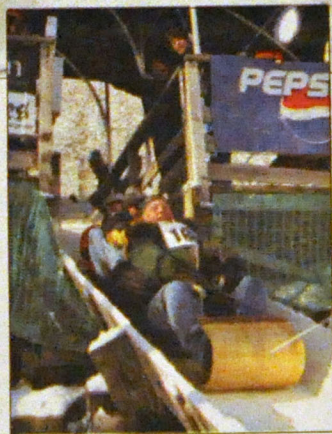




Courtesy photos

From start, bottom right, to finish, bottom left, to the 400-foot chute of ice in between, the toboggan run at the Camden Snow Bowl is a scream-inducing thrill ride that 400-plus teams will be taking this weekend.



## Cover Story

# Down the chute

The U.S. National Toboggan Championships in Camden started small 18 years ago but have picked up speed – not unlike the hundreds of vertically inclined thrill seekers hoping to be the fastest racers down the 400-foot trough of ice this weekend.

By STEPHANIE BOUCHARD  
News Assistant

With a strange woman's legs wrapped around me, I faced a terrifying moment. Four hundred feet of wooden chute dropping downhill at a pitch I didn't want to try to calculate stretched before me.

What the heck was I thinking? I don't even go on the kiddie roller coasters at amusement parks.

Our toboggan tipped out into space. "Hands and elbows in," I repeated to myself as we dropped three feet and shot down the chute. Trees, snow, people all meshed together in a blur. The wind and the skimming of the toboggan over the planks of the chute sounded like a jet – accompanied by the sound of my own screaming.

In mere seconds, we exploded onto the ice-covered Hosmer Pond. Three-quarters of the way across, we finally slowed to a stop. Tom Cox,

### IF YOU GO

#### THE U.S. NATIONAL TOBOGGAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

**WHEN:** Friday through Sunday. Race times (subject to change) begin at 9 a.m. Saturday and Sunday. Chili and Chowder Challenge is 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday.

**WHERE:** Camden Snow Bowl, 20 Barnestown Road, Camden (check camdensnowbowl.com for accurate directions).

**HOW MUCH:** Free to watch the championships. \$8 (\$6 for children) to sample the Chili and Chowder Challenge.

**INFORMATION:** 236-3438; camdensnowbowl.com. (At the Web site, check out the video from last year's championships.)

**PARKING:** Parking is limited at the Snow

Bowl (and costs \$5). It's recommended that you take a free shuttle. Shuttles pick up and drop off at the Village Green on Elm Street (Route 1), the lower parking lot at the Camden-Rockport Middle School on Knowlton Street and at the Knox Mill parking lot (Knowlton Street entrance). The shuttle runs every 20 minutes from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

**WHAT ELSE:** During the U.S. National Toboggan Championships, the Camden Snow Bowl will be open for skiing, snowboarding and snow tubing. Skiing/snowboarding trails are open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Snow tubing trails are open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

the only one of the three of us on the toboggan with serious experience – he's a winning tobogganer of the U.S. National Toboggan Champion-

ships – cheerily declared that if he'd been able to bring one of his sleds, we'd have gone a whole lot faster. (The faster toboggan teams reach up to

40 miles per hour and make it down the chute in about seven seconds.)

Cox, 65, is returning for his 17th competition this weekend at the 18th annual U.S. National Toboggan Championships at the Camden Snow Bowl. He's a member of one of 404 teams signed up to compete.

The Rockport resident not only rides toboggans, like many competitors of the toboggan championships, he builds his own. He even teaches an adult education class on toboggan building.

In fact, he's so serious about tobogganing he refuses to share sledding secrets – even with his students. "I tell them to put one coat of varnish on it," he said with a grin, and that's as far as he'll go.

This year, for the first time, registration for the event sold out well in advance. The race is the only fund-raiser for the Camden Snow Bowl, a community recreation center owned by the town of Camden.

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## CHUTE

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So far, \$37,000 has been raised, said Barbara Goos, the Snow Bowl's marketing director. The town will match up to \$35,000. It's expected that this year's total will meet or exceed last year's of just over \$40,000.

Organized primarily by volunteers, the U.S. National Toboggan Championships is a family event that draws about 5,000 spectators to the base of the 1,300-foot Ragged Mountain. The championships began in 1991 as a way to debut the most current incarnation of the toboggan chute.

Mostly local folks went to that first event, but it didn't take long for word to get around about how much fun was to be had at the championships. Today, teams of two, three and four come from all over the

United States.

The wooden chute currently used is the third to be built at the Snow Bowl. The first was built in the 1936.

Stuart Young, the "chute master," grew up riding it. He's a dedicated man, sometimes arriving at 3 a.m. to condition it. "Just like Dracula, I do my best work in the dark," he quipped. Working early in the morning is a good time to build up the ice, because it's so cold.

Young uses a "chute Zamboni" – a black plastic box punctured with several holes to allow water to flow out – to add layers to the ice. For the championships, he hopes to have two to three inches because of the wear that will be caused by the 400 or so sleds.

While the competition for the mahogany, toboggan-topped trophies is real, the event is truly about having a good time in the middle of winter. Maybe

it's the childhood memories of sledding that bring out the kid in everyone.

Folks get dressed up in costumes. Some adorn their sleds with painted-on team logos and take on names such as Vertically Inclined and Sled Zeppelin.

Some spectators and competitors set up tents and seating on the ice on the pond. There are bonfires and plenty of food. This year, the Chili and Chowder Challenge, which has been held off-site in recent years, is at the Snow Bowl on Sunday, complete with live music.

"Everybody does it for fun," said Cox, whose children and their spouses, grandchildren and friends will be competing along with him this weekend. "For the whole weekend, everybody's happy."

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