

SPORTS BARREL

Grand Traverse reaches 10-year mark this weekend

First nine years carry magic of epic race

by Than Acuff



photo by Alex Fenton



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Eleven years ago an idea was born that has now become an obsession for some and a rite of passage for others—the Elk Mountains Grand Traverse. Jan Runge, Elhan Hicks, Mike Martin and Cutler Ferchau pulled together an idea to create a backcountry ski race that would join two classic ski towns together, Crested Butte and Aspen.

In 1998 that idea came to fruition with the first annual Elk Mountains Grand Traverse, taking teams of two on skis on a 40-mile trek from the edge of Crested Butte, up the Brush Creek Valley, past the Friend's Hut, over Star and Taylor Pass and along Richmond Ridge before descending to the

finish at the base of Aspen Ski Area.

Fifty teams entered and 41 finished the first race, with Pierre Wille and Travis Moore from Aspen winning the men's race, and an Aspen/Crested Butte team of Deb Curtis and Ginny Bullock winning the women's. Ted Anderson and Deborah Hutchinson won the coed division.

"Drop in and stay high."

—Buck Myall

That first year set the standard for equipment from then on for the Grand Traverse. Both Moore and Wille chose to go lightweight with Nordic-specific gear, as oth-

ers opted for a slightly more secure gear choice, such as three-pin bindings and leather boots.

"We got totally schooled," admits Crested Butte resident Jimmy Faust, who took third place with partner and resident Pat O'Neill in the first race. "Their [Pierre and Travis] victory that year pretty much set the stage for gear for the rest of us."

The second year the high country was buried in a massive snowstorm, forcing race officials to reroute the course at the last minute, taking skiers up to the Friends Hut and then back down, nicknaming the race the Grand Reverse.

Traffic on the climb to the Friend's Hut was dicey to say the least as the lead pack was already bombing back down when the back of the pack was still struggling up to the turnaround point.

Local team Jimmy Faust and Pat O'Neill took the men's title, Crested Butte women Ginny Bullock and Niki Schroer won the women's race and Sara Ballentyne and William Mattison won the coed division.

The third year the race was close to being stymied once more as weather rolled in the week prior, but snow safety directors Buck Myall and Dan Ewert made a clutch call.

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