

**Confessions of a Skate Skier:  
A Skiing Diary of an Anchorage Winter  
By Rudy Brueggemann  
(Started Jan. 2, 2005; Finished March 20, 2005)  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann. All rights reserved.**

**PART I: A Brief Introduction to the Sport of Skate Skiing and the  
Joys of Skiing in the USA's Most Northern Metropolis**

ANCHORAGE – Prior to moving to Anchorage in August 2004, I had never experienced the sublime pleasures of skate skiing. Instead, I briefly had dabbled over the years in Nordic skiing, also known as classic or track skiing. This sport could never be described in such pleasurable terms.

My past equipment was shabby, and I bombed at what I considered to be a painful, Protestant sport. Classic skiing seemed good for little beyond boosting one's red blood cell count, one's lung capacity, and one's ability to sweat outdoors in the cold.

Outside of Alaska, I had skied in poor terrain, with less-than-perfect snow. I began in urban St. Louis. There was barely enough white stuff covering the ground, and it was often soggy. My skis were the skiing equivalent of an AMC Gremlin. Then I moved to the Pacific Northwest. That region's famous Cascade chunk is reputed to offer some of the worst snow conditions for all forms of skiing.

I tried downhill skiing on this stuff first, in the mid-'80s. I never excelled at this sport; also I couldn't afford it as a chronically poor college student. I sold my equipment before I had finished college. Next, in 1987, I ventured into the sport of backcountry skiing and acquired a pair of telemark skis. Tele skiing combines Nordic and downhill styles, but with techniques requiring good doses of dexterity, strength, and skill.

I never enjoyed telemarking. I lacked the killer attitude of the über-skiers who dominated this style. Worse, I owned the same equipment – used boots and all – for 16 years. I mostly got bitter after each failed trip with friends. I finally gave away that equipment to Goodwill the day before I left Seattle for Anchorage. I wasn't a manly telemarking man I had once hoped to be.

Older and wiser, I now realize that I had made a crucial strategic blunder during my tele skiing days. I never had owned good skis, and equipment truly, positively is everything in the world of skiing. Vowing to do it right, finally, I equipped myself with pricey new skate skis just as the ski season began in Alaska. I was about \$500 poorer, but committed as a devotee of Apple computers.

Skate skis are shorter and slimmer than Nordic skis, and more arched. The boots are firm on the bottom, sealed tight above the ankle, and flexible. A skier pushes off side to side, using long poles planted behind one's body to generate a forward motion. This subgenre of skiing is also called freestyle.

When it is done right, it feels a lot like ice skating, but better, because your terrain is not limited by the frozen lake's edge. When you get your glide, and the snow is just right, it's a bit like that moment when a great salsa band is playing, and they hit the groove, and suddenly you move into another realm of sensorial pleasure. That's what happens when skate skiing works, except you don't get to share the pleasure with a partner.

Well, truth be told, I love salsa dancing, and finding a similarly intense and passionate groove on skis made me an instant convert to the gospel of skate skiing. Anchorage, with nearly 400 miles of urban multi-use trails, much usable by skiers during the winter, seemed like the Holy City for my new-found faith.

The city boasts two world-class skiing facilities. Hillside Park, situated at the foothills of the Chugach range on the city's eastern and mountainous edge, has more than 32 kilometers of lighted and unlit trails, connector trails linking the park to longer and more painful long loops that lead up and down the hills and mountains, and a well-run non-profit group helping to manage the facility called the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage (bless their do-gooder hearts).

Across town sits Kincaid Park, a former Nike military ground-to-air missile site that became park land in 1978. Thanks to the cross-country ski boosters who make this city among the best ski cities in the world, Kincaid has been converted into a winter wonderland of beginner loops, intermediate hills, and deadly steep climbs. Located on the city's far western side bordering the airport and Cook Inlet, it's also a remote location with numerous moose wandering about.

