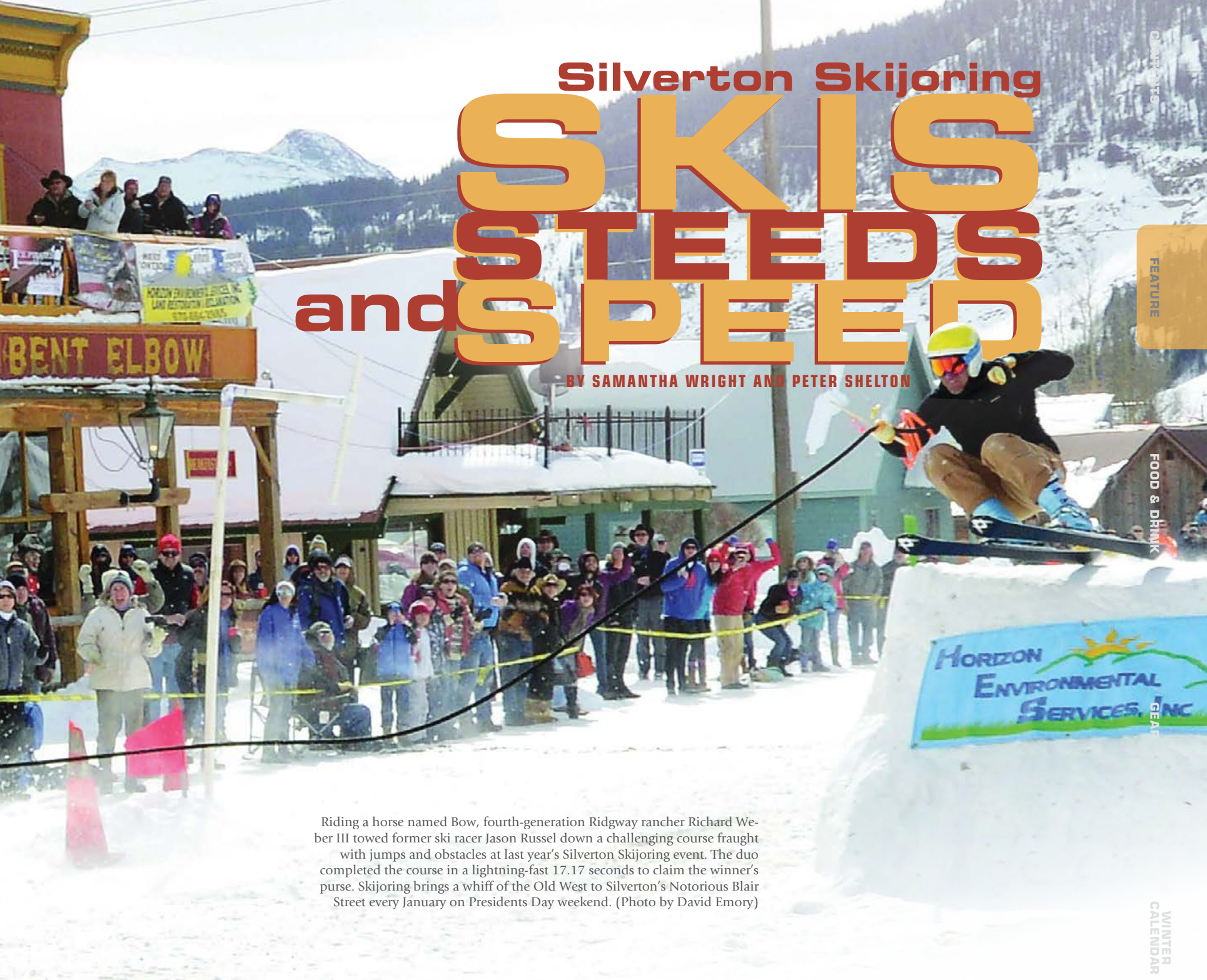




Silverton's heyday as a mining boomtown may be long gone, but once a year, in the heart of winter, the Wild West returns to this scrappy little mountain town, when race horses hurtle down Blair Street at 45 mph, pulling daredevil skiers behind them for the annual Silverton Skijoring races.

The Presidents Day weekend event delivers thrills for competitors and spectators alike, as skiers, towed by a galloping mounted steed, navigate six-foot-high jumps, gates and obstacles while attempting to spear a series of rings with a baton on a straightaway course through the heart of Silverton.

The historic town is packed, its restaurants, hotels and bars chock-full, and Blair Street is lined with spectators standing on berms of snow built up for safety and better viewing. It's a display of cabin fever craziness that brings together disparate breeds of



Silverton Skijoring

SKIS

STEEDS

and SPEED

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT AND PETER SHELTON

Riding a horse named Bow, fourth-generation Ridgway rancher Richard Weber III towed former ski racer Jason Russel down a challenging course fraught with jumps and obstacles at last year's Silverton Skijoring event. The duo completed the course in a lightning-fast 17.17 seconds to claim the winner's purse. Skijoring brings a whiff of the Old West to Silverton's Notorious Blair Street every January on Presidents Day weekend. (Photo by David Emory)

mountain folk who otherwise don't tend to mix.

