

What's It Like

A REALLY FAST TRACK

All in a day's luge; 25 mph and more, without breaks

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, February 26, 2006

This is the second in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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NORTH MUSKEGON, Mich. - Jerry Seinfeld once called lugging "just a human being hanging on for their life."

He did a whole bit on the Olympic sport, going so far as to suggest grabbing random people off the street, putting a helmet on them, and tossing them down the track.

"World record. Didn't even wanna do it," he joked. "I wanna see that event next year, the involuntary luge."

That's kind of what they do at the Muskegon Winter Sports Complex, one of three places in the United States with an Olympic-style luge track, officials there said. (The others are in Park City, Utah, and Lake Placid, N.Y.)

They don't grab people and force them to luge, but they do make it possible for just about anyone off the street to give the sport a try - no experience necessary.

Which is how I recently found myself flying down an icy track on my back, nothing between me and the walls but my elbow - ouch! - and my shoulders - d'oh! - and how do you stop this thing again?

I came to this wintry outpost of the edge of Lake Michigan, about 3 1/2 hours northwest of Toledo, for one of the regular clinics they offer on weekends when it's cold enough (which hasn't been very often this winter). I shared the track with about 15 first-time sliders, most of the kids ranging in age from 11 to 16 from Boy Scout Troop 287 in Portage, Mich., who'd spent the previous night sleeping in a submarine anchored in Muskegon Channel. (Seriously.)

The wooden luge track with hand-packed ice is located in Muskegon State Park, where it opened in 1984 after community members thought it might make a good Olympic training site. It hosts 3,000 people every year, and gave local hero Mark Grimmette a start that led to medals in two of the last three Olympics.

The coach for our 15-minute tutorial was a tall, lanky man with a white beard named Larry Page. A retired teacher, he likes things fast - fast cars, fast motorcycles, fast winter sports. He's been lugging for 20 years, and began his instructions by addressing what everyone was wondering.

"We have an extremely safe track," the 63-year-old said.

Once in a while someone will wipe out, but usually the worst injuries are bumps and bruises. It helps that beginners are only allowed to use a span of the track that extends 700 feet through four bends, accelerating sliders to speeds of about 25 mph. By contrast, the Olympic track in Torino, Italy, is 4,708 feet long with 19 bends and a maximum speed of more than 80 mph.

That said, it's still daunting when you start flying down the track on nothing but a glorified Flexible Flyer.

"There's no braking in luge," Mr. Page told us.



Blade staff writer Ryan Smith takes a turn on the luge track at the Muskegon Winter Sports Complex in North Muskegon, Mich. (SPECIAL TO THE BLADE/NICHOLAS TREMMEL)

There's no crying, either. Or screaming.

The whole point of the sport is pretty simple: make it to the bottom faster than everyone else. Sliders at the winter complex use a sled weighing about 30 pounds. Each rides on metal bands and has wooden runners called "kufens" that you steer with your legs. You also can steer by shifting the weight of your shoulders.

All of this is easier when you're wearing some kind of lightweight, skin-tight body suit. I wore six layers of clothing (it was 10 degrees outside) that ballooned with air as I descended, and a giant helmet that made me look like The Great Gazoo from The Flintstones.

I don't remember a whole lot about my first run, except everything seemed to come at me really fast. With me lying down on the sled, Mr. Page gave me a push down the ramp, where I immediately encountered a hard turn to the right.

I went around it, despite the fact that I seemed incapable of controlling my sled. That's not a huge problem, since it's kind of like a self-guided missile heading down the chute.

Still, it was tense, especially when I got a little air coming out of a turn. That's when I grabbed the sled's handles extra tight, arms close to my side, legs fully extended, feet pointed straight ahead.

I tried turning with my legs, pushing hard against the kufen in the direction I wanted to go, but it never seemed to work. Or rather, I always seemed to try too late.

The sled normally makes a deep growling sound as it winds its way down the track, but I didn't hear anything as I focused on not bumping into the sides of the chute - with moderate success.

Then I hit a straightaway.

Whoooooosh!

Awesome.

It was a bumpy, but absolutely exhilarating ride. And when my sled found its way to the finish line, I was still on it.

My time was 20.291 seconds, almost five seconds longer than the track record. That's held by three-time U.S. Olympian Frank Masley, who happened to be there the morning of my visit.

His advice: "Keep your legs in, shoulders back." OK, Frank.

I tried again and again, a total of 11 times - with no wipeouts - in my 2 1/2-hour clinic. I was able to improve my time to 18.473 seconds. Respectable, but I was dying to crack the 18-second mark.

The hardest part may have been carrying the sled up the 55 steps to the starting point 70 feet above the finish line.

Strike that. The hardest part was ramming into the wall with my elbow during the third run after I came out of the first turn too strong. (Elbow pads are recommended by officials.)

To anyone who thinks that lugers aren't real athletes, I invite them to examine my bruises and explain the six-second difference between the best time of the day in my group (17.98 seconds) and the worst (24-plus seconds).

The more I tried, the better I got. As I traveled faster, the track seemed to come at me more slowly, and I was able to turn with visible results. I wasn't hitting any of the walls. And I was almost calm. Maybe they should start a zen luge league.

There's nothing like coming out of a quick couple of turns and then flying down a straightaway, before coming into a 180-degree turn delivering the force of 2.4 Gs.

And that's not even the best part. Flush with excitement, I always loved cruising past the finish line, hearing my time called out over a loudspeaker, and then ramming feet-first into a huge foam cube. Although Mr. Page showed us the correct manner of slowing down, I agreed with his general philosophy: "We're not gonna worry too much about stopping."

Picking up my sled after my final run, I looked back at the track. As snow continued to fall through the trees, I noticed the extra 200 feet at the top that only experienced sliders may use, since they can handle the maximum speeds of 40 mph that come with it.

I looked at it before I turned away and thought: Next time.

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