Kincaid boasts nearly 60 kilometers of criss-crossing trails – 20 kilometers lighted – and all are equally well groomed and literally crammed with skiers. The park features competitions for the selection of the U.S. Olympic Teams for cross-country skiing; Alaska Ski for Women, the largest women-only ski race in the country; the National Masters Cross-Country Skiing Championships; and the NCAA National Cross-Country Skiing Championships; and races for high-schoolers and younger athletes.

The place is unquestionably world class, and it could be used even more by Olympic athletes, were Anchorage's snow more stable. But the city experiences fickle patterns of snow, thaws and rains, and then immediate freezes, as Alaska coastal weather is highly unpredictable. So, skiers enjoy the good snow while they can.

Now one season into the sport, I have developed behaviors that could be classified as obsessive.

Throughout the winter I was engrossed by snow, and how crappy it was in Anchorage. I was riveted to the weather forecasts. I took up watching a half-hour Alaska weather broadcast, when I could, each evening at 5:30 p.m. on public television.

I thought each morning, was it going to snow? Nope, another five-day forecast of cold, with icy conditions getting worse and the already hard-pack ice snow that's left disappearing by chilly evaporation.

Emails to friends this winter were usually prefaced by, well, it's alright, except, we got shit for snow. It's crapped out. I can't go skiing.

People in the lower 48 who haven't lived here don't get it, and tended to dismiss these emails, except my friends who once called Anchorage home. One of my friends, a former Anchorage resident, responded enthusiastically to my detailed weather descriptions, complete with thoughtful discourses on the relative difficulty of climbs at Anchorage's favorite ski areas. Spencer's Loop? Barely ever made that climb without a rest. Or, don't even try the "difficult" routes at Kincaid – they are sheer ups and downs.

This same friend repeatedly told me before I moved here how much he loved the city's network of ski trails. I only now realize what he was trying to tell me. I simply couldn't get it until I had "done it" here.

The lovely two snowfalls of early and late December enabled me to get in a mere four ski runs on the city's urban trail system (the Coastal Trail and the Chester Creek Trail) and two runs at Kincaid Park.

At Kincaid, I found a sort of bliss I never quite experienced outdoors. I had the freshness of being outside, and the luxury of benefiting from a groomed trail that had been packed down by a Cat machine. I glided effortlessly and found myself mumbling to myself like a street person: I can't believe this. This is awesome. Dude, is this real.



*Perfection is fresh snow at Kincaid Park, in Anchorage.  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann*

Some trails are lit at night. They curve through trees in region called Sherwood Forest. They have routes named Elliot's Climb (don't try that unless you want a lot of pain), Icebox, Mize's Folly, and Stairway.

Of course I learned how to climb hills. And climb more hills. And then climb even more hills. There's no choice.

This is where the Protestant work ethic of skiing sets in, and I convinced myself that the fire in my lungs was fun, that this was worth the effort because I would be a better person once I reached the top.

Oh woe is the skate skier beginning a climb up a steep, long trail.

A typical outing would go a bit like this:

*I begin to itch in my ugly polypro (this is a fashion-conscious sport, and she-women and he-men skaters and Nordic skiers look like Spiderman without a mask in chic, pricy outfits). My boring blue but functional wind jacket is soon damp, as is my somewhat more stylish slacker-fashion hat. Teenage girls in lovely spandex outfits and perfect skating form pass me. Exhausted, suddenly I hit the downhill spots.*

*Now the groomed trails curve elegantly through the trees. Gravity is your best friend again, not your hated enemy. It is like, dude, I'm Bode Miller. I tuck, and try to go as fast as I can, though admittedly I'm using wussy skate skis. Still, my breast is beating with pride.*

*I came. I climbed. I slalomed.*

*The mind is on some weird oxygen high and gets out of control. Hah, you fools in the Lower 48. You think you've got skiing? This is skiing! I'm on an Olympics-quality route, and I'm looking so awesome. Check me out. I'm making this turn at about 25 mph.*

*Then, blam, white out. I'm on the snow, full splatter, like a bug on the windshield. My polypro pants are covered with white stuff, and I look around to make sure no one saw that stupid turn I failed to nail.*

This kind of mental processing happened the entire time I skied at Kincaid, and then a few more times on the Chester Creek trail, outside my house. Things finally calmed down in February, but the sport never lacked a thrill.

