

Local Sports

Loppet ready for take off

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Banff Crag & Canyon

When 160 cross-country skiers gather in Lake Louise on Jan. 23 and take off towards Banff, they'll be taking part in one of the Bow Valley's oldest sporting traditions. The Lake Louise to Banff Loppet & Relay has been held on-and-off annually since 1929 and offers Nordic skiers in the Bow Valley the chance to ski areas that are not normally open to the public.

"These are citizen level skiers," said Jo Lunn, chief organizer for the loppet. "We've had some former national team members in the past, but it's really a community event and an opportunity to ski parts of the Bow Valley that aren't usually track set in the winter."

Lunn said that "loppet" is a Scandinavian word for a long Nordic ski race, and the Lake Louise to Banff event certainly fits the definition. The race starts at the Chateau Lake Louise and winds through 72 kilometres of rarely skied terrain before finishing at the Central Park gazebo in Banff.

This year's race has already reached its racer capacity, with 160 skiers registered. Participants can either enter to race solo or in a team of between two to six members. This year there will be 40 individual skiers and around 20 teams.

The race consists of six stages, the shortest being 6.5 km and the longest being 21 km.

Lunn said that recent weather in the Bow Valley has helped create ideal racing conditions, although organizers will be monitoring temperatures to see whether the snow-pack holds up.

Most of the skiers racing in the event come from the Bow Valley, but Lunn said the race also attracts skiers from across Western Canada and encouraged spectators to come out and show their support.

"Probably the easiest spot is right in Banff along the river by the skating oval," he said. "There are various checkpoints along the way too, but most people will watch along the finish line."

The first documented rendition of the loppet took place in 1929, and while there have been years where it hasn't taken place, it's run mostly continuously since 1979.

"It's been going virtually every year," Lunn said. "There were many years where it didn't occur, but it's certainly occurred most years for the last fifteen years or so."

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