

This Kite Climbed Mt. Washington

The bumper sticker hasn't been printed yet,
but it's best not to encourage amateurs to join this club.

Story and photos by Brian Irwin

On a brisk February day last year Zebulon Jakub plodded up the Winter Lion's Head route on Mount Washington. The trail was steep and convoluted, winding through gnarled pines and growth-stunted shrubs. The wind blew steadily at 30 miles an hour, a mere breeze for the hill whose moniker is "Home of the World's Worst Weather." After an hour the trees faded in height as he approached tree line. In front of him a giant apron of snow led to the summit. Under normal conditions, the cadence up the upper mountain would take hours. For Jakub, it would take six minutes.

With camera in hand, I watched as Jakub stabilized his skis and threaded his legs through an intricate harness. The harness tethered him by a system of cord to a foil, a large kite designed to bite into the wind, deploy rapidly and drag a skier across the snow. With a snap of thin nylon fabric and a brisk jerk on the control bar, the foil rocketed skyward, yanking him up the hill in a rapid, controlled flash. In mere seconds, Jakub was gone, out of sight.

Snowkiting is an adventurous outdoor endeavor, one that is gaining popularity rapidly in New Hampshire. Executed while standing on either skis or snowboard, it's a thrilling sport akin to kitesurfing, where foils or other forms of kites are used to tow those on wakeboards or surfboards, either on flat water or in the frothing surf of the ocean. Like wakeboarding, there is a wide variety of terrain from which to choose, with a wide range of difficulty.

From broad meadows to rolling cornfields, from steep mountain slopes to alpine areas fraught with cliffbands, snowkiting is a blend of riding and transportation, one where free-style tricks, big air and exhilarating speeds can be enjoyed by experienced riders. And while some snowkiters certainly push the needle firmly into the "extreme sport" end of the gauge, an explosion of introductory instruction has made this once-nebulous sport an option for those with no former experience.

Today Jakub is one the country's most revered snowkiting instructors. The 35-year-old man is stocky and calm, penetrating his confidence into his clients as he teaches them how to fly a kite, and hopefully, someday, learn how to be pulled by its force. While he honed his skills as a child kiteflyer in the fields of western Massachusetts, his boyhood fascination with the wind and its power evolved into

Jakub stretches his legs during a blustery day at the Omni Mount Washington Resort. Their golf course makes an ideal training slab for snowkiting with a spectacular backdrop and favorable conditions on most days.

a deeper understanding of its forces, vectors and ability to provide him a wild ride. And a wild ride it can be.

New England has no shortage of outdoor festivals that promote adventure sports. There are a half-dozen ice climbing festivals alone in New England. The Adirondacks host a backcountry ski festival. There are alpine-touring races and tours, geared toward spreading the word about the pursuit. But until 20 years ago there weren't many public events aimed at spreading or celebrating the sport of snowkiting. And there were none in New England.

In 2005 Jakub started one of the East's first snowkiting festivals, the Kite Free or Die event. This festival was initially held on Lake Winnepesaukee and it ran for two years. "We realized quickly that snowkiting on frozen lakes did not suit all ability levels equally," he says. The exposed ice made conditions challenging, so he moved his project to Tug Hill plateau near Lowville, NY, where rolling hills and broad hillsides offered more variable terrain. This event continues today, but in 2012 Jakub sought to bring the sport back to the Granite State.

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Die festival and re-launched it at the golf course at the venerable Omni Mount Washington Resort. His perception was that an event would be more successful if there were a broad array of other snow-oriented activities available to attendees in the event of a slow or no-wind day. With more than 75 participants in the first few years, Jakub regards this interest as a harbinger of a sport growing out of its infancy.

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Today's snowkiting is a far cry from Jakub's early days of flying kites. He's been flying giant kites capable of towing a skier or rider since he was young. Back then, 30 years ago, the direction of the sport was still unwritten. The flight of huge kites was just taking off. In my own youth I watched these kite flyers at Kitty Hawk, NC, home of the Wright brothers' inaugural flight. Another time I vividly recall watching employees of the kite store in Ocean City, Md., fly these huge instruments. They resembled small parachutes, but more lenticular in shape, more streamlined. Their pilots would launch seven-foot kites into the sea breeze, sometimes catching a gust that would allow them to leap off the ground and coast many tens of feet and over sand dunes. These were the kites with which Jakub grew. And flying them was a pursuit known as powerkiting, one that remains popular today.

"The first time I went snowkiting it was 1999. At the time it was a small niche



Jakub's foil in flight. Learning to control a kite this size takes diligence, but once learned can provide a thrilling ride.

pursuit. The sport was barely gaining popularity," Jakub says. "But I'd already learned how to fly kites large enough to provide propulsion, so it seemed natural to use them to move me on skis."

Although it's just starting to fly with more popularity, snowkiting isn't new. It has roots based in the Alps, where in the 1960s a man named Dieter Strasilla initiated experiments with his parachute, the one he used for parapente stunts. Parapente is a pursuit where the pilot deploys a modified parachute atop a mountain or cliffband and eases it into the wind and off the ground. Parapente pilots still fly today, although much of the sport's popularity in the United States has faded, and its modern stronghold resides in places like Chamonix, France.