Thus proceeds my skate skier's diary, a record of mental noodlings linked intimately to local weather and snow conditions in the micro-climate known to locals as the Anchorage Bowl.

-30-

## Part II: Rudy Brueggemann's Diary of an Anchorage Winter

### Jan. 2:

No way. The paper's wrong. It can't rain. Rain? In January? In Anchorage?

I come home from work, in the dark, in the warm air. You feel it when it's warm in Anchorage. When it's above 32, you don't need a hat. It's drizzling. Crap. Better go skiing before it melts.

Time: 6:30 p.m., the same night. I'm soggy, hot, and frustrated. My last skate ski until who knows when. I head north on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. Still enough snow for some fast sprints. I head south. Now past Westchester Lagoon. Suddenly, I see a big moose on the path. Stupid f'ing moose. The dumb male doesn't even acknowledge me. Should I try to ski by him? No, better not, there's only two feet of space. OK. Back home.

### Jan. 3:

Rain, all day. Disaster. Visions of the Wicked Witch of the West screaming "I'm melting, I'm melting" come to mind. Despair. Misery. Worse, the seven-day forecast was right – rain and temperatures in the high 30s.

### Jan. 6:

Wet snow has frozen to ice, as temperatures hit freezing again. Even walking is deadly. Chester Creek Trail is crapped out. I begin asking Anchorage residents, is this normal? Oh yeah, we've had some years without snow, they all say.

### Jan. 7:

Not too cold. Time to try the Glen Alps and Chugach State Park. Not as deadly a drive as I thought. My rear-wheel drive pickup makes it to the parking lot, up ice-covered roads and hairpin turns. That was stupid, but hey, for skiing, why not.

The Powerline Trail is groomed. The huge mountain bowl that stretches several miles apart and nearly five miles long sits beneath blue skies. The Cat, all-volunteer run by the Nordic Ski Association of Anchorage, has plowed a wide enough trail for skate skiers and laid tracks for classic skiers. I head three miles up the valley. Perfection again. I love life again. This is great.

### Jan. 10:

Just about two inches of light powder snow cover the hard-pack crud beneath it. Cloudy skies and cold weather. I run instead of ski on the Chester Creek trail. Skate skiers come buy in the bone-chilling night. The sound of their poles pushing off sounds metallic. Definitely not a quality experience. The ice foundations must be cutting the skis to ribbons.

### Jan. 12:

Highs above freezing, but hey, at the Powerline Trail, that means passable skate skiing snow. Slight rain. I don't care. On my return I'm flying. I've never gone this fast before. Skate skiers seem to be out in droves. Lots of dogs and skijor skiers (people pulled by one or two dogs) as well.



*The Powerline Trail in Chugach State Park is a superb groomed route with breathtaking views of the surrounding Chugach Mountains. © 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.*

**Jan. 13:**

Still no snow, and it's above freezing. Crap, my car slides backwards down the treacherous road to Glen Alps parking lot for the Powerline Trail. I could die getting there. White knuckles all the way to lower elevations, sliding a lot. So much for skiing up at the Glen Alps.

Wait, they've taken a Cat and crunched the Chester Creek Trail again. It's passable, except you have to remove your skis at each tunnel, and there are seven between my house and my turnaround point three miles to the east. The snow is hard-packed. Die-hard skate skiers still skate. I go for a run instead. I start send emails: Hi, life is good in Anchorage, except the skiing sucks. We haven't had a good snow for a while.

**Jan: 23:**

I hit the Hillside Park ski area for the first time. It's just as nice as Kincaid, with easy to moderate routes that are impeccably paved by a Cat. Here, moderate means definite ball buster, and I'm referring to Spencer's Loops. It's this nasty little route that climbs up about a half mile before descending with some fast and furious chutes. My lungs are on fire going up. I'm trailing an Irish guy who's English is so bad, people listening to him have to ask him to repeat entire sentences several times in a row. The first Irish skier I've ever seen – a real good chap.

