



HERE: A soft cotton rope is best even for experienced skijorers; soft ropes are much more forgiving and far less slippery than yacht rope or traditional lariats. Any colour other than white is best as it makes the rope easier to see in snowy conditions. RIGHT: Protective gear for your horse is important as hard packed snow can be quite sharp.

SNOWSPORT

Skijor Canada's Skijordue is a must do.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MONIQUE NOBLE

What started as a private event with an entry fee of a block of cheese, is now a growing national competition.

Skijor Canada's premier event Skijordue is back again this year and will be held, weather permitting, on February 3, 2018 at the Calgary Polo Club. If last year's event with almost 700 attendees was any indication, it will be the must do event of the season. Skijordue 2018 is expected to be larger than 2017 and plans for an epic day of skijoring events, demonstrations and races followed by a bumping après skijor party are well in hand.

Cheese fondue is the epicurean epicentre of this event and with ski and equine excitement all around, Skijordue promises to be the not-be-missed extreme sporting event of the year. While the original fondue idea was based on an après ski tradition Skijor Canada founders Sam Mitchell and her husband Graham adopted over seven years of wintering in Switzerland, she enthuses that, "The cheese gave us such a weird opportunity to be cheesy and to not take it too seriously... we want to have fun, and keep it affordable (sadly cheese is no longer the preferred currency). We want to create a unique event that welcomes all sorts of people and the cheese aspect just seems to give us license to do some ridiculous stuff."

Sam, an Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD) graduate in textiles and design, loves any excuse to break

out a costume, and the abundance of fur, fringe and neon spandex at last year's event is a testament that the competitors and spectators of skijor are eager to join in on the fun.

When winter arrives, most equestrian folk are settling in for a slower pace or no pace at all, but skijorers across Canada are gearing up in slick fashion for cool weather and hot extreme-sport skijor racing. As the sport grows in popularity, more and more people are joining the community. With this in mind, we asked Sam Mitchell to walk us through all the aspects of getting started in the sport.

Sam, who was also a race marshal last year advises that, "The last thing you want to do is pull out a fat, fuzzy horse and run it flat out." For this competitive sport, the ideal (and most fun) way to start skijoring is with an experienced rider mounted on a fit ranch or rope broke horse. An experienced slider (on skis, a snowboard, or a toboggan) is also an asset. The horse must be accustomed to a rope and able to neck rein as Skijor Canada rules specify that the rider must guide the horse with one hand while holding the rope with the other.

If your skier is inexperienced, ensure your horse is experienced or vice versa. Pairing a green slider with a green horse is a fast way to face washes and frustration. Green riders are encouraged to spend some time learning to handle a rope on their horse before towing anything.



Preparing your horse for winter sports is slightly different from other seasonal riding but not so much as to be prohibitive. If you are expecting a big day of sport, ensure your horse is well fed and watered before exercise.

Therapeutic products may help to warm up your horse's muscles before, in between and after exercise. In the winter, they are very helpful for both humans and horses. Always take care to warm your horse up properly, and cool him down, ensuring he's completely dry before you turn him out.

When first introducing your horse to skijoring, it is best to do so in an enclosed field and in small steps, rewarding your horse with reassurance and rest as he learns.

1. Introduce the horse to your board or skis, let the horse smell and touch them and then put the equipment on the ground and move it around – without a slider – so the horse can get used to the movement and sound. When the horse is comfortable, your slider can get on their ride.

2. Ensure your horse is comfortable with your slider on their ride while they are unattached. The slider should jump, move and fall to get your horse used to their movements. Once the horse is comfortable, it is time to attempt your first skijor!

3. Communication between rider and slider before you start is important as it's near impossible to converse once you start. Discuss your route and plan your speeds together. If you encounter a problem mid-run, the swiftest save is for either party to simply to let go of the rope.

4. To start, the slider should hold the rope with one hand, about three feet from the end, anchoring the tail of the rope in their other hand at the corresponding hip. Passing the tail of the rope behind their bum is a good way to help ease the pull on their arms at slow speeds. They should begin with their front arm bent, and allow it to extend as they start moving, to avoid getting jerked forward. Safety in mind, the rope should never be tied around the slider. Once your slider has become used to the pull [\[CONTINUED ON PAGE 24\]](#)



TO GET STARTED YOU WILL NEED:

- Two people with adventurous spirits and a sense of humour.
- A fit, broke horse accustomed to both ropes and neck reining.
- A western saddle with a horn that can be used for dallying a rope.
- Roping (joined) reins as they are easier to handle than split reins.
- A breast collar that will help the saddle stay in place and redistribute some of the pressure created by pulling at speed.
- While some horses fare well barefoot, if the conditions are particularly icy, you can shoe horses with borium or corks for extra traction. Sharp shoeing is an option but is not encouraged for horses that are turned out in groups. Shod horses should also be equipped with snow pads to help prevent snow from balling up in their hooves.
- Sport boots and bell boots for your horse – all four legs should be protected. Wraps are not recommended.
- A strong, soft, round cotton rope free of knots and in good repair, approximately 30 feet long.
- Older downhill skis or a snow board – they may get a bit banged up. Whether you use skis or a board is strictly preference. (If you are an experienced boarder, stick with your snowboard; for a complete beginner, skis are easier to start on.) Toboggans (although they are not used in skijor competition,) are a great introductory option for green sliders/horses.
- Sliders should wear a helmet – you will fall.
- Goggles and face protection for the slider are key – you will get snow in your face.
- Gloves for both the slider and rider are highly recommended as you are handling rope and, it's winter. For the rest of your gear, you can go traditional and functional or have some fun Euro-trash-mashing bright spandex with fur, shearling and fringe-tastic cowboy chic items to create your own skijor style.

Check out www.skijorcanada.com for competition schedules, rules and for help planning your own skijor event!



ABOVE: As your team gains confidence, you can pick up speed and start going up and down small hills. A slider should never get ahead of their rider/horse team, so steep hills are discouraged. If you do get in front of your rider/horse team, let go of the rope immediately! Ensuring your horse's comfort with the slider is not only a vital component for safety but also for success. Ritz, a 10 year old gelding trained by Rempel Performance Horses, was very relaxed throughout his introduction to skijoring, which is not a surprise, as he used to be a Calgary Stampede pick-up horse.

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23] and movement of the rope, they can hold it in front of them or wherever is most comfortable. If the slider falls, they should always let go of the rope.

5. When your slider is ready, you can dally the rope around the horn. There are four key points to this; thumbs up, counter clockwise if you are right-handed; clockwise if you are left-handed. Always keep the rope over your leg, and always turn your horse toward your rope so the rope cannot go behind your back.

6. Before cueing your horse, check to see that your slider is ready and when you get the nod, start slow. Let your horse get used to the person attached to them and let that person get used to the movement.

It is the rider's job to guide the horse and the slider's job to guide themselves so they stay on the rider's rope side. The slider must take great caution to avoid sliding into the horse or fellow skijorers. The rider should make turns gentle and wide to help the horse – the slider should stay to the outside of the turn on the rope side, to keep the rope taught and to get the most out of the centrifugal force of the movement.

Skijor Canada discourages tying ropes to riders, sliders or saddles so that in the event of an issue everyone can be disconnected by letting go of the rope on either end. Team safety should be foremost in everyone's mind.

Once everyone is comfortable, you can go outside of your enclosed area and start practicing your skills over hills, around corners and even - if you're brave enough - jumps.

Happy Skijoring! *AB*

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