



## 2026 Minnesota Nordic Skiing Achievement Awards

**Minnesota Nordic Skiing Lifetime, Biathlon, Visually Impaired,  
Master Skier, and Community Ski Organization  
Recognitions**

**Sunday, April 12, 2026  
Vasaloppet Nordic Center, Mora, MN**

# Minnesota Nordic Skiing Achievement Awards Program

## ***2026 Lifetime Achievement Award*** **Amy Cichanwoski, Arne Stefferud**

### ***2026 Minnesota Biathlon, Visually Impaired, Master Skier, and Community Ski Organization Recognitions***

Minnesota Biathlon  
High Achievers:  
Irina Viskovatykh, Paavo Rova

Minnesota Visually Impaired Skiers:  
Charlotte Czarnecki, Brent Nesser

Minnesota Master Skiers:  
Liz Holliday, Dave Christopherson

Minnesota Community Ski  
Organization Excellence:  
Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club

### ***Recognition of past Lifetime Award Recipients***

2006 Glen Johnstone  
2007 Norm Oakvik  
2008 Mike Marciniak, Anne Rykken  
2009 Lars Kindem, George Hovland  
2010 Bob O'Hara, Pat Lanin  
2011 Bjorn Lasserude  
2012 Jack Jeffery  
2013 John Filander  
2014 Emily Lanin, Bill Simpson  
2015 Avho Taipale  
2016 Bob Montebello  
2017 Bonnie Fuller-Kask, Larry Myers  
2018 Bruce Adelsman, Darby Nelson  
2019 Glenn A. Fuller, Roland Ring-Jarvi  
2020 Paula Anderson, Gary Larson  
2021 Dave Paulson, Mark Helmer  
2022 Antonina Anikin, Jan Guenther  
2023 Muriel Gilman, Dave Johnson  
2024 Kris Hansen, Nancy Bauer  
2025 Neil King, Ben Croft

### ***Recognition of Lifetime Legacy Award Recipients***

2016 Nikolai Anikin  
2016 Robin Baker  
2016 Charlie Banks  
2016 John Burton  
2016 Earle Dickinson  
2016 Tim Knopp  
2016 Jinny McWethy  
2016 Brother Charles Rademacher  
2016 Toni St. Pierre  
2016 Al Waverek  
2016 Don Wolter  
2023 Phil Zink  
2023 John Dyste  
2023 John Schmitt  
2023 Norman Kragseth



# 2026 MINNESOTA NORDIC SKIING ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

## Program Schedule

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1:00pm – Social with refreshments

2:00pm – Awards Program

Vasaloppet Welcome – Chip Gerdin

MNSA Welcome – Neil Franz

Keynote Presentation – Chris Hecker

Master of Ceremonies – Bob O’Hara

### 2026 Lifetime Achievement Awards

Amy Cichanowski – Introduced by Bob O’Hara

Arne Stefferud – Introduced by Bob O’Hara

### 2026 Minnesota Based Biathlon High Achievers

Irina Viskovatykh & Paavo Rova –

Introduced by Owen Baird

### 2026 Minnesota Visually Impaired Skiers

Charlotte Czarnecki & Brent Hesser -

Introduced by Bruce Slinkman

### 2026 Minnesota Master Skiers

Liz Holliday - Introduced by Greg Fangel

Dave Christopherson – Introduced by Deb

Diggins

### 2026 Minnesota Community Ski Organization Excellence

Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club - Introduced by Brita Sailer

Closing Comments - Neil Franz

Post Awards Social with Cake & Ice Cream



## MNSA Member Clubs In Action...



*Maintaining Trails*



*Grooming Trails*



*Teaching Skiing*



*Hosting Ski Races/Events*

# 2026 MINNESOTA NORDIC SKIING LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

## Amy Chichanowski



Amy grew up skiing with her family in Winona, MN. She quickly aspired to local and club level racing, attending many Junior Nationals. She started skiing in the high school league in 10th grade and was State Champion (team and individual) in 1988 for Winona Cotter. She went to Middlebury College for one year and skied on the team. She then returned to the Midwest to work with coach Mark Ernst, completing her physics degree at St. Mary's in Winona. She's skied many Kortelopets (winning three times).

Amy qualified for multiple NCSA and NCAA skiing championships, but in her senior year, she passed up collegiate nationals to go to Europe on a sponsored trip to ski the Engadin Marathon. That trip was very transformative for Amy because she saw firsthand how skiing is integrated into European culture.