A young, sprightly woman skate skier passes me near the top. She isn't even sweating. I'm wheezing. God is kind the young and cruel the middle-aged. Gravity isn't nice to anyone. The turns heading down on Spencer's Loop are wicked. I hit the ground twice descending back to the main trail.

Dirt is visible on the highly manicured loop. We need snow soon, or this place will be brown soon. I'm amazed how grooming makes skiing in terrible snow conditions passable. I also love the closeness of the Chugach Range, which towers to the park's east.



*In Anchorage, skiers must yield to mushers at key crossings.  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.*

**Feb. 9:**

Snow is coming down in buckets. Woh, man, 12 inches. Lots of it, and it's cold outside too. This will be great once groomed. After work, I hit the trail. The wet base below is sticky. I try to skate, but trip. I move about 100 meters with the energy normally reserved for moving 10 times that distance. Just wait, Rudy. Tomorrow it will be perfection.

**Feb. 10:**

Anchorage is a fairytale city. White and quiet fill the Anchorage Bowl, broken only by the roar of F-15s from nearby Elmendorf Air Force Base. I join the hardy skiers who have already broken trail. No machine groom yet on the trail. It's hard work, breaking trail. Here, Nordic skiers have the upper hand. They glide by. I push, and pant, and push, and pant. I do a six mile loop, but it's kicked my ass. My jacket is soaking wet from sweat when I get home.

**Feb. 11:**

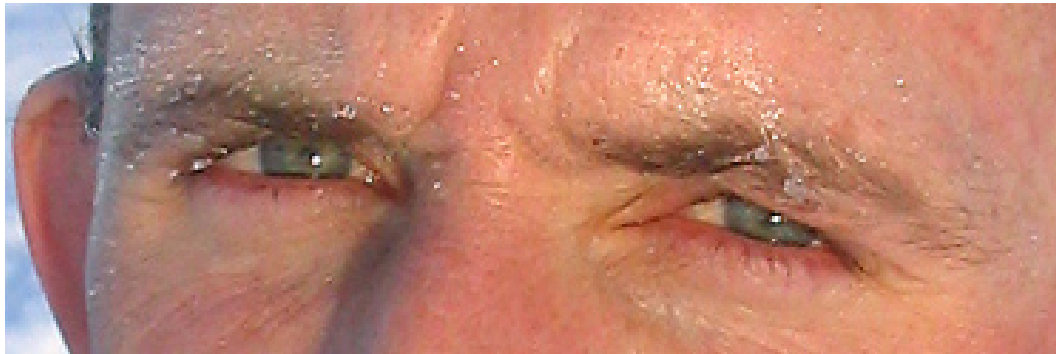
The Nordic Ski Association of Anchorage hotline provides the latest. Tracks and trails have been groomed at Hillside Park and Kincaid Park. The recording was logged at 4 a.m. by a tired volunteer. He had been grooming until then, saying it looks pretty good. That means tomorrow, my day off, it's time to reconnect with the trails at Kincaid.

**Feb. 12:**

Saturday, and I go out to play. Play in 5 degrees F, that is. I arrive at Kincaid Park early. No one is here except these insanely healthy and strong skiers from the University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University. Their ski teams are out in force. They wear identical outfits. APU in blue, UAA in forest green. The UAA squad does sprints, in a line, back and forth on some flats. It looks terribly painful. (One of the UAA skiers, a German transplant named Mandy Kaempf, later goes on the way to win two NCAA races at a national meet in March).

Speaking of pain, I can't feel my fingers after five minutes. They are numb pieces of flesh. I know not to worry. I've been here before, but each time they lose all feeling I wonder when the sense of touch will return. It does return after 30 minutes. There's no one on the trails this cold morning but me and the team from APU that passes by, while I wheeze climbing Mize Trail. I see a female moose nibbling low-hanging branches. I do two laps on this exquisite trail. The snow is perfect, not to dry, not to wet.

