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Snow marathon: A guide to the cross-country skiing event of the year

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Handout

The Canadian Ski Marathon, held from Feb. 13 to 14 in Quebec, offers many opportunities for skiers at different skill levels to take part, from almost-professionals to newbies.

Need a training goal this winter? How about kicking up some snow at the Canadian Ski Marathon, Feb. 13 to 14? It's billed as the longest cross-country ski tour in the world. The 160-kilometre distance between Lachute and Buckingham in Quebec takes two days to complete, with an overnight at Montebello.

The marathon is split into 10 sections, the shortest of which is 12 km, so if you can ski, there's a distance out there for you. And just in case you're worried that the field is full of young things squeezed into Lycra, you'll be happy to note that the youngest competitor ever to finish the full 160 kilometres was 10 and the oldest, 72.

With such a wide-open field, there's lots of opportunity for Joe-averages to test their mettle. In fact, skiers come from all over to earn bragging rights. More than 2,000 skiers gather at the starting line, with competitors from as far away as the Yukon, B.C.

Alberta, P.E.I., Maine and Minnesota in the running. The trail is groomed for classic skiing (not skating) and is cut especially for the marathon.

Pointe Claire, Que. native Chris Blanchard has skied the course since childhood. His first experience was at the age of six. By 10, he skied the full 160 km. At 22, he was on Canada's Nordic ski team and in 1998, competed in the Nagano Winter Olympics. These days, he skis for fun and offers training tips for newbies interested in tackling the marathon.

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"It's a great race for cyclists and runners looking for something to do in the winter," Blanchard said.

He says endurance athletes are naturals for the race, as long as they are comfortable on skis and do some preliminary training. The shorter distances don't demand the same level of fitness, but skiing experience is recommended. The majority of those registered ski somewhere short of the full 160 km. Buses are at the ready to pick up skiers at several points along the course, so it is perfectly OK call it a day earlier or later than planned. And for those who want a little pampering at the end of the day, the Chateau Montebello and several local bed-and-breakfasts have special overnight packages that include a pre- and post-ski meal.

While the majority of skiers crawl into a warm bed overnight, a select group of die-hards camp out under the stars. Known as the gold coureur de bois class, these dedicated skiers carry their camping gear and food in a backpack and ski the full 160 km, which translates into about 10 hours of skiing a day.

Whether you're going the full distance or somewhere in between, now is the time to start training. With snow on the ground and the holidays around the corner, it's a wonderful opportunity to pull out the skis and put in some hours on the snow. Blanchard says a good training program also includes time in the gym. He recognizes that most skiers can't make it out to the local trails during the week, which means that a treadmill, elliptical or bike workout will have to suffice when it comes to cardio. As for muscular conditioning, Blanchard recommends skiers focus on their core and upper body, as both these areas are traditionally weak in recreational skiers.

"If you can get to the gym a couple of times a week, that's great," said Blanchard.

Come the weekend, it's time to pull on the skis. Depending on the planned distance, skiers need to get in one good day per week on their skis. As the marathon date approaches, skiers will need to put in some back-to-back (Saturday and Sunday) ski workouts in preparation for the real thing, when you'll be getting back on your skis roughly 12 hours after the end of Day 1.

Lots of slow, easy kilometres are what you need to get ready for the event. While you're out there, you should experiment with finding the right clothes and snacks for race day. Blanchard suggests skiers get used to wearing a fanny pack that includes a change of shirt, hat, socks and a warmer or lighter pair of mitts.

As for eating during the race, each section has an aid station that includes soup, bagels, oranges and chocolate-covered raisins, so snack on similar foods during your training to see how your stomach responds to eating while on the go.

Once you've mastered the clothing, fitness and fuelling strategy necessary to go the distance, you're ready to take on the weather -- the only real wild card in a race known for its attention to organizational detail. But it wouldn't be such a uniquely Canadian event if weather weren't a factor, so forget about whether the sun will shine or the temperature will hit a new low. Working toward a goal will make the winter months fly by. So pull the skis out of the shed and hit the trails.

• For more information about the Canadian Ski Marathon, visit csm-mcs.com, or call 877-770-6556 or 819-770-6556.

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