After her senior year of college, Amy trained for a year at the Vuokatti Training Center in central Finland. That year was an epic adventure of hitch-hiking around Scandinavia and competing in club races and three Worldloppet races.

In 1993, Amy came back to the US, moved to Minneapolis and signed on to Team Birkie. She met her future husband, Marc Beitz, through Team Birkie and spent the next several years training for

Olympic level competition and participating in three Olympic Trials. During these years, in her "free time" she was obtaining her MBA from the University of St. Thomas.

Throughout her Team Birkie years, Amy coached Masters and Juniors. She started coaching high school skiing at St. Thomas Academy in 1999, coaching there for 5 years as an assistant before moving to Burnsville as a head coach. Under Amy's coaching, the Burnsville girls won the state meet in 2009.

In 2005, Amy became the Executive Director of the Minnesota Youth Ski League (MYSL). She has built MYSL into the premier youth cross country ski organization in North America. The League membership is now over 3500 skiers in 60 clubs throughout the Midwest. Highlights of her work with the MYSL include:

- Establishing developmentally-appropriate youth racing and programming (Skiwerx) for U8-U14 skiers throughout the Midwest
- Using applied research to design programs that Develop Lifelong Skiers
- Creating a complete and integrated system for youth ski club management
- Recruiting generations of volunteers into the ski community
- Creating the most diverse cross country ski organization in the country
- Leading the largest cross country ski swap in the US; expanding access to affordable winter gear
- Mentoring athletes from their youth years into their junior and senior careers
- Partnering with MYSL alumnae, Jessie Diggins, as she rose to become a positive influence and role model for youth
- Organizing Wednesday night Team Sprints at Wirth Park for over 20 years, as a developmentally appropriate introduction to racing for thousands of youth skiers and their parents

Amy holds both US Ski and Snowboard Level 200 and Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) Level 2 certifications. She is a US Ski and Snowboard Level 2 Technical Delegate and was on the Minneapolis World Cup organizing committee (both times). She was the Competition Secretary for the 2024 Minneapolis World Cup, and continues in this role for all National and FIS-level events that come to Minneapolis.

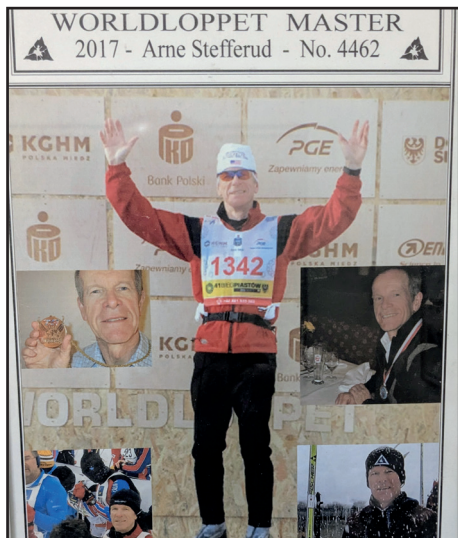
She has two daughters, both skiers of course, that are now in college.

Her current projects include building the fundraising base for MYSL to allow the organization to continue its outreach efforts and helping to standardize high school Section meets.

She is, and always will be, a consummate protector of research-based youth skiing development and is a visionary for cooperative and sustainable growth in the ski community. For all that Amy has done in support of Minnesota Nordic skiing, especially her tremendous commitment and inspiring impact on youth skiing, Amy is truly deserving of the Minnesota Nordic Skiing Lifetime Achievement Award!

# 2026 MINNESOTA NORDIC SKIING LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

## Arne Stefferud



Arne Stefferud's contributions to Nordic skiing span both personal and professional experiences. On a personal level, his introduction to Nordic skiing began in childhood, attending annual ski jumping competitions at the 90-meter Snowflake Ski Jump located just 2.5 miles from his family farm in Westby, Wisconsin. Although young Arne found ski jumping fascinating, he did not participate in that discipline – he had seen the “agony of defeat” segment on Wide World of Sports!

Arne's exposure to ski touring began as a student at the University of Minnesota, where he majored in Recreation Resource Management under the guidance of Tim

Knopp. Tim introduced Arne to the North Star Ski Touring Club, which Arne joined in November of 1976. Arne helped form the Singles Division, which at the time made up about 40% of the club's membership. Over the years, Arne led many weekend ski trips to the North Shore. He has served as the club's Government Liaison from 1989 to the present and is currently the President of the club.