Strasilla modified his parachute's system and began using it while skiing, allowing him to ski off and over obstacles never before possible. His experiments evolved and eventually he found it possible to slide uphill, pulled by his chute, then stash his parachute into a pack and descend peaks on skis with the aid of gravity. Snowkiting was born.

From a transportation point of view, snowkiting is a logical sport.

Rather than utilize ski lifts or expensive helicopter rides, or gain skiable slopes by hiking, the rider can kite up hills and mountains and then enjoy the downward slide. The possibilities are almost endless and have taken Jakub all over the country. He's kited in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah, and has countries like Norway and France in his crosshairs. Kites have been used for years to aid expedition teams in conquering large tracts of land. They've been used to pull climbing teams across Greenland's icecap and through Baffin Island, Canada's gaping fjords. They've even been used in polar regions to aid teams in reaching the globe's poles.

Jakub isn't just a snowkiting professional; he's a revered climbing guide. He works with the International Mountain Climbing School (IMCS) in North Conway. He guides climbing clients up iridescent columns of ice and frozen waterfalls, harrowing granite faces and wind-whipped mountains. And although he's still an active climbing guide, his true passion is in the wind. In 2009 he became a certified

snowkite instructor, a badge overseen by the International Kiteboarding Organization.

Jakub has become a popular instructor in this pursuit, partially due to his calm demeanor and partially because he is one of the few people who has sunk his talons into a growing, thrilling sport that is just getting off the ground. He's self-taught, and given the fact that he has 15 years under his harness, he knows the limits of his clients and the forces of nature. And in his business, safety is top priority.

I witnessed Jakub provide a lesson to a new kiter, a young woman in her late 20s. She'd flown these kites once before,



While learning, Jakub holds on to students by their harnesses until they're ready to fly off-leash.

but today the wind was up and Jakub's schoolroom was in prime condition. Soft snow blanketed the undulating surface of the instruction area near Bretton Woods. His client wanted to ride and ride fast. But first, she needed to learn to fly.

At first, each flight of the young woman's kite ended in a crash landing. She wasn't riding her snowboard, rather she sat seated, both heels augured into the snowpack, anchoring her to the ground. Behind her Jakub sat, holding onto a retention loop on her harness. The only way she could be uprooted from her stance would be via anomalous gusts,



Foiled again: Parapente and powerkiting are two variations on this growing field of sport.

failure of her to drop the kite and Jakub's failure to restrain her, the latter two of which seemed more improbable the longer I watched him.

Jakub has watched the evolution of the sport and noted that "... even in the last 10 years the change in equipment and instruction have become infinitely stronger." By the end of this woman's second lesson, I watched her fly her kite with steady precision, and eventually pull herself up onto her snowboard for a short ride.

There's something pure about flying a kite. Even small, toy kites demand attention to detail and respect for nature's forces. Perhaps nothing can make a

child cry more than a kite that snaps loose, gone forever. Some of these events, and many other happy ones, are my earliest memories of flying kites on that same beach in Maryland. We'd fly them all day, keeping almost all from the hungry surf that bites at an inattentive little boy with a spool of twine in his hand. And when night would fall, we'd tie glow sticks to them and fly them over the dark ocean.

But big kites demand big respect. They can pull you onto

your face, and if you're tied into them, off your feet. However with proper instruction and a tincture of respect for the wind, we can use them for a free ride. Kites have taken skiers like Jakub all around the world, without burning a single drop of oil or gasoline or without the sticker shock of a lift ticket. However, like anything worthwhile, snowkiting doesn't come that easy.

Jakub said it best: "You do have to put in your time. With ever-changing wind it can be a hard sport to learn. But as with most things that are hard to learn, they're all that more rewarding once you do." **NH**

Have a Wild, Wild Winter

Just playing in the snow is fun, sure, but if you want to try something new or different, read on...