My jacket is drenched when I return to my car. My moustache is covered in frozen dribble, and my eyebrows sport frosted sweat. I'm very hot now, quite literally steaming. I see the APU team skate off to do a loop on some deadly hilly terrain. Ugh, how do they do that.



*A few days a year, it's almost too cold to ski in Anchorage.*  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.

### **Feb. 13:**

This is amazing. I'm skating in some backcountry yet urban terrain of Anchorage. A beehive of trails links the City's urban trails with Far North Bicentennial Park at the base of the Chugach. From here, skiers can pick up the old Rondy Trail, which links to the Tour of Anchorage Trail. On this trail, racers of all stripes compete in 25k, 40k, and the dreaded 50K Tour of Anchorage the first weekend of March. Today, it's recreational skaters like me.

You see lots of people and their dogs, even skijorers. A signpost by the Rondy Trail indicates skiers must yield to mushers. I climb the hill. The trail comes to a busy skiing intersection. I ask where I am. It's Hillside Park. I was on the Tour of Anchorage Trail and didn't know it.

I converse with a slightly older guy, who tells me about a loop around Robert Service (the bard of the north) High School. We discuss the pleasures of eating chocolate chips in bulk after skiing. We part ways. It's friendly on the trails. I then bump into three older Nordic skiers. They share yummy brownies. Two dogs are poised to mooch any crumbs. This is about the right ratio of dogs to skiers today.



*Anchorage skiers seem naked without their canine companions.  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.*

**Feb. 14:**

Rain in the forecast, and temperatures above 30 predicted throughout the week. No. That's cruel. We did this already after new year's. I want my snow. I want my snow!

After a good six-mile skate ski, the purple skies finally turn dark at 6:30 p.m. Rain begins to fall. Warm rain. Then snow. Then rain again. I complain bitterly to everyone I meet out shopping and at the library. I've just dropped off my skis to be waxed, too. Will I use them again this season?

**Feb. 16:**

Skis are still in the shop. It's warm, above 30, and the town's roads and sidewalks are an ice-covered mess. I check the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage's web site's Alaska Ski Trail Report section for an update. The report was glowing. "NEWSFLASH! \*\*\* NEWSFLASH! \*\*\* NEWSFLASH!" wrote a local skier named Peter. "The Coastal Trail was JUST dragged and is in PRISTINE condition for skating. I mean the BEST IT'S BEEN ALL SEASON! Go ahead and play hookey [*sic*] - get out and SKI! I'm sure your boss will understand."

**Feb. 17:**

The Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage's voice-recorded grooming report is upbeat, despite three days with temps over freezing. Just finished grooming at Kincaid, said the tired friendly voice of the cat driver, who lays tracks around town and punches up that ice into skiable snow. Looks good, except for some ice and bare spots on Mize Trail.

I head out after work, driving over Kincaid Parks's icy and dangerous roads with my truck. Surprisingly few folks are out tonight. It's warm, about 20 F. The wax on the skis gives me wings. I'm flying. Yes it's icy, and hard to navigate turns on the lighted trails, but my glide is oh so mighty fine. I'm racing up hills that left me panting weeks earlier. However, some icy patches on Mize nearly dump me. I avoid some crashes that seemed imminent on the downhill turns. I see two groups of junior skiers, learning from