Arne's passion for travel led him to earn a Gold Worldloppet Master Award in 2017. Over a span of 27 years, he completed ten long distance marathon races in Canada and the USA, as well as eight races in Europe, covering a total of 551 kilometers. While his average speed was 9.7 kilometers per hour, his main goal was always to finish the event. In 1999, Arne received the Haakon Haakonsson Award by completing the Birkebeiner races in the USA (1980), Norway (1996), and Canada (1999). His longest ski event was the 400 kilometer Border to Border 7-day tour in Finland in March 2020. Although he did not ski every kilometer, his group completed the tour before the COVID pandemic forced an early conclusion.

Professionally, Arne's career in outdoor recreation planning and grants administration has allowed him to represent Nordic skiing interests as a member of the Minnesota Recreation Trail Use Advisory Committee from 1991 to the present. This committee reviews funding requests for both non-motorized and motorized trail projects financed through federal gasoline tax revenues and other funds. He has also served on the Minnesota Nordic Ski Association Board since 2022. Additionally, Arne participated in the planning and funding committee responsible for creating the ski trail system for the Battle Creek Winter Recreation Area in Battle Creek Regional Park. For all that he has done, over the decades, to support and enhance Minnesota Nordic skiing, Arne is truly deserving of the 2026 Minnesota Nordic Skiing Lifetime Achievement Award!

# 2026 MINNESOTA BIATHLON HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

## Irina Viskavatykh



Irina Viskavatykh is a junior at Minneapolis Edison High School and a member of MN Biathlon. She has been part of the Twin Cities biathlon group since 2022 and has taken part in many events, showing strong commitment and love for the sport. She finished 1st or 2nd Youth Woman this year in MN Biathlon races.

Irina started biathlon and cross country skiing when she was 10 years old in Russia. What started as something fun quickly became something much bigger. Over time, biathlon became not just a sport for her, but a big part of her life. In 2022, Irina and her family moved to the United States. Biathlon was the primary reason for moving specifically to Minnesota. Since then, she has been training with MN Biathlon under coaches Lynda Bouley, Bill Meyer, and Owen Baird and training with Loppet Nordic Racing at Theodore Wirth Park with Piotr Berdnarski. Irina has improved a lot over the past season. She enjoys both skiing and shooting equally and especially likes the challenge of

combining the two. She is very focused during shooting and in her last race hit 70% of her targets. In addition to biathlon, Irina is also involved in cross country running and track & field.

Irina also gives back to the biathlon community. She enjoys helping new athletes, especially during novice sessions, where she helps teach others how to shoot and feel comfortable in the sport. Looking ahead, Irina hopes to continue improving, compete at higher levels, and stay involved in biathlon for many years. Irina's parents are Natalia and Aleksei Viskavatykh.

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## Paavo Rova

Paavo is currently a sophomore at St. Olaf College where he is studying ecology and Norwegian and skis on the Nordic ski team. Paavo was raised on skis, exploring the many ski trails along the North Shore of Lake Superior with his family. He graduated from Duluth East High School in 2024. At St. Olaf College he has been an integral part of the team contributing to two Midwest Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Conference (MCSA) regional championship titles and two top three national team titles. Individually he has won the 34K skate Mora Dalaloppet, placed second in the 53K American Birkebeiner Classic race and been the MCSA individual regional champion for the last 2 years. At the United States Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association National Championships he placed both 2nd (2026) and 3rd (2025) overall.



Paavo started biathlon during his freshman year of college. Since that time he has raced most of MN Biathlon's series races and in regional development camps finishing high in the order in each event! He enjoys many of the different aspects and challenges of the sport as well as the community it creates.

Starting with a strong skiing background, in his first year in biathlon, Paavo scored the "Most Improved" shooter award early in the summer. He participated in some of the summer races including the regional championships, and steadily improved his Biathlon placing even while competing in Nordic skiing for St. Olaf. By the end of the winter Paavo was 2nd overall in Elk River in the meet in January and finished 1st overall in both Duluth biathlon races at the end of February.

Outside biathlon, Paavo enjoys camping, canoeing, playing the organ, and spending as much time outside exploring as he can. His favorite ski memory is skiing across Finland with his family in 2023. He is honored to have been nominated for this award and is excited to continue to represent the great Minnesota ski community.