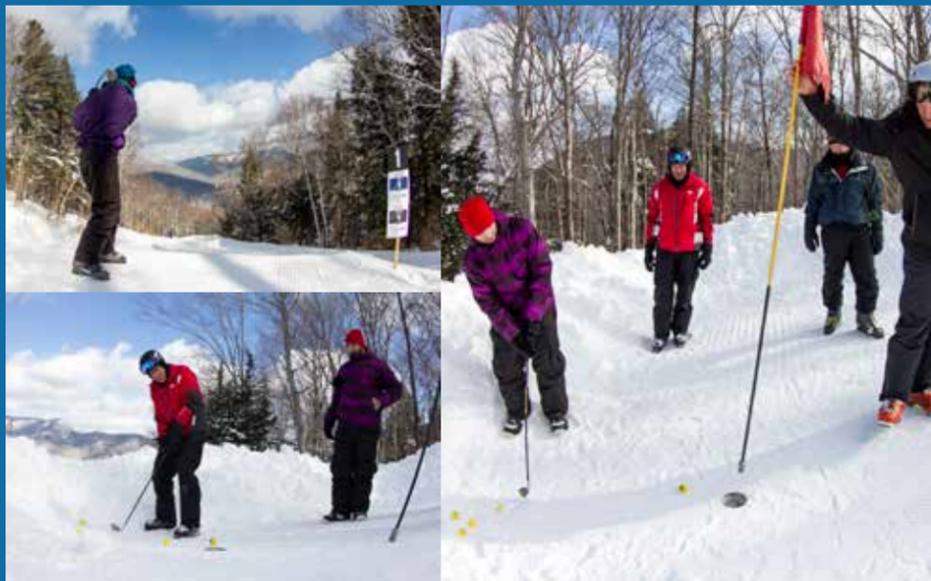
Fatbiking

Just because it's winter doesn't mean that you have to give up your biking season. In fact, that's why fatbikes are around — to extend the time you can pedal around. Unlike a mountain bike, a fatbike will not easily sink in snow. It's more than slapping fatter tires on a mountain bike body, though. According to Arlon Chaffee of LOCO Cycling in Newmarket, fatbikes are a "relatively new type of bicycle specifically designed around wider rims and tires. You actually have to redo the bike geometry; everything's wider."

Mountain bikes have a suspension system, but on a fatbike, the tires are the suspension. Chaffee says it can be like riding on a donut. "They're basically mountain bikes on steroids," Chaffee says. Last year, Chaffee introduced a fatbike race series at Stratham Hill Park. This year, he's expanding; there will be a variety of races across New Hampshire, including night races at Gunstock. Chaffee seems excited as he talks about adventure races and the grand finale at Stratham Hill where there will be numerous bike vendors and demonstrations. "We're infecting the planet," he says. Visit fatbikenh.com for race details.

Snow Golf

The rules are the same, but the "greens" are called "whites." The nine-hole course game has become popular in Canada, Sweden and Finland and has made its way to New Hampshire ski resorts. This year marks the 15th Annual Snowfest at Loon Mountain, a snow golf tournament that raises money for CASA of New Hampshire, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing volunteer court advocates for mistreated and abused children in New Hampshire. While still a tournament, Snowfest is a fun, energetic affair that is more like an extreme game of mini golf. "They're just really light-hearted and happy to be on the snow trying something new," says Greg Kwasnik, the communications manager for Loon Mountain. To register a team of four or just as an individual, visit casanh.org.



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Winter Ziplining

Imagine that instead of walking on wintry streets and sloshing in fallen snow, you're zipping through the tops of ancient hemlocks. At Bretton Woods, you can do just that on a zipline canopy tour, descending more than 1,000 feet of elevation.

You wouldn't think that hanging in treetops midwinter would be enjoyable, what with the freezing air and wind. But for canopy tour guide Bobby Wisnouchkas, who's been a guide at Bretton Woods since 2009, it's the best time. He loves zipping through snow-covered trees. "When you're zipping up through that, you have this nice coating on everything." He says it's unique because you zip over ski trails and skiers' heads, whereas in the summer, you see wildlife. brettonwoods.com

You can also find winter ziplining at Loon Mountain, loonmtn.com, and Alpine Adventures, alpinezipline.com.



PHOTO COURTESY BRETTON WOODS



PHOTOS COURTESY MOUNT WASHINGTON CURLING CLUB

Curling

It's everyone's favorite slow-burn Olympic sport. Nicknamed "chess on ice," curling involves two teams, each comprising four members: the lead, the second, the third and the skip. Each position helps guide a 40 lb. polished granite stone down a 146 ft. curling sheet into a three-ringed target marked in the ice known as the "house."

The closer the stone is to the center of the house, the more points a team is awarded. According to Leo Lambert, the president of the Merrimack Valley Curling Club, a successful curling delivery is contingent upon understanding the curling sheet's surface.

"It's about the ability to read the ice," he says. This is where the sweepers come in. After the stone is initially launched, two team members move quickly in front of the stone's path to brush away any ice or debris that would derail the rock from its intended path.

The game draws a diverse membership from middle schoolers to retirees. "We have curling members in their 80s," Lambert says, "It's a game you can play your whole life."

While the Merrimack Valley Curling Club's league is currently full, the Mount Washington Valley Curling Club will be hosting a "Learn to Curl" event on January 31 at the Ham Arena in Conway. The event is open to the public. mwvcurling.org

Skijoring

With skijoring, taking a ski day doesn't have to mean leaving your favorite canine at home.

A hybrid of dogsledding and cross-country skiing, skijoring connects a skier and their dog using two harnesses and a rope. Like dogsledding, the skier directs their dog using verbal commands. A Norwegian word translating to "ski driving," skijoring originated in Scandinavia where it was most commonly done with reindeer and horses.

"It's a great thing for those people who really do take their dogs everywhere with them," says Bill Quigley, director of marketing and sales at Gunstock Mountain.

Skijoring is best fit for intermediate to advanced cross-country skiers who have dogs weighing at least 30 lbs.

"It gives a whole new dimension to playing with your dog in the winter," Quigley says.

Private lessons are offered at Gunstock Mountain, gunstock.com. If racing is your thing, check out the New England Sled Dog Club skijoring race schedule at nesdc.org.



PHOTOS COURTESY LOON MOUNTAIN RESORT