

CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC IN THE CLASSROOM

Article How to become a coureur des bois in two days
Issue January/February 2016



The **Canadian Ski Marathon** is part race, part adventure where people of all ages and abilities are encouraged to participate. Skiers choose to participate in one of 4 categories, with the most challenging category being “the coureur des bois.” This article with its photos and maps of the Canadian Ski Marathon can act as a catalyst for interesting and useful geography activities.

Here are 5 ideas to consider for use with your students. But first, what is a coureur de bois? Coureur des bois is French for “runner of the woods” and is used to describe the mostly French-Canadian men who ventured into the interior of Canada to trade furs with First Nations people. They are often mistaken for voyageurs. The difference is the voyageurs were often employees of companies such as the Hudson’s Bay Company, while the coureur des bois were independent. Because of how they ventured into parts of Canada that no European had been to before, coureur des bois were also de facto explorers. They used skis, canoes, snowshoes and anything else that could help them navigate the wilds of Canada, which is why the Canadian ski marathon has named their toughest category after them.

1. Coureurs de bois as geographers

Several of the skills necessary to be successful at the coureur des bois level fit very well into several sub-categories of geography. While reviewing the article, have students consider how geographers would have an advantage while competing at this level. Use the subcategories listed below to help students approach this topic from several geographic perspectives. Show students this [video of the Canadian Ski Marathon](#) to start the conversation.

- cartography - map making and map reading,
- exploration – seeking new areas of opportunity and transportation routes
- bio-geography - understanding the natural landscape and ecosystems,
- meteorology - understanding weather
- economic geography - developing efficient trade networks
- transportation geography - efficiently using the appropriate transportation systems
- cultural geography - understanding and respecting different cultures
- political geography – recognizing and understanding boundaries and working within a dynamic political system

2. The spread of cross country skiing

Use the topic of cross country skiing to examine the key geographic concept of diffusion. In this discussion you can add several other recreational activities such as alpine skiing, canoeing, kayaking and biking. Have different groups examine the diffusion of the different activities. Consider how these once essential modes of transportation became recreational activities and eventually competitive sports, and what affect that had on the diffusion of the activity. (Ex. once cross-country skiing was a popular mode of transportation for woods-people, but now it’s almost exclusively used for fun. But does that mean there are more or less cross country skiers in Canada now than during the fur trade?)

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3. Landscape modification for skiing

Examine the types and the extent of modifications that are undertaken for various skiing events. The modifications can be as minor as cutting a few trees or grooming a trail, but they can also be much more extensive. In the case of the Calgary Olympics, it was not a matter of modifying an existing hill for the ski jump competition, but actually constructing 2 human-made hills. What are the advantages of the human-made modifications?

4. Map the distribution of skiing locations in Canada.

Have students map key skiing sites for different types of skiing, and other winter recreation activities in Canada. The more experienced students might be expected to create different categories and use different symbols based upon the elevation change and/or the gradient of the different locations. Ask students to highlight patterns and trends they see.

5. Map the hometowns of Canadians who have competed in Olympics skiing events.

This map would be interesting to compare to the map of skiing locations. Do most of the Canadian Olympians come from the regions with the greatest number and most challenging skiing facilities?

Canadian Geographic has produced articles and online resources that can be useful when discussing winter recreational activities in your geography classroom and extending your students' geographical thinking.

Canadian Geographic

Go with the Snow (Canadian Ski Marathon)

Nov/Dec 2006

Powder Trip (snowboarders @ Banff)

December 2007

Canadian Geographic Travel

Whitehorse's cross-country ski culture: Whitehorse's cross-country ski club is winning big

November 2013

5 backcountry ski sites in Eastern Canada and New England

November 2013

Skiing Gros Morne National Park: Hitting the backcountry slopes in Newfoundland

November 2013

Exploring Skoki: Travelling through Alberta's storied mountaineering and ski-touring past and present

May 2014

A tour of the best skiing in the Rockies

May 2014

Online

What's it like to be part of the Canadian Ski Marathon: [video and photo gallery](#)

[Interactive Map of the Big Hills](#): A tour of the best skiing in the Rockies