# 2026 MINNESOTA VISUALLY IMPAIRED SKIER

## Brent Nesser



Brent Nesser discovered his passion for Nordic skiing in the eighth grade when he joined the St. Cloud Cathedral high school cross country ski team. Drawn to the supportive team culture, competitive spirit, and the beauty of outdoor winter training, he quickly became a dedicated athlete. Brent went on to compete at the varsity level and continued participating in citizen races. After high school, he skied with the University of Minnesota Duluth's cross country skiing club.

At age thirteen, Brent was diagnosed with macular degeneration. Later, he learned he had Retinitis Pigmentosa, a progressive condition affecting the retina's rod and cone cells that ultimately leads to blindness. Brent's final solo ski as a sighted skier occurred at age 27. Today, he is totally blind with limited light perception yet remains deeply connected to the sport he loves.

One of Brent's greatest joys has been watching his now adult children develop their own athletic interests. His son, Sean, competed on the Anoka high school Nordic ski team, while his son Reid and daughter Libby found their stride in cross country running. Being involved again in the encouraging and competitive world of endurance sports revived Brent's enthusiasm for active living.

With the encouragement of his wife, Sandy, Brent applied to participate in the 2025 Ski for Light International National Event in Provo, Utah an annual program that pairs blind

skiers with sighted volunteer guides. After a week of training, Brent competed in the 10 kilometer race, earning third place in the under 60 totally blind division and sixth place overall.

Beyond skiing, Brent embraces many endurance challenges. He has run multiple 5K and 10K races with his children guiding him, and he has trained for and completed several local sprint and Olympic distance triathlons. He and Sandy enjoy hiking, snowshoeing, and exploring the trails near their home in Andover, Minnesota.

Brent is honored to be recognized with this award. He looks forward to a lifelong journey of Nordic skiing, outdoor adventure, and long-distance athletics.

It is very awesome to present Brent with the first ever Minnesota Nordic skiing male Visually Impaired Skier Award!

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## Charlotte Czarnecki

Charlotte was born with Congenital Glaucoma which is a rare eye condition present at birth or early childhood. Charlotte did have some color vision and could ride a bike and other such things until her mid-twenties when she became totally blind. However, Charlotte's blindness has not prevented her from having a very active lifestyle. For example, Charlotte participated for years in a sport designed for people with vision impairments called Goal Ball. In Goal Ball, teams of three attempt throw a ball with bells in it into the opponent's goal. Charlotte notes that she loves being in Nature and challenging herself.

In regard to cross country skiing, Charlotte was actively recruited by a friend to attend a Ski For Light International event as an introduction to cross country skiing. Charlotte's first Ski For Light was in Anchorage, Alaska in 2014. And she was hooked! Since Anchorage she has attended Ski For Lights at Snow Mountain Ranch in Colorado multiple times, Bellaire, Michigan, Casper, Wyoming, and Provo, Utah. Charlotte reports that she loves Ski For Light experiences for the great week long opportunity to cross country ski, learn new things, meet new folks and develop friendships. Charlotte is planning to attend Ski For Light 2027 in West Yellowstone, Montana! She notes that she is not a racer, but maybe a smell the roses kind of skier!

For Charlotte the most difficult aspect of cross country skiing for her is finding qualified sighted guides who are willing to find the time to guide her. Her hope is that an effort can be made in the Twin Cities to develop a group of willing sighted guides to provide more opportunities for visually impaired skiers to hit the trails!

In addition to cross country skiing, Charlotte is actively involved with adaptive canoeing, kayaking, rowing, and sailing. She is a member of the Twin Cities Blind Sailing and North Star Community Rowing organizations.

In her working life Charlotte has been employed as a federal investigator for the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission since 2007. She investigates complaints about discrimination based on race, gender, national origin, religion, disability, and much more. Complaints are against private employers, labor, unions, and apprenticeships. She notes that we just want to have equality in the world and that's what this federal agency aims to do.

It is very awesome to present Charlotte with the first ever Minnesota Nordic skiing female Visually Impaired Skier Award!



# 2026 MINNESOTA MASTER SKIERS

## Liz Holliday

Liz was born and raised in eastern Duluth. Spending her youth exposed to the outdoors she learned to love the variety of activities northern Minnesota offered. In the early 70's, alpine skiing became the main family sport with nearly every weekend spent skiing at the local ski hill (Mont du Lac) where her parents were on the ski patrol. Liz soon began alpine racing with the Duluth Alpine Club and as a member of the Duluth East High School Alpine Team.