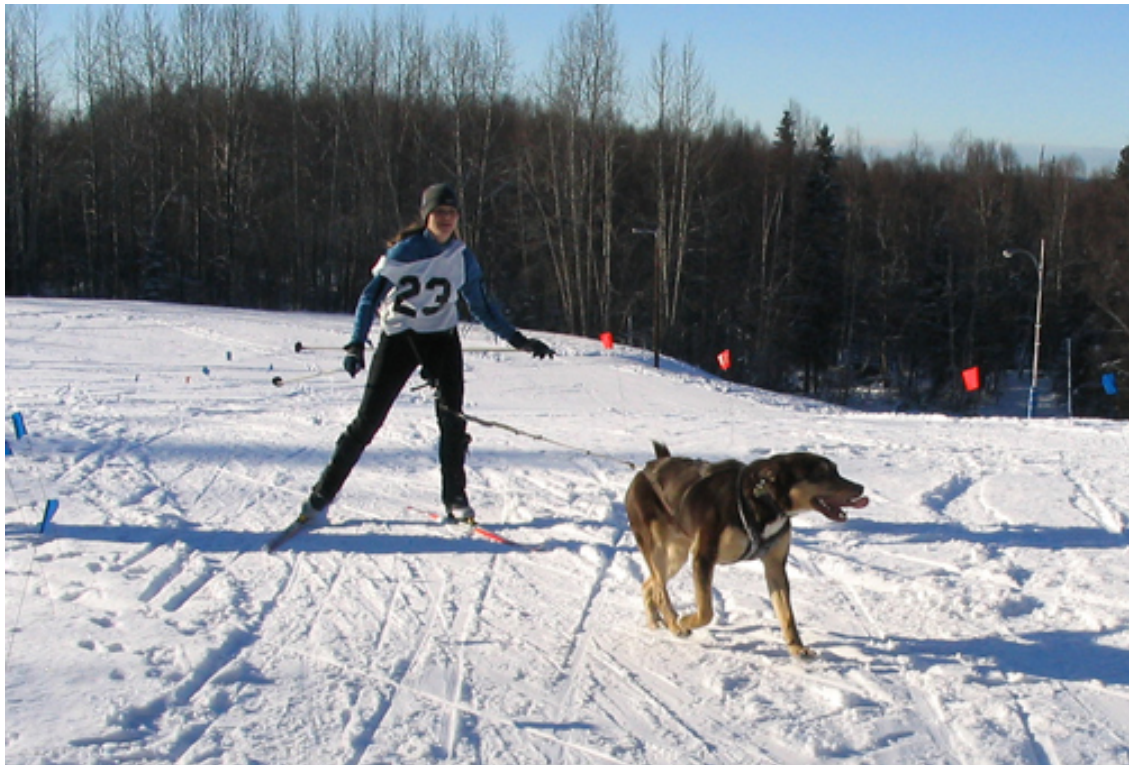
patient coaches. These kids probably don't want to be here. Their parents are grooming them to become future athletes. Just think how good I could be had I grown up on Anchorage.

**Feb. 19:**

Back on the Rondy and Tour of Anchorage trails. A bit crunchy, as it's warm. But what great conditions. Have to wait for a young female moose to finish munching near the Campbell Creek crossing. Sunshine and about an inch of new powder greet me. Lots of skiing juniors in team jackets are on the trails.

After my morning workout, I stop at Russian Jack park to photograph the start of some skijoring races. What great fun the dog race is. Howls from about 60 dogs at the parking lot rise up from the parking lot. Most are husky mixes. Lots of bright blue eyes are among their friendly dog faces. Owners haul them around in pickups that smell like barnyard piss.

The sun is out in earnest. Though a city park, this is the great outdoors, mountains in the backdrop, wagging tails and hyperactive sled dogs in the front. Skiers zip around with dogs on pulleys. They yell start. The 15 or so racers run 100 yards to their parked skis with dogs out front. They take forever putting the skis on because the dogs are pulling them all directions. An occasional dog fight breaks out. Some dogs then go sideways. Finally, they all get going, and the dogs by now are just nuts, pulling at full strength. Can there be anything more fun?



*Skijorers are the fastest moving objects on Anchorage's ski trails.*

© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.

Later at night, one of the city's annual Fur Rendez-Vous events (which are weeks-long and celebrate the skinning of Alaska's fur-bearin' critters with all kinds of corporate tie-ins, fireworks, cool ice sculptures, and great dog races), a couple of hundred skiers gather at the University of Alaska Anchorage to ski with head lamps to Westchester Lagoon – about four miles away via the Chester Creek Trail. Hot cocoa awaits finishers, who are supposed to wear head lamps. I think it's a bit hokey, but I'm glad the city organizes this lil' ski party. Thanks to the corporate donors and city for putting on a great show. I mean how many cities throw ski parties? Not many.

