

# **The Ski Playground: An Introduction to Sport for Life for *All* Canadians**

For Jesse Cockney, the experience helped him drift back more than three decades, to a time when he was a young, unsteady novice just beginning a love affair with a sport.

“When people get on skis, any skis, for the first time,” says the two-time Canadian Olympian, “there’s always that moment of apprehension – they’re really focused, so dialed-in, paying extra special attention.

“But then – as always – after a while, there’s this spark, as if a light goes on for them, and they really get it. We all have experienced that, at some place, at some time.

“You’ll see the biggest smiles on faces. Cold, –18, maybe the coldest day they’ve ever been outside in their lives, and they are *loving* it.

“Those moments are universal, across ages, backgrounds, when you find yourself gliding, actually doing it.

“I started skiing when I was about two years old. And being a part of this – a totally unique experience – does take me back to those feelings I had when I was 5, 6, 7 years old. No aspirations of racing, of personal goals, of competing at an Olympics.

“Just the love of skiing. That is really cool to see.

As coordinator of the Ski Playground initiative, a four-sport partnership between Nordiq Canada, Biathlon Canada, Ski Jumping Canada and Nordic Combined Canada, Cockney has gotten the chance to see those moments firsthand again.

The format is unique: All four ski disciplines in one setting, designed to introduce one or all of them to people of varying backgrounds and especially people who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQI+, low income, newcomers and persons with disabilities.

It’s a one-stop ski-experience for mostly first-time skiers and oftentimes under-served Canadians. Over \$290,000 in funding, received through Sport Canada’s Community Sport for All Initiative, was used to develop the Ski Playground program, market it, purchase equipment and run five demonstration events in partnership with clubs. All in hopes that

clubs across the country will create low-cost ski playgrounds of their own, using shovels and other common supplies.

"There's not a lot better than seeing kids drawn to the biathlon range," laughs Cockney. "It's fun, we have (laser gun) lights set up so they go green or red and they get really excited about that.

"Being outside, experiencing a new sport with other kids, good sport-for-life endeavours.

"What could be better?"

Ski Playground's five-province tour began on Feb. 18th at the Nickel Plate Nordic Centre in Penticton, B.C., then all the way cross-country to the Wostawea Cross Country Ski Club in Fredericton, N.B., west to Strathcona Wilderness Centre in Uncas, Alta., then to Langham, Sask. and River Ridge Nordic , and, finally, to Cockney's hometown, Yellowknife, NT and the Yellowknife Ski Club.

"The experience we had here," summarizes Wostawea club president Nathalie Comeau, "was wonderful."

The morning activities in Fredericton on Feb. 24th focused on jackrabbit and regular adult learners, keen to try new things. In the afternoon session, those who'd never skied before joined the participation party.

A pleasant sidelight, adds Comeau, was the sight of former jackrabbit cross country skiers who hadn't visited the club in quite a while returning specifically to give biathlon and ski jumping a whirl.

"I think people were more ready to try the biathlon laser rifles, because they've been to arcades or laser tag," says Comeau. "Ski jumping is a bigger challenge for people, but I was pleasantly surprised to see both kids and adults try it.

"And some kids ... they actually got air. They were really good. But if they tried and didn't get it right the first time, or the second, they'd run right back up the hill and say 'I'm going again!' And did, until they landed on their feet.

"When you think of ski jumping in New Brunswick, you don't think you'll ever get the chance. You see it at the Olympics. You know there were ski jumps out west. But that's about it. So, to have this here, to have a go with the skis, the helmet, everything, was

unusual and so much fun, so exciting. I'm sure people thought: 'I'd better try this. When am I going to get another chance?'"

An opportunity both Carolyn MacDonald, in her first year as a volunteer at Wostawea, and six-year-old son William, both avid cross-country skiers, wholly embraced.

"Ski jump!" enthuses William, when asked which of the four sports he enjoyed most on the day.

And why?

"Because it was fun and mommy was scared of it.

"I was fine. I tried about 20 times. I landed on my skis, then lost my balance and I fell over on my side or my back. And once I went over the jump, went through the air, and landed in a snowbank!"

The concept of incorporating the four types of skiing together impressed Carolyn MacDonald.

"I think it's a great idea," she says, "especially in a place like here in Fredericton, where our terrain is ideally suited for cross-country skiing but people don't have an opportunity to really get involved with the other kinds of skiing - we do have a downhill spot near the city but compared to, say, out west, it's very different.

"To be able to try ski jump ... the slopes were very small, the bumps were very gentle but that's something that in my life I never thought I'd try. I don't know if I'd have ever had the chance, if they hadn't brought the appropriate helmets and skis and built the beginning jumps for us to give it a go on.

"If they want to get people involved in all aspects of skiing, I think this is a great way to do it.

"I hope they bring it back again."

That, of course, is music to the ears of Cockney who acknowledges that the initiative involved a lot of work and travel packed into a tight time frame.

"When I first heard of this program in general," he admits ruefully, "my thought was: 'Wow that sounds like a big job ...' As I get to the end of it here - I've got one more event next week in Yellowknife - it has been big - in the inertia, in getting it moving and on the radar of clubs earlier in the year, physically loading up 13 bags of Salomon skis and all

the supporting equipment that goes along with that. Even driving it to communities with a rented pick-up truck or flying across three time zones in our massive country.

"I really didn't know anything about biathlon, ski jumping, or nordic combined. For me, filling in these gaps to bring quality programming has been so well supported by the national sport bodies - I can't hammer that home enough.

"But the whole thing, I'll admit, was a little daunting. 'I'm going to be bringing *how* many pairs of skis to *how* many clubs across the county, in *how* many weeks?' Before I even set out, my head was already spinning."

The personal benefits though, have made his effort more than worthwhile: Visiting new communities across the country, seeing clubs he'd never even heard of, talking skiing, and gaining fresh perspectives.

"One thing that stood out to me right from the start," says Cockney, he himself of Inuvialuit heritage, "was reaching certain populations and having that be the main target. Whether it's Indigenous communities, LGBTQ or any of our equity-deserving populations that we've reached through these events, and just knowing that skiing can really be for everyone. It's not just about your ability, your age, where you come from or your familiarity. Just fun events that take in such a broad engagement ... whatever you want from any of these four sports, it's there. Sport for life activities.

"Opening opportunities to different people across the country has been really fun.

"Another cool thing, believe it or not, has been the challenges presented by this winter. Conditions have been pretty similar across the country - low snow, spotty weather, rain in January ... just really tough, ski-wise. I've been to B.C., New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta chatting with people in Ontario and Quebec, and to see the resourcefulness and the work volunteers are doing on the ground, to keep conditions good enough to get people out and skiing. Incredible.

"To see the enthusiasm of these people working with what they've got has been awesome."

And the opportunity to return, on the final leg of his journey, to the place where his dad, Angus Cockney, a national team cross-country skier in his day, had introduced him to a sport that he quickly came to embrace, then cherish.

"I've been back over the years, but I haven't had a chance to ski in Yellowknife since 1996, the year my family moved to Canmore, Alta.," Cockney muses.

"My first steps on skis were at this ski club, in 1991 or 1992. A long time ago. I've got friends from Yellowknife who still live there, they've got young families that I haven't had a chance to meet ... time just flies, right?"

"This is the community where I learned to ski so many years ago. So this is going to be really special.

"I'm just so lucky to have this sport in my life."

And moving forward, he hopes all Canadians will feel the same, thanks, in part, to the Ski Playground.