During this time Liz's parents outfitted her with basic Nordic equipment that she used to ski around home and the Lester-Amity trails which were far less developed than they are today.

It was in the mid-1980's that Liz turned her focus to cross country skiing and soon she began competing in many of the regional weekend races as a member of the Ski Hut/Peltonen Team, eventually skiing her first Birkebeiner. Liz became a veteran Birkie skier starting in the elite wave several times with her top finish of 25th in 1996. For years, winter weekends were spent skiing or competing with fellow skiers and friends. Those weekends also included competing with her sisters Diane and Mary while they were all members of Team Rossignol, often being referred to as the "The Holliday Sisters".

Liz also traveled to Norway and Sweden to ski and compete. Skiing the original Vasaloppet 90K in Mora, Sweden among 18,000 other skiers with red klister as the wax, was perhaps one of the longest days she ever spent on skis, but the experience was thrilling. Twice she has competed in the Flyktningloppet, a classic technique race that stretches from Nordli, Norway, to Gäddede, Sweden. Her time in Scandinavia was marked by a special friendship with Harald and Maj-Lis, two wonderful Norwegians who took her on many hiking and skiing adventures in the mountains of northern Norway.

In 2000, Liz married Mark Helmer. She also married his efforts and commitment to maintaining the ski trails at the Korkki Nordic Ski Center. Together they have two daughters Maj-Lis and Anna-Britta who at a young age learned to ski on the Korkki trails and became accomplished skiers and racers. Both girls skied for Duluth East and were members of the state teams. They are her greatest joy in life.

While Liz will say she is on the other side of competition now, she still finds happiness in an extra blue day of skiing. She has also always made a commitment to giving back to the sport she loves. Early on in the late 90's when the Duluth East Nordic team was quickly growing, she volunteered as mentor coach, providing ski instruction, teaching waxing techniques and encouraging skiers that were new to the team. She continues to support the local ski teams and ski community, volunteering at events and cheering on racers. Always willing, always with a smile...a wonderful person.



## Dave Christopherson

At the age of five when he lived in Norway for a year, a gift from relatives of skis, boots, and poles introduced Dave to a life-long love of our skiing sport. His parents quickly decided they had better get the necessary equipment as well, and when the family moved back to the States, most winter weekends became spent in the mountains of western Washington.

That love of skiing, however, was for the alpine variety. He only began cross country when forced into Nordic in college – all the ski meets were 4-way affairs, and the coach informed everyone that if they wanted to ski slalom and downhill they were going to do cross country and jumping as well. Dave still remembers being fairly terrified his first time off an Olympic-size jump.

When he moved here for grad school, one trip to a local downhill venue quickly convinced Dave that cross country made more sense than downhill skiing in Minnesota. He quickly bought a beautiful new pair of Toppen Tur-Lett wooden skis, with leather boots, 75-mm bindings and cane poles (which he still has).

A few years later, a clinic with Steve Gaskill (who as then the National Team coach for nordic combined) made Dave decide that he should again begin training and racing. Some success at local races followed by an unexpected age-group win at the Birkie convinced him that he should up his game, and a year with Sisu Skiers and then several more with the original Team Birke under Gaskill and Ahvo Taipale did just that.

Since that time, Dave has stood on several World Masters Cup podiums and won a good number of National Masters Championships. He does "the big one" up in Hayward every year of course, but Dave says that he actually prefers the smaller, low-key races. His favorite is probably the Mora Vasaloppet; those Dala horses are the only race trophies his wife really likes, though she keeps saying she would like to see some in her favorite color - blue. He's also been joining up with old friends for an annual trip to Sun Valley for the Boulder Mountain Tour where, even if the high altitude air feels pretty thin for a flatlander, he really likes the fact that the race has a net drop of more than a thousand feet.

Dave is now a retired environmental researcher at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, but continues to do some serious training and racing (this year he again won his age class, in his 38th Birkie). At least as important to him, Dave has been giving back to his sport by coaching Finn Sisu's Vakava Nordic Racing Team for more than 20 years, helping his skiers to their own successes and finding their own love of the outdoors and our great sport of cross country skiing.