**Feb. 24:**

Still no snow in a while. I decide to do a little night skiing, back on the Tour of Anchorage Trail. Bump into some nutty distance runner I know who just ran a 100-hundred mile race a week earlier, in the snow! (They are truly whack jobs up in Alaska). You never know who you'll meet on the trail. Some times it's easier to spot people by their canine companions, who usually come over to sniff you out.

Icy trail tonight, but now it's light out at night, even at 7 p.m. Gliding in a birch tree forest in the twilight can put one's mind in a mighty peaceful state. Slide, glide, whoosh. I come up to the Hillside Park ski area, and kiddos are out in force learning how to ski with their ski coach chaperones. The fun part is coming back on the Tour of Anchorage trail. It's dark now. You can't see the edge of the plowed trail. Maybe a moose is ahead, or maybe not. Other skiers are still out. You pass by each other silently, but quickly. Zipping down a hill in darkness not knowing if you'll crash is just great fun. I love it.



*Moose on the Rony Trail pose a hazard to inattentive skiers.*  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.

**March 1:**

Awful day at work, so I need another night on the Tour of Anchorage Trail. Sun goes down after 7:15 p.m. Hey I am digging this evening skiing now. Still icy, but they have groomed it with a cat. Fewer evening skiers tonight than before, and with cloud cover, I can see better with the overcast light reflecting down in Bicentennial Park. How lucky I am, skiing on this trail. I can't imagine how other people spend their evenings elsewhere in the world. This seems just right, particularly when your work is driving you nuts.

**March 3:**

I try the Coastal Trail after avoiding it for a few weeks. I've been afraid the afternoon warming spells have turned it into icy crud. Wrong. They cats have beaten and churned up the snow into skiable crud. And it's fast, fast, fast. My twisted ankle makes me wince with every left push, but what can you do when you're a few miles out.



*The Chugach in the evening is a lovely sight when seen from the Coastal Trail.*  
© 2005, Rudy Brueggemann

The evening glow casts a pink light on the icy Cook Inlet. In the distance Sleeping Lady mountain lies serenely. As I head back home after about 3.5 miles, I can see the glow of Anchorage's piddly downtown, framed against the snow-covered Chugach. It's an awful pretty sight to behold, particularly at a very brisk skate-skier's pace.

And after a nice ski, nothing can be finer than a cold micro brew and huge bowl of pasta and spicy red sauce – "the skate skier's special" is what I call this dinner.

#### **March 4:**

I can't believe it. Light is shining as I'm finishing my loop on the Coastal Trail to the Airport and back to my house, via Westchester Lagoon and the Chester Creek Trail. Not perfect snow, but good enough. The pink light up the sky to the west. The peaks of the Chugach to the east catch the light. So few skiers are out too, but it's Saturday. I come back drenched. I check the bottom of my skis. They are looking white again. That means it's time to wax them again.

#### **March 6:**

The Tour of Anchorage runs today. Here's how the official Web site describes this most popular of amateur ski races in Alaska: "The Tour of Anchorage is a point to point cross country ski marathon that is at sea level. There are actually 4 races, a 25 k classical race, and a 25k, 40k and 50k freestyle. The 40k and 50k start on one side of Anchorage and go through the middle of town, along bike trails. The 25 k race starts in the middle of town and uses the same course. The elite skiers in the longer races will overtake the slower skiers in the shorter races. All the races finish at Kincaid Park."

It ain't cheap (\$35 for early birds, \$70 for late comers), but it's popular. Nearly 1,000 skiers do it, most from the Anchorage area. The 40 and 50 kilometer races are ball busters, forcing racers to climb about 500 feet in several hundred meters on about mile six from the Service High School start point. Then they descend. The mass of common skier folk line up at Russian Jack park. The place is mobbed with skiers of all stripes, but most are experienced and most really dress the part.

