



TRAIL BLAZERS

*ST. OLAF
ALPINE AND
NORDIC SKIERS
EXCEL ON THE SNOW
AND IN THE CLASSROOM*

BY TRENT W. CHAFFEE '09

PHOTOS BY VINCENT MUZIK, CALISTA ANDERSON, JENS MATSON & DAVID SAYRE

Connor Lund was strapped into his first pair of skis at the age of two.

By age five, he was a member of his first ski racing team at Buck Hill, a popular ski area in Burnsville, Minnesota. It's been "downhill" ever since.

Lund, a senior economics major who is pursuing an emphasis in finance, is co-captain of the St. Olaf men's alpine ski team. As his final St. Olaf season gets underway, Lund steps into the starting gates of black diamond courses, digs his poles into the battered snow and races against the clock down treacherous courses with the freezing wind in his face, soaring past gates while avoiding potholes, ice spots and "waterfalls" to reach the finish line. The equipment and the team colors have changed since his early Buck Hill days, but the St. Olaf skier's passion for the sport has not.

"Skiing is the closest you can get to flying while you're still pretty close to the earth," says Paul Wojick, St. Olaf alpine skiing coach from 1988 to 2004 and an associate professor of economics.

The St. Olaf alpine ski team has been one of the best in the country over the past 30 years and, as one of the only varsity programs left in the Midwest, St. Olaf skiers find their real measure of competition against teams from the mountain states both east and west. Last season, at the U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association (USCSA) National Championships in Sunday River, Maine, St. Olaf finished first in both men's and women's Nordic, sixth and seventh in men's and women's alpine, respectively, and were USCSA national champions in the Nordic/alpine four-way combined President's Cup. The sport is a natural fit with St. Olaf College's Norwegian heritage and continues to draw top skiers who want to receive a rigorous liberal arts education and compete at the national level.

Wojick says the St. Olaf skiing program's success can be credited to having the right priorities and capable student athletes. "We expect as much as it's reasonable to expect from someone without compromising [his or her] education," he says. "Everyone goes out on the hill for the right reasons: to get as much out of the experience as they can, realizing this is not the central focus of their life but something that adds a crucial ingredient."

As a first-year on the women's Nordic ski team, current senior Shaina Short was the slowest racer on the team. Fast-forward two years to the USCSA National Championships in Maine. Not only was Short the fastest skier on the team, but she was also the second-best overall skier in the competition and a first-team USCSA All-American, leading the St. Olaf women to an overall first-place finish.

Short, a biology and psychology major, has the right attitude. "If you set your mind to something, you can push your way up to the top. It's about prioritizing things and focusing on your goals," she says.

St. Olaf College has a rich history of alpine and Nordic

St. Olaf men's alpine co-captain David Sayre '09 (preceding page) at the 2008 USCSA National Championships and Calista Anderson '09 (right), co-captain of the Ole women's alpine team.

skiing that began on Manitou Heights in 1886 with the founding of the St. Olaf Ski Club. The club hosted its first ski meet in 1912 and drew the best amateur skiers from across the Midwest. The skiers were attracted by Pop Hill Slide, a wooden ski jump. Pop Hill was reconstructed in steel in 1913, increasing its length and potential jumping distances to more than 100 feet, and renamed Haugen Slide in honor of world champion ski jumper Anders Haugen, who supervised the renovation. St. Olaf hosted popular ski events throughout the early 20th century. In 1931, Nordic skier Lloyd Ellingson '32 became St. Olaf's first individual national champion when he won the National Collegiate Ski Jumping Championship and was named to the 1932 U.S. Winter Olympics team. Fifty years later, David Williams '83 won USCSA slalom title, followed by Tony Olin in 1987 and Peter Larson in 1990.

Alpine and Nordic skiing continued to flourish into the 1950s, until a wind storm in 1958 brought down Haugen Slide, and a severe snow drought in the late 1950s and early 1960s forced the cancellation of ski seasons and caused the sport to be dropped from varsity status. Men's and women's alpine skiing was conducted as a club sport until 1977 when it was re-elevated to varsity status, and men's and women's Nordic skiing followed in 1982. Since then, the combined men's and women's teams have won USCSA national titles in 1988, 2000, 2005, 2006 and 2008.