# 2026 MINNESOTA COMMUNITY SKI ORGANIZATION EXCELLENCE AWARD

## Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club, Park Rapids, MN

The mission of the Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club is to inspire a healthier, more active community through the joy of non-motorized outdoor sports. The club came into existence in 1979, when local skiers and bike riders came together with the Park Rapids Chamber of Commerce to organize what was originally an annual bike ride and race called the Headwaters 100. Although the race is no longer part of the event, the Headwaters 100 provides an excellent opportunity for riders of all abilities to enjoy a fall ride through beautiful Itasca State Park and the surrounding area in Hubbard County. This event also provides a steady, reliable source of funding for the club, allowing for the development and maintenance of cross country ski trails, ski equipment, and outdoor activities and education.

The Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club has been grooming and maintaining cross country ski trails and equipment for over 40 years. Originally the club designed and maintained the Long Pine ski trail located just outside of Park Rapids. In 1993, through cooperation with the MN DNR, the Soaring Eagle Cross Country Ski Trails were established north of Park Rapids. In the early years this new public trail system was “lightly” groomed for one-way classic skiing only and featured a three-sided structure with an outdoor fire ring to augment a parking lot filled with several running vehicles for heat.

The Soaring Eagle trail system has seen meaningful improvement since those early days. In 2003 a new warming house was constructed with volunteer labor and significant donated materials. Trail users now have a cozy, heated building to warm up in after skiing, and for limited ski equipment storage. Thanks to a grant from the North Star Ski Touring Club, a trail realignment project was done in 2024 to correct existing property line issues on the Lilly’s Loop trail. Part of this work, which included redesign of Lilly’s Hill, now provides a wider, open downhill area more suitable for lessons and use by beginner and intermediate skiers. This grant also provided funds for critical warming house maintenance/upkeep measures.

The 10k Soaring Eagle trail system is groomed to high standards by experienced skiers for both skate and classic skiing. Regular training sessions for the people who will be grooming the trails are provided each year prior to the ski season. The club’s current Ski Director is a longtime downhill and cross country skier and ski instructor who has extensive experience with trail and equipment maintenance. In 2024, the Itascatur Outdoor Activity Club, through federal and state grant funding and club fundraising, purchased a 2024 Polaris Ranger tracked UTV and a new 96” Ginzugroomer and tracksetter which have significantly enhanced the club’s grooming capabilities.

With the introduction of the “Open House Sundays” program, begun by the club in 2014, use of the Soaring Eagle trails has increased substantially with an estimated several thousand users in a good snow year. The club owns over 25 pairs of waxless skis, poles, and boots which are offered for use, free of charge, along with coaching, and /or lessons by club members to enable new people of all ages to become familiar with cross country skiing during the scheduled Open Houses and other events.

The Soaring Eagle trail system also has a one mile snowshoe trail. The club provides several sets of snowshoes for use during Open House programs. Schools, youth, and other community groups are invited to use the equipment during educational visits to introduce them to snowshoeing and to provide outdoor activity experiences for underserved community members. The addition of the snowshoe trail makes it possible for mixed groups of skiers and non-skiers to all enjoy time outside on trails that meet different skill and ability levels. This equipment is also available for club members to use for free when wanting to bring additional visitors / family members who lack equipment to share the trail experience.

The club, with a current membership of 130 members, anticipates continued membership growth and looks forward to promoting and assisting with the development of additional public outdoor, non-motorized recreational trails such as those proposed at the new Hubbard County Deep Lake Park, and at Itasca State Park.

Happy Trails! Follow us on Face Book and on our website. Itascatur.org



*New 2024 Polaris Ranger for Itascatur Club grooming*

# Minnesota Nordic Ski Association

## 25th Anniversary

### 2001-2026

Having formed in 2001 as a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the sport of cross country/Nordic skiing in Minnesota, the Minnesota Nordic Ski Association (MNSA) is celebrating 25 years of service to the Minnesota Nordic ski community. MNSA's founding and primary focus throughout its history is to serve as liaison between the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource (DNR) Grant-In-Aid (GIA) Ski Pass program and ski clubs, trail organizations, cities, counties, and State Parks that rely on GIA funding to maintain, improve, and groom the 93 public ski trails in the Minnesota Ski Pass system.