The starts are great. About 15 skiers line up in waves on a field of snow and then get the green light to go. The first out are Nordic skiers. Skater skiers come next. The skate skiers fly out of the start.



*The Tour of Anchorage race marks the highlight on every Anchorage skier's winter calendar. © 2005, Rudy Brueggemann.*

There are some serious athletes here, with serious muscle tone, with serious attitudes, with seriously expensive and seriously bright and gaudy ski suits and ski tights. I suppose you earn the right to wear these high-decibel-level costumes, as it can be a damn snobby sport. But these are folks who really train, who really compete at the elite level (high school through national levels). I do not ski it, content to take pictures and instead dash off to Willow to watch the official start of the Iditarod dog race. To me, watching dogs is more important than skiing 25 k on a Sunday morning. I read later that two brothers from Wisconsin grabbed the top two slots for the 25K. They must have had wings.

### **March 8:**

A near perfect day. But the weather forecast is gloom and doom for a skate skier. Highs in the upper 30s, lows in the upper 20s. Classic Anchorage thaw and freeze. The question is, how long will the snow remain skiable on the urban trails of Anchorage?

After work, I strap on the skis and head out to Chester Creek Trail. I skate past Westchester Lagoon. The sun is out. The Chugach is illuminated in light. I'm wearing just one layer on top, and no hat, it's so warm. The trail conditions are perfect – slightly colder than yesterday. I think I've died and gone to skier's Valhalla, which is probably a snow-covered place, where all the Vikings ski. I see a lot of skate skiers out. I do a seven-mile run. My strides are perfect. My rhythm is methodical. My upper body feels great. My shoulder, which has been aching for months, feels better than ever.

And this is the end of the season. (I didn't know it at the time, but this would be the last time I can ski in Anchorage.) I ski back north from the turnaround point, to the railway underpass, where skiers can see the Chugach standing in their glory. In the forefront, the lagoon is still ice covered. What a sight. It's still daylight. I'm cruising like an eagle, carried by thermal draft. And this is it. This is the last run. No more after this. From here on out it will be ice and concrete, but mostly ice, until it warms up considerably in April.

**March 10:**

I fly to Fairbanks, where the thermometers spike above freezing. I come back to Anchorage at night to rain, and temperatures still in the 30s. I know the party is over. The five-day forecast predicts more of the same. Rain. Warming temperatures. Melting snow. I walk to the Chester Creek trail by my home. It's a puddle, with hard ice now beneath the slush and water. I feel like crying.

**March 13:**

The two saddest words any Anchorage skier ever heard are "break up." For those outside of Anchorage, this is the time of year when ice gives way to slush, and eventually the thaw.

The party is definitely over. I walk the trails at Bicentennial Park that I skied just a week before. Dog and horse poop now are visible everywhere. Some rocks and stumps are now sticking out of the snow pack. There are just two people out on this rainy afternoon. On previous days I saw dozens.

My neighbors tell me it's a dry year. Winter isn't over yet, they say optimistically. We can still get a foot of snow. I tell them I'll think positively. Inside, though, I really can't see another dump happening. A few year's back, nearly three feet of snow fell on Anchorage on St. Patrick's Day. Well, Alaska can be a fickle place. It snowed on me the third week of September, so why not the third week of March? In Anchorage, attitude is everything. You can't fight nature here. You have to live with its changing moods.

**March 20:**

How does one celebrate the arrival of spring in Anchorage? With spring skiing, of course.

I drive up to Glen Alps, a place that nearly led to another roadside fatality. This time, the road is almost ice free, removing the death-wish memories I once associated with this skiing experience. And, yes, the ski conditions are to die for.

I've been here the three of the last four days, two of them after work. I can ski in the early evening, in the daylight, in the mountains, 35 minutes from my home. Hey, the arrival of spring ain't all that bad. It means I just have to drive a little way to strap on my skis.

Few pleasures can match skate skiing in a mountain valley on a sunny spring day. It almost makes up for repeated disappointments of Anchorage's winter.