TEAM PERFORMANCE

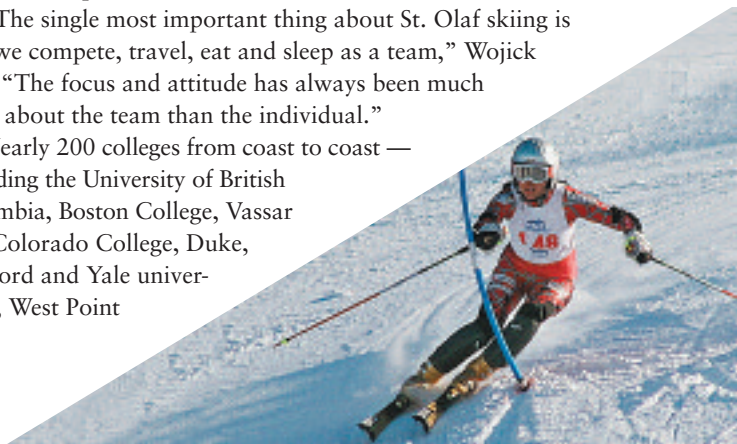
COLLEGIATE SKIING IS GOVERNED by two different organizations: the U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association (USCSA) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

The USCSA was established nearly 40 years ago to give student athletes of all levels and abilities access to a quality and exciting venue of competition. The organization stresses academics over competition, and team performance is emphasized over individual success. The focus on team is perhaps the biggest transition for skiers coming out of elite high school racing teams, but St. Olaf coaches believe the USCSA team concept better matches the philosophy of St. Olaf athletics.

The USCSA, chaired the past six years by Paul Wojick, allows St. Olaf skiers to compete primarily in the Midwest rather than travel weekly to Utah, Colorado, Montana, Vermont or New Hampshire, where most NCAA races are held.

"The single most important thing about St. Olaf skiing is that we compete, travel, eat and sleep as a team," Wojick says. "The focus and attitude has always been much more about the team than the individual."

Nearly 200 colleges from coast to coast — including the University of British Columbia, Boston College, Vassar and Colorado College, Duke, Stanford and Yale universities, West Point



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and the U.S. Air Force and Naval academies — participate in more than 200 winter race events annually. Minnesota colleges include Carleton, Saint Benedict/Saint John’s, and the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities and Duluth campuses. The USCSA includes schools that offer skiing as a club sport as well as those that give it varsity status.

Schools such as the University of Colorado, Utah, Vermont, Dartmouth and Middlebury compete in the NCAA, a national organization through which hundreds of colleges and universities, including St. Olaf, govern their athletics programs. St. Olaf College, as an NCAA Division III school, can participate in both the NCAA and the USCSA, and does so in Nordic skiing.

According to Wojick, a number of colleges believe the NCAA format — in which athletes qualify for the championship event as individuals, while schools attempt to qualify up to three individuals as a team — is inconsistent with the basic philosophy and objectives of their programs.

“While the USCSA and the NCAA have approximately equal numbers of Division I, II and III NCAA teams, only the USCSA allows club teams to compete. As a result, nearly 80 percent of college ski racing occurs in USCSA events,” explains Wojick. “St. Olaf is an NCAA Division III school, so its ski teams are members of both the NCAA and the USCSA and participate in both NCAA and USCSA races during the regular season. However, the teams must choose either the NCAA or the USCSA for post season competition and championship qualification.”

“Skiing can be scary but also really exciting,” says Connor Lund ’09 (far right), co-captain of the men’s alpine team. “You become more than just friends with everyone on the team. You become family.” “Family” members include (clockwise from top) Kristin Kooman ’09, Jeff Stamp ’11 and the 2008 USCSA National Champion alpine team.

“In the NCAA, skiing is your life,” says Kevin Cook ’96, director of skiing and head alpine coach at St. Olaf. Cook, a three-time USCSA All-American, captain and four-time letter winner for the St. Olaf ski team, understands the importance of maintaining balance between sport and academics for St. Olaf student athletes. Cook says that St. Olaf skiers who participate in semester or January Interim off-campus study programs can still ski in the USCSA because academics come first.