MNSA's accomplishments in advocating for GIA issues over the past 25 years include: successfully proposing and advocating to the Minnesota Legislature for three increases in Ski Pass rates, thus increasing GIA revenues, partnering with the DNR to establish an accurate state-wide ski trail inventory, advocating for DNR financial response to ski trail damage by ATVs, advocating with the DNR Enforcement Division for local and state wide enforcement of the Ski Pass, and partnering with the DNR to improve the ski GIA system through structural changes and enhancements.

MNSA was the umbrella organization for the Minnesota Skinnyski Series, statewide citizen race series, from 2006 – 2011. MNSA has also advocated for many other Nordic ski related issues on state and local levels. In 2006 MNSA established the annual Minnesota Nordic Skiing Lifetime Achievement Award to honor and recognize individuals who have contributed significantly to the advancement of Nordic skiing in Minnesota. In 2017 the award categories were expanded to include the Minnesota State High School Individual Champions, Minnesota Biathlon High Achievers, Minnesota Based Collegiate High Achievers, and Minnesota Master Skiers. In 2024 the Minnesota Community Ski Organization Excellence Award was added and replaced high school and collegiate categories. In 2026 Minnesota Visually Impaired Skier was added as an award category.

Over the past two years MNSA has added ski trail grooming education as an outreach to ski clubs and other organizations that groom Minnesota ski trails. In December of 2024 and 2025 MNSA conducted Groomers Roundtable Zoom Meetings. The roundtable format provides an opportunity for dialogue and information exchange on various aspects of grooming including grooming equipment, trail maintenance, grooming techniques over various snow and temperature conditions, GIA issues and more. Over 30 groomers participated in each of the Groomer Roundtable meetings. In January of 2026, MNSA hosted the first ever Minnesota On Snow Grooming Clinic. The clinic was hosted by the North Lights Nordic Ski Club (Grand Rapids) on the Sugar Hills trail system. The clinic provided a "hands on" opportunity for groomers to try out various snowmobiles, ATV and UTV vehicles, and grooming attachments, as well as informal grooming information exchanges. Around 30 groomers attended this first ever Minnesota On Snow Grooming Clinic. MNSA is also planning to host a fall 2026 Groomers Roundtable Zoom Meeting focused on the GIA Ski Pass system.

MNSA is very proud of all its accomplishments and positive impacts on Minnesota Nordic skiing in its 25 years of existence and is looking forward to the next 25 years of service to Minnesota Nordic skiing!

Individuals, ski clubs, trail and race organizations, and ski retail interests are invited to join MNSA to help further support and enhance Nordic Skiing in Minnesota.



On left Greg "Boomer" Moritko and Bruce Slinkman are the two "Charter" MNSA board members having served continuously from 2001-2026.



In 2026 MNSA conducted Minnesota's first ever On Snow Grooming Clinic at the Sugar Hills Trail system.

**MNSA founded in June of 2001 at the Sawmill Inn restaurant in Brainerd, MN**



**Founding MNSA Board Members**

*Front row from left: Deb Diggins, Greg "Boomer" Moritko, Keith Sjoquist, Greg Fangel*  
*Standing from left: Terry Holm, Ed Bouffard, Buni Slinkman, Bruce Slinkman, LeRoy Youngbloom, Roger Landers, Bill Meyer.*

**Previous MNSA Board Members**

Bill Blank	Jeff Thielen
Rolf Forslund	Gary Strandemo
Rich Houg	John Baker
Dave Johnson	Anne Flueckiger
Pat Lanin	Molly Weyrens
John Munger	Darby Nelson
Janie Weiderman	

CELEBRATING  
**25**<sup>th</sup>  
anniversary

**2026 Current MNSA Board Members**



*From left: Bruce Slinkman, Arne Stefferud, Emily Ranta, Nicholas Culp, Chip Treen, Brita Sailer, Deb Diggins, Greg "Boomer" Moritko, Bob O' Hara, Neil Franz, Ken Jorgenson, Missing: Kent Montgomery, Tolly Vollen*

**Current Ski Club / Ski Organization Membership in MNSA**

- Bemidji Area Cross Country Ski Club
- Brainerd Nordic Ski Club
- Duluth Cross-Country Ski Club
- Itascatur Club, Park Rapids
- Lake Country Nordic Ski Association, Cass County
- Nordic Ski Club-Central MN, St. Cloud
- Norpine Trail Association, Lutsen
- North Star Ski Touring Club
- Northern Lights Nordic Ski Club, Grand Rapids
- Sugarbush Trail Association, Tofto
- Vasaloppet USA
- Leaning Barn Farm (Business)

