



A Fierce Cha

A LOVE FOR SKIING
LEADS MANY PLACES

by Sheila D. Grant

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JOHN CHASE

Over the years, John Chase, 64, has been a husband, father, biologist, teacher, and nurse—and during all those endeavors, his love affair with skiing has lived on, taking him to national and global competitions, small business ownership, and now, community altruism.

John was born in Boston, grew up in New Jersey, and attended colleges in Idaho and Wisconsin. Childhood summers were spent with his grandparents in Spruce Head, Maine.

“I enjoyed Maine so much that I figured that was where I was going to settle down,” John said. He spent his first year in Maine living aboard a sailboat in Kennebunkport and teaching middle school in Biddeford. Soon, however, he set his sights on Monson, moving there in 1991 and teaching science at Piscataquis Community High School (PCHS) in Guilford for the next 11 years.

John taught himself downhill skiing as a child by watching others and imitating what they did. “I downhill skied from then until I was a senior in college,” he said. “I was on the National Ski Patrol through high school and college.”

During his senior year of college in Idaho, John finally tried cross-country skiing, which he had thought, “can’t be any fun at all. But I was just hooked from the moment I got on those things,” he recalled. “It was so much fun! It was like running. Most of my background in athletics was long distance running. It was just like that, but there were skis involved! I think I’ve been downhill skiing three times since then.”

“I started cross-country skiing in 1977. By 1978, I was a regular in citizen races. I lived in eastern Idaho and was a biologist studying bald eagle populations, so I was close to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I went there, and lo and behold, a National Biathlon Team was

there. I thought, gosh, they are really not that fast. All I have to do is learn how to shoot,” he said.

The biathlon combines cross-country skiing with marksmanship. The team’s coach showed John how to use a rifle and invited him to the National Championships in Lake Placid, New York. “I competed, and I wasn’t last! That hooked me,” John said.

“A lot of us skiers say that you have to be a rabbit and a rock, and to make that transition almost immediately,” John said, chuckling. “You have to be a rabbit because you are skiing really, really fast. And you have to be a rock, to slow your pulse and breathing and become really still and calm so that you can fire the rifle accurately.”

He traveled the national cross-country ski circuit for the next few years, working part-time and summer jobs to “support my winter habit.” In 1984, John competed in the Olympic trials in biathlon. Only seven could be chosen; John placed 12th.

When he joined the circuit the following winter, John discovered, “a whole radical change in style.” The sport was moving toward the faster skate skiing, for which he said his body was not well designed. “I couldn’t make the transition. I couldn’t compete like I used to, though I could shoot as well as anybody. So, it was time to get a real job,” he recalled, laughing.

Despite becoming a science teacher, John continued to compete. He placed sixth in the 30 kilometer at the U.S. National Masters Championship in Anchorage, Alaska. “And the next year, they had the World Cup Masters Championship in Lake Placid, and I competed just in cross-country and came in sixth in the world and second for the U.S.,” John said.



Above: Chase spent much of 1983 at the Olympic training center in Lake Placid, NY, preparing for the Olympic biathlon trails in January, 1984.

Opposite: Chase placed first at the Eastern Masters Cross Country Ski Championships at Sugarloaf in 1998.



Top: John and Susan Chase tried running A Fierce Chase as a business while also working full time jobs and parenting young Aquila. These days, they enjoy offering the trails on a volunteer/donation basis instead.

Middle: Now that A Fierce Chase is a volunteer venture rather than a business, Chase gets out to enjoy the trails more frequently.

Bottom: Clarissa Daphinee, Elizabeth Cooper, and other friends are enjoying the newly groomed trails at A Fierce Chase in Monson.



Skiing begins to “snowball”

John and his wife, Susan, had been packing trails on their 100 acres in Monson by walking with snowshoes and then following behind with skis to create a track. “We found that after snowshoeing we were too exhausted to ski, so we purchased a snowmobile and a groomer,” he said.

Then he was asked to help coach the new PCHS cross-country ski team. “There were very limited places we could go to train and race locally that provided good-quality groomed trails,” John said. “With the help of some high school students – I traded their work clearing trails for cross-country ski equipment I bought for them – our trail system developed.”

Other people began asking to use the trails. “And they needed a bathroom, so we installed a composting toilet in our shed behind our house,” John said. “Then they needed rental skis, so we purchased skis for rental. Then they seemed to want to buy skis, so we started selling equipment. Then they needed a place to relax and warm their bones after a long day of skiing, so a warming hut that used to be a

shed increased in size and a woodstove was added. They were hungry, so my wife provided soup, bread, snacks, and fantastic cookies.”

A Fierce Chase, the region’s only dedicated cross-country ski area, officially opened for business in the winter of 1999/2000. John also offered lessons, which attracted even more customers. In 2002, A Fierce Chase received the Cross-Country Ski Association Eco-active Award for its environmental design, operation, and programming.

In 1998, the couple had a son, Aquila Fierce Chase. Susan has been a special education teacher in Guilford for 30 years. With her job, a son to raise, and John feeling called to change professions, operating the ski business left the couple feeling overwhelmed.

“Life just got to be too hectic,” said John. As a business, “it was such a hard thing to maintain.”

A Fierce Chase closed in 2008. John attended the University of Maine to earn his BS in Nursing. “Now, I work at Mayo Regional Hospital,” said John. “I’ve been nursing on the med surge floor for the last 15 years.”

Less business, more fun

In 2018, people were still asking to use the trails. “But alas, the grooming



equipment, the plow truck, the warming hut, and the rental skis were sold,” John said.

“But then we were thinking that the land is just sitting here, growing alders and fir trees, and I still have this passion for skiing,” John said. “It’s great fun for myself, and I wanted to

**“Whenever there is snow,
I am out there every day skiing!”**

be able to share that with people in the area, for them to have it as a resource. My wife said, ‘Okay, we can do this, but it’s not a business!’ So, we’ve developed a loose ‘Friends of A Fierce Chase’ group. Volunteers help with clearing trails, mowing, and plowing, and people donate money, which goes directly into gas, oil, plowing, bridge-building, mowing, all

that other kind of stuff.”

A Fierce Chase is open to the public by donation – “whatever they can afford,” John said. “We just allow people to use it. Now, when I’m free, I groom. I don’t feel like I *have* to have it wonderful at every moment. Now that I’m in the nursing profession, I have four days off a week. I can groom and I get out to ski more than I’ve ever skied. I get to go out with friends and share it with the people of the area and beyond, so it’s a win-win!”

These days, more people want to snowshoe, as well. And someone also reached out to John via Facebook expressing an interest in fat biking the trails this winter (wider tires, lower air pressure). “I said, hey, give it a try!”

“Trails at A Fierce Chase are wide enough to allow cross-country and snowshoeing,” John said, “and smooth enough for skate skiing. And I’ve done some mowing of trails in the summertime. People use them a little bit for hiking.”

A Fierce Chase is located on the Elliotsville Road off Route 15 in Monson, about one mile down on the left. The facility no longer has a warming room or food service, which “lightened the load,” for the Chases. The facility does have parking, a kiosk with trail maps, a donation box, “a really nice, rustic outhouse – it’s really quite nice – and immaculate trails. It’s an incredible trail system that we have,” said John. “It’s good to have people enjoy it as much as I do. Whenever there is snow, I am out there every day skiing!”



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