

sledding

As a public service before we get to the meat of the column, I must present the following sledding safety tips:

First, it is not advisable to attach a four-man toboggan to a 1969 International Harvester Scout by means of a rope and/or chain and then go careening down snow-covered country roads or fields. Such behavior can lead to the chilling phenomena of snow forced into your pants and the inhalation of noxious exhaust from the aforementioned Scout. When my grandfather did this for me, it earned him a serious scolding from my grandmother.

Second, we caution against finding the steepest, rockiest (albeit thrilling) run at the local sledding outcropping and plunging down it on a sheet of thin, brightly colored plastic. Such behavior, as one of my junior high acquaintances would attest, can lead to a broken arm and collarbone.

With these public-service announcements out of the way, I'd like to talk about the obvious benefits of sledding. After all, sledding remains the giddiest activity of wintertime outdoor leisure. It takes little skill, a splash of nerve, warm clothes and the resolve to march yourself back up the hill for another round.

First, a little history on the sport. As far back as the ninth century, the Vikings used rudimentary sleds to haul the bounteous booty they pillaged back to their bases. Native Americans also used sleds,

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PHOTODISC

but preferred a canoe-like structure atop of runners. In modern times, sledding history was made in 1883 as 21 contestants from six countries raced four kilometers in Austria. A student and a mailman tied for the contest. And who can forget when four blokes from Jamaica flipped their bobsled in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics?

The activity, though, normally doesn't require helmets, athleticism or some secret knowledge. Sledding materials are, for the most part, affordable. You'll need snow, of course, which tends to be free, especially up north. You'll need a big hill, also usually free. You'll need a sled, though an inner-tube, a giant piece of cardboard or cheap sheets of plastic will all suffice.

Those wanting finery in their sledding activities may want to opt, though, for the classic American Eagle Wooden Sled, which, ironically, is made in Canada. This old-school machine will rip you down the hill in no time and is somewhat steerable with either arms or feet as its red runners glide through the snow.

Adventurers and X-tremers may want to check out the Euro Sled Champion, a bullet of a sled that appears to have been designed by some Scandinavians in search of real danger. Those more family-oriented may want to choose a low-key, but surprisingly fast toboggan instead.

Once on the sled, nostalgia isn't far behind. The memories of spills and thrills past will rush over you as you speed down the hill. As the day progresses, that trek back to the top will seem longer and longer and longer and longer. Always keep in mind, however, that you have a secret weapon in your arsenal that you never had as a kid.

You can add a nip or three of Bailey's to the hot chocolate when you're done.

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