***Special thanks to these sponsoring organizations***

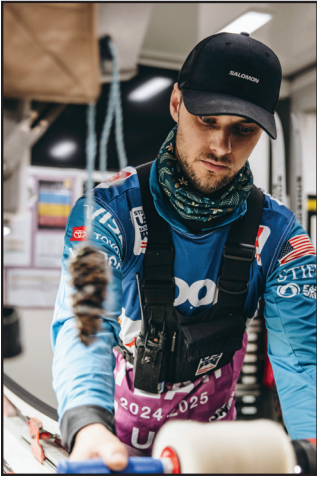
Continental Ski & Bike Shop  
Vasaloppet USA

***MNSA wishes to acknowledge and thank the generous donations from the following:***

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe • Geri Nelson • Cascade Lodge  
Severt's Woods Mapleworks and the Ursa Minor Cabin

# Chris Hecker

## Keynote Presentation for 2026 Minnesota Nordic Skiing Achievement Awards Program



Chris Hecker is a Minnesota native who has been deeply involved in Nordic skiing at nearly every level, from the Minnesota Youth Ski League to high school and collegiate racing. Growing up in Minnesota, skiing was a family affair; his dad was a high school ski coach, often taking Chris to practices and meets, immersing him in the sport early on. Spending countless hours at Giants Ridge and Trollhaugen, he developed a lifelong connection to skiing and a strong understanding of the Minnesota Nordic ski community.

Throughout his career, his coaches, most notably Chad Salmela, showed him that skiing is not just a competition but a lifelong hobby and passion. Their guidance fueled his motivation, teaching him to approach each weekend with purpose, focus, and respect for the process. These lessons continue to influence his philosophy and work ethic today.

In 2017 Chris took on roles as Racing Service Manager and Research & Development Coordinator for Rex Ski Wax. During this time, he attended one Olympic Games and three World

Championships, helping develop some of the fastest waxes in the world. His work involved not just preparing skis for elite competitions but also testing new raw materials and refining methods to improve ski performance. This technical expertise has become a key part of his career.

After working with Rex Ski Wax, Chris joined the US Biathlon Team for a season, attending a World Championship, before moving to the US Ski Team. Over the past six years, he has led the Glide Program, supporting more than 20 athletes. In the first three years, he primarily worked with Scott Patterson and Katherine Ogden, while also assisting athletes like Rosie Brennan, Hannah Halvorsen, and Kevin Bolger. In the next three years, he took on a larger leadership role, overseeing the Glide Program and working closely with Gus Schumacher and Novie McCabe.

Across two Olympic Games and three World Championships, Chris and the team contributed to four World Championship medals, four overall World Cup Globes, and five Olympic medals. Beyond medals, he has helped athletes build trust, consistency, and confidence on race day.

In 2026, Chris stepped back from international competition to focus on his wife and family while remaining deeply connected to the sport that has shaped his life. His journey reflects a lifelong dedication to skiing, influenced by family, mentors, and a passion that started on the trails of Minnesota.

MNSA is very excited to have Chris as the keynote speaker at the 2026 Minnesota Nordic Skiing Achievement Awards banquet, providing information and stories about the “behind the scenes” aspects of World Cup and Olympic Nordic ski racing.

### Welcome to the Vasaloppet Nordic Center Complex

The Vasaloppet and Mora community is very proud of this facility, which was built exclusively with private donations. Construction of this three-building complex began in 1999 with the building of the Nordic Center. The Nordic Center features a wax room, changing and shower areas as well as saunas. The Center also has a small kitchen and plenty of room upstairs and downstairs for events. After that building was completed, the “Garage” building was constructed and today serves as a garage for the Vasaloppet grooming equipment during the snow season and as a social facility for Vasaloppet events. The third building of the complex is a storage and maintenance building for Vasaloppet groomers and equipment. The Nordic Center serves as the focal point of over 12 kilometers of ski trails, which also includes three kilometers of lighted trail. Snowmaking efforts cover the trail system with manufactured snow for great season-long skiing. There is currently no cost for skiers to use the Center, which is maintained through skier donations, Vasaloppet funds, and volunteer labor. Thank you for attending this afternoon and we hope to see you next winter on the trails here at the Nordic Center. -Mora Vasaloppet USA