The horses wear shoes studded with extra-long nails that function like crampons on the slick course; the riders tend to dress like the cowboys and ranchers that many of them are (it's a mystery how they get their hats to stick on their heads as they gallop down Blair Street at breakneck speed). The skiers wear everything from Carhartt to sleek racing suits, and helmets are mandatory.

Silverton's Notorious Blair Street – a wide, flat street lined with colorfully-painted saloons and one-time brothels – provides the perfect setting for the rowdy sport. And at an elevation of 9,318-feet, in the heart of the San Juan Mountains, there is plenty of snow to go around.

Savannah McCarthy of Cortez, sporting zebra-striped boots, was the youngest rider at the Fourth Annual Silverton Skijoring Event. She rode a tough

little horse named Tank. If you touched Tank's neck just right, you could still feel a bullet hole there – a souvenir from his brush with the Mexican mafia before the McCarthy family adopted him.

In a random drawing matching riders and skiers prior to the race, McCarthy was psyched to get paired with Silverton skier Eli Alsup. "He's 13, like me!" she exclaimed.

The blast of a starting pistol sent them jolting out onto the course. Alsup, in a blue racing suit and wearing a dirt-bike helmet, flew along the course – too short to reach the rings with his baton, and too young to care that there was a one-second penalty per missed ring.

The crowd didn't care, either, because the kid was hauling. Alsup comes from a family of stock car racers (his grandfather, Bill Alsup, used his snowcat to help build the Silverton Skijoring course), and this

was Eli's first time giving the sport a try.

"That was soooooo fun!" he yelled after finishing. "I want to do that again and again!"

Skijoring is not for the timid. Young Alsup made it look easy, but a skier who followed him biffed hard on the second jump and rose shakily, holding his hips; another got hauled across the finish line on his back.

Luckily, services from the EMTs and veterinarians stationed on the sidelines were not needed that day.

Skiers don't need a horse to register, said spokesperson Laura Des Palmes, although participants can sign up as a matched team (skier and horse/rider). Unmatched skiers and horse/riders are randomly matched at registration both days.

Some of those random matchups are successful, and others not so much. The best match of last year's event came at the end of the second day of racing,

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Clockwise from top left: Andrea McCarthy, her teenage daughter Savannah McCarthy, Richard Weber III and Jeff Dahl galloped down Blair Street with skiers in tow at last year's Silverton Skijoring event. Facing page: Jeff Dahl saluted the crowd as his skier went airborne. Dahl and his horse Red Lodge are frequent skijoring competitors. The sport is a display of cabin fever craziness that brings together disparate breeds of mountain folk who otherwise don't tend to mix. (Photos by David Emory)



when Jason Russel, a former CU ski racer who trained in Telluride, was paired with 22-year-old Richard Weber III (aka "Little Richie"), a fourth-generation rancher from Ridgway wearing a bright red cowboy shirt and riding a horse named Bow.

Together, the team careened down the course through the roaring gauntlet of the cheering crowd. It was a clean, 17.17 second run – fast enough to take the winner's purse. As Russel whizzed across the finish line in his Volkl SLs, he released the tow rope, and Weber came riding back the other way, still at full gallop, slapping his horse, waving his black cowboy hat at the bluebird sky, sunlight gleaming off his silver aviator shades. Girls milled around him as he dismounted from his steaming steed, over by the Shady Lady Saloon. "I finally got a good skier!" he said.

Skijoring is derived from the Norwegian word *skikjøring*, meaning ski driving. According to the North American Skijoring Association, the sport began several hundred years ago in Scandinavian coun-

tries as a way to travel in the long winters for Laplanders on Nordic skis holding onto reins attached to reindeer.

Skijoring found its way to North America, where ranchers attached a long rope to the saddle horn of a horse ridden at high speeds down a long straightaway. Today, equestrian skijoring has become a highly specialized competitive sport, with competitions in at least five U.S. states and more than a few countries worldwide. In some parts of the world, skiers are pulled by dogs, mules and snowmobiles.

Silverton Skijoring, put on by a grassroots group of local enthusiasts, is open to both novices and experienced competitors. A big pot of prize money (up to \$10,000) is at stake this winter, with prizes going to the fastest skiers and horse riders in both novice and open categories.

The novice course does not include jumps and obstacles, but all competitors must get through a series of gates, collecting rings along the way. If they miss a gate, or drop a ring, two seconds are added

to their time. The skier and rider with the fastest time win.

The skier must be in control, in an upright position (no body part touching the ground) and on at least one ski when crossing finish line, or the team is disqualified. Likewise, the rider must be on the horse when the skier crosses the finish line.

Spectating at Silverton Skijoring is free (no dogs allowed). Snow berms line both sides of Blair Street for safe viewing – and incredible photo ops.

The number of participants has grown in the event's five years, with last year's event featuring 25 matched teams of horses/riders and skiers who had traveled to Silverton from throughout the region. Many of them were experienced competitors who ride a circuit of skijoring events everywhere from Leadville to Steamboat Springs to Red Lodge, Montana.

The 2014 Silverton Skijoring races take place Saturday, Feb. 15-Sunday, Feb. 16, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Check out Silverton Skijoring on Facebook or visit www.silvertonski-joring.com for more information. ☺