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## Benson right at home on Nor-Am podium

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FEBRUARY 17, 2014

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Denied a chance to defend her crown last weekend when extreme cold cancelled her favourite multisport endurance race -- the Prince George Iceman -- Jacqui Benson applied her pent-up energy Sunday to ski racing on her home trails at Otway Nordic Centre.

Born at least a decade before the rest of the field of 11 skiers in the open women's category at the Haywood Nor-Am Western Canadian cross-country championships, the 31-year-old Caledonia Nordic Ski Club member showed those young guns she still has plenty of spring in her stride.

Benson ended up second overall in the 15-kilometre freestyle race, 82 seconds behind gold medalist Maya MacIsaac-Jones of Canmore, who finished the 15-kilometre race in 50:12.9.

A former World Cup cross-country skier, Benson has focused more on her running while training for Iceman and the Boston Marathon. Her overall fitness and familiarity with the Otway course worked in her favour Sunday.

"It was good to get on the podium, it's a pretty good result, I like racing at home," said Benson, a KPMG accountant.

"I made some rookie moves that I shouldn't have been making and then my hometown corner coming down on that Race Maze took me out on the last run. It was getting pretty soft and I should have gone wider and I went in too soon, so I ended up wiping out."

Despite her fall, Benson managed to stay in front of third-place Ember Large of Edmonton. Russell Kennedy of Canmore won a close open men's 20 km race in 53:23.4, only two-thirds of a second ahead of Ezekiel Williams of Gatineau, Que., (53:24.1) and 4.1 seconds in front of David Palmer of Rossland.

John Hagen and Jacqui Pettersen of the Caledonia club both won their respective masters races. Hagen covered a 10km course in 34:39.5, edging Caledonia clubmate Scott Forrest (36:41.4), while Pettersen clocked 27:34 on a 10 km course, arriving eight minutes ahead of second-place Wanda Nemethy of Vanderhoof (35:31.9).

Kaia Andal of Prince George, 14, finished third overall in the juvenile girls race. Her medal result put Andal in a great frame of mind for her next races -- the national championships March 15-22 in Corner Brook, Nfld. Other Caledonia club finishers were: Erika Kreitz, 12th, junior girls; Midget boys -- Liam Connon -- eighth, midget boys; Bhavish Parshotam, 10th, juvenile boys; Sadie Bialuski, eighth, midget girls.

"This was my first 7.5-km race, I was pretty tired," said Andal.

"It was a little soft in some spots. All the corners had the snow pushed off them and they had big ruts in them, I almost crashed once."

Four of five centimetres of new snow overnight and above-freezing temperatures slowed down the course for 225 racers, but nobody was complaining as the four-day event wrapped up. In fact, the organizers and volunteers for what served as a test event for the 2015 Canada Winter Games received well-deserved praise from the skiers and their coaches for trail conditions and the seamless operation of the races.

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