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Skiers welcome warmer weather

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Conor McGovern left the hot packs he's come to depend on this winter in the Manitoba team van.

There was no need to worry about his hands and feet from freezing Wednesday at Otway Nordic Centre, not with sunlight nudging the thermometer well into the plus side.

It was a rare luxury for McGovern, a 14-year-old Red River Nordic Ski Club member from Winnipeg, who skied the course as practice for the Haywood NorAm Western Canadian cross-country championships, which start today.

"It was -35 when we left Winnipeg, it's been pretty cold and windy," said McGovern. "I love this course. It's hilly and finally we've got warm temperatures. The warmth is a factor but I just like the hills, surprisingly most Manitobans like hills. For whatever reason, a lot of us are good at them."

Nine Manitoba skiers are entered among the 225 athletes in the four-day event, which starts with an interval start classic race today at 10 a.m. Fiona MacIsaac, also part of the Red River team, likes the snow at Otway and says it's much faster than the abrasive ice-crystal surfaces she's had to get used to in Manitoba. The Otway course received 15 centimetres of new snow Tuesday and Wednesday morning, which should make for ideal racing conditions today and no weather-related cancellations are forecast this weekend. Half of the races in Manitoba have been cancelled due to the cold.

"It's nice to ski without the cold air rushing into your lungs," said MacIsaac, fighting off the effects of a head cold. "Most of the days this winter have been -30 C or lower. We've had five or 10 days when it was -40 C and one day when it was -50. We just go inside and hop on the bikes. We're kind of used to the cold."

The Western championships are a tuneup for next year's Canada Winter Games. Eighteen-year-old Ember Large of Edmonton, a member of Team Alberta, has made her first trip to Prince George. She's prepared to do what it takes to be back next year competing for her home province in the Games.

"I'd like that," said Large, who won the junior women's overall title at the Eastern Canadian championships two weeks ago in Nakkertok, Ont. "I just want to ski decently well."

The four days of competition include classic technique sprint races Friday (for the younger age groups, 9 a.m. start) and Saturday (for skiers born in 1995 or earlier, 10 a.m. start). Mass start free technique races are scheduled for Sunday, starting at 9 a.m.

Former national team head coach Dave Wood, a native of Prince George, brought nine members of the Black Jack

club from Rossland, where he now lives. Wood is expecting top results from his four senior skiers -- Julien Locke, David Palmer, Collin Ferrie and Nicole Perrin -- all of whom have done well in NorAm races this season.

"Unfortunately the field isn't as good as it could have been -- the training centres from B.C. didn't send their full teams because there wasn't enough at stake for them," said Wood. "But this is a Canada Games site. Our older skiers will likely be in the Canada Games next year, so it's important for them to see the site and the facility."

Dave Dyer, director of events and race director for Cross-Country Canada, gave the Otway trails, the work of volunteers from the host Caledonia Nordic Ski Club, and the co-operative weather a resounding vote of approval.

"We couldn't have asked for anything better," said Dyer. "Let's order this up for every race that we get. Weather can make or break a classic race and the combination of conditions and the way the course is laid out, I think the guys did a great job. The tracks are fine."

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