

CANADA'S OUTDOOR ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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CANADA'S 50 BEST TRIPS

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JOURNEYS
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HOT STUFF: GETTING WARMER WITH THE LATEST MIRACLE FABRICS

■ CANADIAN CHALLENGERS

Canadians fared well in the latest **Eco-Challenge** (*Explore*, November/December), as all five Canuck teams managed to navigate New Zealand's south Island and finish the race this October: Team Subaru Outback (8th place), Team Advair (10th), Team Schick (13th), Team Advll (28th) and Team Merrell (48th). For some competitors (like Team Salomon/Eco-Internet, who won in under five days), the route proved more a sprint than the ultimate ultramarathon—which has organizers considering more "creative" obstacles, such as a choice of routes or the need to build rafts from scratch, for next year's race.

■ END OF THE CHASE

Frank Wolf and Kevin Vallely had to cut short their expedition through Indonesia (*Explore*, September/October) due to the post-September 11 war on terrorism. The Vancouver adventurers still had six



volcanoes left on their "Chasing the Dragon" tick-list, as they tried to cycle the length of Java and hike up a dozen of the island's volcanic peaks. After several unsettling encounters with passing drivers and Islamic militiamen who assumed they were Americans, the pair decided to head home early. "Adventuring in the largest Muslim country as a *Jihad* is declared against Westerners makes for entertaining stuff," deadpanned Vallely. "The Canadian flag on my pack didn't seem to make the slightest difference to the guy scoping us with a rifle."

■ WORTH HOWLING ABOUT

Listed last March as a "species of special concern," the **Eastern wolf** got some good news. After decades of research, three years of committee study and a two-month public comment period, the Ontario government announced a 30-month moratorium on hunting and trapping wolves in the four townships surrounding Algonquin Provincial Park, where an estimated 150 to 170 wolves live.

Powder baby

Continued from page 17

one of the hottest off-piste skiers on the planet—had to climb another two hours to reach the top. Tougher still: She was five months pregnant.

Then a small miracle happened: Fortier felt her baby move for the first time. He rolled and kicked for the rest of the climb and throughout the competition, and Fortier's energy soared. "I was on such a high," she remembers, "and it lasted until the end of the season."

She and her Swedish partner, Nina Oqvist, placed second at the U.S. nationals and then went on to the powder-eight world championship in Blue River, B.C., where they easily beat the other women. "It was hard for me to bend over, so I couldn't even clean the snow off my boots," Fortier laughs. "I heard one of the European skiers say, 'What is she doing here? She should be in hospital.'"

Fortier's sport remains one of the more obscure disciplines in the world of skiing, yet also one of the most glamorous. Helicopters fly tandems to the top of untracked mountain slopes, and then the two skiers descend together, linking their turns to form perfect figure-eights. Judges at the bottom of the run rate competitors on the size and symmetry of their turns, as well as the speed of their runs, using a system that's as mysterious—and sometimes as contentious—as that of figure skating.

The first world championship was hosted by Mike Wiegale Heli-Skiing in 1981 near the sleepy town of Blue River. Over the years, the competition has evolved into a fiercely competitive event, attracting skiers from some of the most famous resorts in the world: St. Anton, St. Moritz, Gstaad, Vail, Whistler.

In 1999, Fortier and Oqvist were working as ski instructors in Beaver Creek, Colorado, when three-time powder-eight world champ Franz Fuchsberger noticed Fortier's skills on the slopes. "He skied up to me and told me about powder eights," says Fortier, "then he suggested I find a partner." She picked Oqvist, a friend and sometime racing rival, and they trained with Fuchsberger for the rest of the season. Then, to their mentor's dismay, the two women beat Fuchsberger—along with all the other men—to win the 1999 U.S. nationals and a spot in the world championship.



THE MOM-TO-BE (LEFT) CELEBRATES ANOTHER POWDER-EIGHT VICTORY

To win a powder-eight event, athletes must combine the aggressiveness of mogul skiers, the finesse of freestylers and the near-telepathic teamwork of ice-dancers. "Catherine has all of these attributes," says Fuchsberger, who adds that his quick-learning pupil also benefits from her background in downhill racing. "You need to have a feel for speed. Without a certain amount of racing experience, you aren't going to win in today's competitions."

After the 1999 nationals, however, the fairy tale started to unravel. A few weeks before the worlds, Oqvist blew out a knee ligament and Fortier was diagnosed with a brain tumour. The pair still competed but didn't even make the finals at the championships. But after a summer of medical treatment for both, they came back stronger than ever, placing second at the 2000 U.S. nationals—behind Fuchsberger and his partner—and then winning the women's world championship.

Last season, they faced a different challenge when, just after Christmas, Fortier learned she was pregnant. While the pair continued to train, Fortier felt her energy waning. She considered quitting, but Oqvist convinced her to compete, assuring her there would be no pressure, and they skied to their podium finishes in Jackson Hole and Blue River.

Fortier gave birth to her son, Jackson, at the end of July, and says that 2002 will likely be her last year of competition. Fuchsberger has retired, so the way is clear for Fortier and Oqvist to take the U.S. nationals again. And, of course, back in Blue River on April 13, they want to capture the world championship for a third year running. This time, her powder baby will be on the sidelines instead of in the race.

—Laurie Cooper

BOB COLE/FORTIER

KEVIN VALLELY

MARTIN FAQUITTE

GRAHAM SCULLS/IEU