

a National Champ Hall of Famer in our midst

By Dolores Ullstrom

Maybe I'm the only one in the Lake Sarah neighborhood not well acquainted with Joe Knapp's success in water skiing. But, in case there are a few more of you out there who do not know this very interesting guy, I would like to introduce Joe to you.

For forty years I have lived just down the street from him. When we first met early in June of this year, we were more or less strangers. "How can this be," I asked myself. After giving it some thought, I have come to the conclusion it is because Joe and I travel in different circles. There is no doubt that we both love lake living, but we focus on different areas of interest. His circle of interest includes long periods of bare, wet feet; mine does not. I keep my shoes on.

When he was a child, Joe took an interest in waterskiing and since age 21, his focus has been barefoot waterskiing. At sixty-four years of age, Joe plans to participate in barefoot waterskiing tournaments well into his nineties and possibly beyond! To this end, he runs 5k's three times a week, trains whenever he can, eats a healthy diet and generally maintains an active lifestyle.



Joe has competed in all three events at all 41 National Barefoot Skiing Championship tournaments. He is the only individual in the country to have done so. This does not, of course, happen by accident. Among other things, hard work and dogged determination play a major role. The three events at all National Tournaments are slalom, trick, and jump. In addition to participating in the competitive side of skiing, Joe is a tournament organizer and a qualified judge of tournament events.

Until he moved to Lake Sarah in 1979, Joe lived in Excelsior, MN. where his dad, Dick Knapp, was for forty years, owner of Knapp Radio and TV. Mr. Knapp was also mayor for eight years. Joe tells the story about the store's first TV. It arrived in 1949. No one took enough interest in this new, modern gadget to buy it. So the TV sat on the store's shelf for a couple of years until Mr. Knapp donated it to his church for a fund raising raffle.

Joe was one of thirteen Knapp children. He graduated from Benilde High School. Joe recalls that he got his first pair of new shoes when he entered Benilde. Till then his older brothers let him wear their hand-me-downs.

A clue to understanding Joe is the story about how he traveled to and from Benilde. Each day his dad gave him 70 cents for bus fare from Excelsior to St. Louis Park. Joe had other plans for the money. Instead of riding the bus, he hitch-hiked every day to school. He was a junior before his parents found out about the hitch-hiking escapade. The 70 cent fare subsidy stopped immediately

With a smile, Joe says that being the ninth child in his large family, he has had to work hard to get some attention. In addition, there were strong competitive feelings between him and a few of his brothers. Joe believes that these factors have greatly influenced his life. It is within this milieu that Joe's fierce interest in barefoot skiing competition most likely fits in. He is a singular type of guy and is very comfortable with that.

Joe was about nine when the family went camping at Lake Independence Campground (Baker Park). His dad had a 10 horse, green Johnson outboard motor which he attached to a small rented fishing boat. A rope was tied to a back corner of the boat for the kids to hang onto while skiing. Given the angle of pull and the weight of each skier, the boat moved in a catywampus fashion around the Lake. Joe was hooked. He learned patience waiting for his next waterskiing opportunity.

During the summer of his thirteenth year, a neighbor, a guy about 30 years of age, asked Joe and his younger brother to drive his boat so he could ski. Joe accepted enthusiastically. In due course, he also got to ski. As he got more proficient, Joe attempted tricks and jumps, anything to challenge himself. He eventually got to where he could use one ski. Three years after the start of this endeavor, he attended a water skiing show on Lake Minnetonka. One of the skiers in the show stepped out of the one ski he was using and skied barefoot for a brief time before falling. Barefoot skiing, at that moment, became Joe's next challenge.

It did not happen immediately. Joe had to wait until he got himself a fast enough boat before he could attempt barefoot skiing. Joe tells me that appropriate boat speed is one of the secrets to barefoot skiing success. At age 21 Joe purchased a 173 Glastron with a 115 hp outboard motor. He thus began the process by which he gained national and probably international fame in the sport.

The formula used to determine appropriate boat speed for an individual skier is twenty mph plus 10% of the skier's body weight. Too slow a speed and the skier cannot get up or maintain an upright position. Too fast and the skier's feet must be protected from damaging friction. Feet that do not ride on top of the water, doom the skier to failure.

The very first Barefoot National Championship Tournament was held in 1978 in Waco, TX. Joe won his first Overall Championship in Owego, NY in 1987 on Spencer Pond. He won his second National Championship in 1991. A baseball fan, Joe is sure there is a connection between his skiing and Twins' World Series successes. Joe has however been more successful than the Twins. He has gone on to win the Nationals in 2003, 2005, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

Joe is proud to say that Minnesota's first State championship tournament was held on Lake Sarah in 1980. Placing in state tournaments is a way to qualify for Nationals. Tired of travelling to other states with equipment and officials required to conduct each tournament, Joe helped organize the tournament on Lake Sarah. Bigger, busier lakes are not good tournament sites. Calm water is another secret to barefoot success.