ACADEMICS OVER COMPETITION

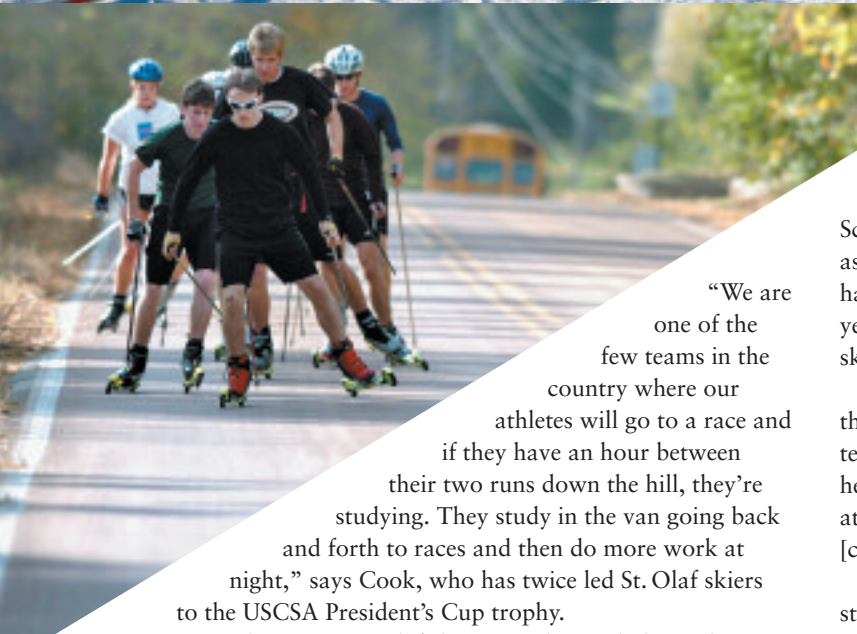
AFTER SPENDING FALL SEMESTER and Interim on St. Olaf College’s Global Semester, Calista Anderson ’09 had skied on snow only four times before the first competition of her junior year alpine season. When the philosophy major won the women’s slalom event in her first race, she was re-energized. Anderson, who thrives on personal best moments, says skiing has embedded the values of time management and a strong work ethic into her daily routine.

“In skiing and in the classroom, you can’t work half-heartedly at either one if you want to be successful,” she says.





Intensive fall training for Nordic skiers means roller skiing in and around Northfield, and up and down the hills of St. Olaf — called “campus tours.” “When you do well, it’s exciting to know that the training has paid off and you can see what you’ve accomplished,” says Jim Vaillancourt ’09 (top left).



“We are one of the few teams in the country where our athletes will go to a race and if they have an hour between their two runs down the hill, they’re studying. They study in the van going back and forth to races and then do more work at night,” says Cook, who has twice led St. Olaf skiers to the USCSA President’s Cup trophy.

Over the years, St. Olaf skiing coaches and alumni have maintained close relationships with elite U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association (USSA) racing programs, creating a pipeline to recruit student athletes who want to ski at the college level and take advantage of an excellent liberal arts education.

“I wanted to go to a school [where students] hit the books just as hard as they hit the trails,” says Matt Rowe ’09, a biology major and a co-captain of the men’s Nordic team. “St. Olaf impressed me with what it offered academically, and after I met the ski coach I knew there was a place for me in the Midwest.”

As an Eden Prairie (Minnesota) high school student, David Sayre ’09 trained at the Hyland Hills Ski Area, a 45-minute drive from the St. Olaf campus. When the time came to choose a college, Sayre selected St. Olaf after his alpine ski coach,

Scott Skavanger from Team Gilboa, was hired as St. Olaf’s assistant alpine ski coach. A 1998 St. Olaf graduate, Skavanger had been a USCSA All-American in 1996 as well as a two-year captain and a four-time letter winner for the Ole alpine ski team.

“Scott told me that St. Olaf was a place where I could thrive in academics but also be on a nationally ranked alpine team and continue to seriously compete,” he says. Sayre knew he wanted to stay in the Midwest for college. But “skiing at St. Olaf is what lured me away from my family’s legacy [college], Gustavus Adolphus.”

Calista Anderson also met Skavanger as a high school student when she participated in the USSA team at Buck Hill. Anderson, co-captain of the women’s alpine team, would watch the St. Olaf ski team during practices and races. “I put the team on a pedestal,” she says. “Younger ski racers know about the St. Olaf team and many look at coming to school here.”

Once they arrive on campus, senior Shaina Short enjoys getting to know the “first-years.” “If you train for two to three hours with the same people every day, you end up becoming pretty good friends, especially if you’re suffering together,” she says.

