people were lined up out the door for doughnuts by the time I paid for my chocolate glaze and headed to Skijordue.

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A long line of cars snaked towards the racetrack where volunteers in baseball caps, orange safety vests, and down jackets directed cars into neat rows.

Until this year Skijordue had been held at the polo club across the road. It seemed odd there were polo grounds in the midst of ranch country but this was once home to “remittance men”.

Back in the day when Canada was young and British ties were strong, second and third sons of the English aristocracy were sent here with money (remittances) and the proviso they didn’t embarrass the family back home (hello Prince Harry). Prior to his abdication Edward VIII bought a ranch in the area and visited a few times before selling. I had searched for the E. P. (for Edward Prince) Ranch a day earlier but came up empty.

Now I scrambled over a surprisingly dainty, wooden racetrack fence and headed to a frozen metal bleacher.

An all-male choir gathered in the infield while horses trotted past the stands, their riders displaying impressive amounts of sheepskin, fringe, and fake fur. The announcer called out license plates, asking people obstructing the race to move. Start time came and went. The crowd got as restless as ancient Romans at the Coliseum.

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“If you don’t move your car now, we’ll move it for you” bellowed the announcer. “What do you say, people? Shall we use the tractor to move the car so we can get this event going?” The roar from the crowd suggested these sunshine-deprived horse lovers were ready, and



somewhere off-stage a car got a new parking spot.

At Skijordue there are five events including a lounge race where horses pull competitors sitting on a couch. The first four require more athletic skill. “I’ve set up four events that should be won by four different horses (because they favor different abilities),” explained Mitchell.



First up was an obstacle course where a horse and rider pulled a skier across the snow and over jumps named with cowboy irreverence. The camelback had several skiers on theirs. On the Great Wall of China the skier had to hit a chuck-wagon bell before heading down coronavirus hill and over the biggest jump.

A stocky sorrel wearing a pink bra and pulling a skier with a flesh-coloured bodysuit grabbed one of three rings on the course as the disc jockey pumped out Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” extolling you to put a ring on it. As another skier fell on the course the music switched to the Bee Gee’s “Stayin’ Alive.”

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The course had been groomed earlier to remove ice and provide good footing for horses wearing special shoes. Former professional hockey player Sheldon Kennedy, once a Detroit Red Wings' right winger, was now the right rider for his daughter, Ryan, and told me although he wasn't likely to win, "I've already won. I'm 50 and I'm doing this! If you're not prepared when the horse takes off, they'll pull you right out of your boots!" (Event organizers declined to say if or how many people have ever been injured.)

Skijoring originated with Sami people in the Scandinavian Arctic where someone on skis would be pulled behind a reindeer and while there are other skijor events in the world, Skijor Canada's events are the only cowboy-style competitions where multiple horses ridden by people run at the same time.

As the second event—a relay—got underway, I watched four riders struggle to hold their horses at the start line as four skiers lined up behind them. At the horn a flurry of snow, leopard prints, and spandex surged towards the infield; skiers crouched behind the horses in a position optimistically called safe. Reaching four hay bales, the first four skiers bailed and four new skiers grabbed the rope while the riders turned the horses and sprinted for home.

Winners dashed past cheering spectators holding beer brewed just for the occasion; other horses ran for home with an empty rope trailing behind them, the skier lost in the melee.





The adrenalin rolling off the course had me wishing I'd packed a flask of whiskey from the local distillery. David Farran, a fourth-generation farmer and founder of Eau Claire Distillery, had told me how locals had defied 20th century prohibition by hiding stills on his family's land. Now he harvests barley using horse teams and produces award-winning whiskey. Judging by the give-him-hell attitude of competitors it seemed a rebellious streak continued to run through community events.

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As the third event—a sprint—started, a lanky cowboy threw a rope to a blue-helmeted snowboarder and wrapped—or dallied—the other end around his saddle horn unlike U.S. events where the ropes are attached to a ring on the saddle. Riders can release the rope quickly but tying and untying it at a gallop takes extra skill.

As the sun softened the snow, another four horses thundered by. Cowboy hats flew off but smiles never did.

For spectators and competitors, blowing off steam with a blend of horses, athleticism, and cheesy fashion was the perfect introduction to spring.

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| LIE VS. LIE |

For the first time ever, Team Trump, so adept at lying, is confused about which lie to tell.

**Molly Jong-Fast**

Editor-At-Large

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Team Trump has finally found itself in a crisis it cannot propagandize its way out of. Unfortunately, this has not led Team Trump (the administration and its various Fox News-based media arms) to pivot to the brash notion of telling the truth. No, of course not.

For the first time ever, though, Team Trump is very confused about which lie to tell. Historically, the Trump administration and Fox News have been meticulous messengers, able to turn almost everything into a way to “own the libs.” But COVID-19 is providing Trump very few opportunities for lib ownership.

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