Joe and his wife Debbie met in 1976. At a time when hitch hiking was a safe and popular means of transportation for many, Debbie, who didn't own a car, lived in Excelsior and hitch hiked every day to work. One day, Joe offered her a ride. Their first date was at a John Denver concert. Eventually they talked marriage and that is what led them to Lake Sarah. Debbie's search for household furnishings took her to newspaper

want-ads and while looking for garage sales, she spied a reasonably priced cabin for sale on Lake Sarah. After purchasing that cabin for \$39,900, Joe moved in on Nov. 1, 1979. Joe and Debbie were married June 12, 1982. Two sons were born, Justin and Travis. Justin is now married. Travis was killed in a very tragic car accident in Medina when he was 15.

Over the years the Knapps have completely renovated and expanded their cabin. In 1984 the house was raised and a walkout basement put under it.

While Joe has many stories, one of his favorite is the one in which he believes Providence, played a key role in making conditions just right for him to successfully complete a once in a life time feat. It happened on Lake Superior in 1976 over the Fourth of July holiday. The Lake, known mostly for rough water and sudden changes in weather conditions, remained smooth as silk for several days while Debbie and he were camping in Two Harbors. Using one ski, Joe asked Debbie to pull him as far as she could until the boat's gas tank showed half full. She was then to turn around and return to Two Harbors. The boat got as far as Silver Bay before Debbie turned the boat around. Sixty-five miles and 2 1/2 hours later, the one ski marathon event ended. Lake Superior's unusually calm conditions played a major role in making this "event" possible. It wasn't a public event but nonetheless a significant personal achievement for Joe. Through it, he learned a lot about himself.

Debbie, in her younger days was an active barefoot skier. Unlike Joe, she does not like the attention that tournament participation invariably brings. After becoming a mother, she retired from tournament competition. She continues to drive frequently while Joe skis.

Since 1988 Joe and Debbie have owned a 454 cu.in. 330 hp Correct Craft, Barefoot Nautique. It is powerful and at a family gathering on Lake Sarah, it pulled all eight of the Knapp brothers

Given the nature of the sport, I asked about injuries. Joe has had several injuries including a deep cut on his right cheek bone, a fracture to his left forearm, dislocated right shoulder, and left knee tendon damage. These injuries have not kept him from National competitions. The cut to his cheek occurred on Lake Sarah in 1986 and required 38 stitches. It occurred four days prior to a national competition in Defiance, Ohio. Joe participated in the competition and was told that because of the high level of pollution in the river, the stitches had to be removed to prevent infection. He now has

an almost invisible scar on his cheek. One has hope that since then the river has been cleaned up more than a little. Aware of the risks, Joe says one must put all fear aside in order to achieve an award winning performance.

On May 18, 2018 Joe was inducted into the Minnesota Senior Sports Association Hall of Fame. Included in the program for the event is a photo of Joe in which he is covered with snow and icicles



Joe Knapp – Minnesota Senior Sports Hall of Fame - Barefoot Water Skiing

Water skiing is not thought of as a winter sport. But Joe doesn't buy that. On January 1 of every year for 43 years, he and members of a water skiing organization have skied the Mississippi River. Or should I say that each Jan. 1, they attempt to ski the river. Three times in all those years, they have been prevented from skiing due to heavy ice buildup. On successful years, they have spent up to five hours clearing away ice. About a quarter of a mile of open water is needed to make skiing possible.

Barefoot skiing requires a surface free of debris. Even a dead fish can be a problem. A floating dorsal fin can enter the arch of the skier's foot and require surgical removal. Joe has a procedure which he calls 'check and go' whereby he covers a surface on skies before he attempts barefoot skiing over the area. Joe is very happy about Lake Sarah's recent decrease in weeds such as curly leaf pond weed.

When asked about the future of his favorite sport, Joe says he is optimistic that it has a future, in spite of the fact that participation in national competitions is down about 50% from its high point twenty years ago. Several factors influence participation. At his level, participation requires complete devotion to the sport, and there or so many other distractions out there today. Water skiing in general is down. Finding calm water is increasingly more difficult. In the future man-made lakes may be needed. This requires a good deal of expense. Only time will tell.



Meeting with Joe to get the information required to write this piece has been a lot of fun. Joe usually has a smile on his face and a joke to tell. Right after his family, barefoot skiing is his life. Never have I met a person more focused. Joe admits this is rather outrageous behavior but he likes the challenge. He is very appreciative that Debbie has supported his interest through the years. He is who he is, and he likes it that way. And it does get him the attention he seems to seek.