PEAK EXPERIENCES

DAVID SAYRE IS NICKNAMED “DANGER” by his teammates for his aggressive skiing style and intensity. The senior American studies major loves the thrill of racing down



Ole skiers plan to be in top form for the 2009 USCSA National Championships in Winter Park, Colorado and look forward to defending St. Olaf's USCSA title. *Below:* As individual contributors in a team sport, Calista Anderson and Kayla Johnson '10 push each other for the top times in their events.

snow-covered mountains, making tight turns past gates with the wind soaring past him.

But what Sayre appreciates the most about his alpine skiing career are the life lessons he's learned. "Skiing has taught me a lot about perseverance, hard work and dedication," he says.

As co-captain with Connor Lund, Sayre is one of the most reliable men's alpine skiers and rarely loses his footing. He races in the anchor position, or 5th spot on the team, so if two St. Olaf skiers fall in their races before him, Sayre can be counted on to finish his race and avoid a team disqualification. Sayre thrives on the pressure and says he looks forward to continue skiing fast this season

So does Calista Anderson. "Skiing can be a hard sport because we're exposed to freezing temperatures for long periods of time, and there can be a lot of pressure, which is stressful," she says. "But when we experience the good part it makes it all really worth it."

For Anderson, the "good part" of skiing at St. Olaf is succeeding both as an individual and as a team each year, accomplishing goals at practice, and making lasting friendships through grueling training regimens, long van rides, weekend races and the team's annual week-long Interim break training trip.

During the racing season, competitions can become three-day commitments for St. Olaf skiers. On top of weekend travel, the teams train 10 hours each week at local ski areas (Buck Hill and Welch Village). On Friday afternoons, they climb into St. Olaf vans with ski equipment, duffel bags and backpacks, and sometimes battle through snow storms to

reach their race destinations. Lodgings vary from cramped hotel rooms to the homes of St. Olaf skiers. Races last two days and the teams arrive back on campus late on Sunday night.

"Every year I tell myself that I'm going to quit skiing because I get so stressed out," says Anderson, "but of course I never do because it's all worth it in the end."

But the busy racing schedule also has its perks. "Nordic skiing is how I interact with nature," says Matt Rowe. "Cold December air is the only air worth breathing and there is nothing better than charging up kilometer after kilometer of fresh corduroy trail winding into the mountains."

The new season began for alpine skiers the first weekend of January at a USCSA race in Afton, Minnesota, followed by races at Spirit Mountain in Duluth and in Lutsen, Minnesota. The men's and women's alpine teams travel to Loveland, Colorado for their annual Interim-break training trip. The Nordic season began with the NCAA Qualifier at Mount Itasca in Coleraine, Minnesota, and the two teams look forward to the NCAA Championships in Bethel, Maine. St. Olaf skiers plan to be in top form for the USCSA National Championships in Winter Park, Colorado in early March.

Both the men's and women's Nordic and alpine teams hope to build on last season's successes and win the USCSA National Championship. Nordic skiing, under the direction of new head coach Mark Skildum '03, also hopes to qualify skiers for both the NCAA and Junior National Championships.

As the only senior on the Nordic women's team, Shaina Short looks forward to competing with the best skiers in the country and to defending St. Olaf's USCSA title. Even though the Nordic women's team lost three of its top five skiers to graduation, she says, "we have a lot of potential and I am excited to see what happens."

At last year's USCSA National Championships, Tom Jorgensen '11 won the men's Nordic title and senior Jim Vaillancourt was both a first-team USCSA All-American skier and a first team USCSA Academic All-American. This season, Vaillancourt, co-captain of the men's Nordic team, hopes to place in the top three overall Nordic skiers while helping the team capture another USCSA first-place finish.

Vaillancourt says he will strive toward his athletic goals in his final months as an economics major while striking a balance between academics, skiing and work commitments. Vaillancourt is up to the challenge.

"You have to be confident that you've put in the hours of training and know what you're racing for," he says. "When you do well, it's exciting to know that the training has paid off, and you can see what you've accomplished. If I didn't like what I was doing, I wouldn't be doing it."

At the culmination of their collegiate athletic careers, St. Olaf skiers have engrained a commitment to excellence, a determination to persevere in the most frigid circumstances, and an ability to stay on their feet as they begin to carve their own trails in a treaded and bumpy world. 🐾

TRENT W. CHAFFEE '09 is a student reporter in the St. Olaf marketing and communications office. He majors in American studies with concentrations in media and management studies.

