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Kicksleds offer fun, fitness

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Think sledding, and you see images of kids sliding down snow-covered hills on Flexible Flyers, plastic disks or wooden toboggans.

Kicksledding is different. It's a winter sport that offers a cardiovascular and lower-body workout, plus fun in the snow.

It's a mix of cross-country skiing and riding a scooter. You hold on to handles while standing behind a wooden chair that sits on two metal runners. You place one foot on a runner, then push off with the other foot to power the sled, much the way you would power a scooter.



Promotional photos of a kicksled outing.

In addition to burning calories, kicksledding works the muscles in the lower back and hamstrings.

While they've been popular in Scandinavian countries for more than a century, kicksleds are less common in the U.S.

Paul Maison aims to change that. He's a representative for GoSlide, a local distributor for Esla, a kicksled manufacturer based in Finland. The company, founded in 1928, is the world's largest producer of kicksleds.

Maison is organizing Stowe's first-ever kicksled race, which will be held during the Stowe Derby Feb. 28. He hopes to introduce Vermonters to a winter sport that suits people of all ages and athletic abilities.

"My son started kicksledding at age 3," Maison said. "It took him about 15 minutes to figure it out. Personally, I needed two to three outings to get comfortable with my technique. Anyone can use it because it is very stable."

Kicksleds can be used on compacted snow or ice. They come with plastic runner covers to help glide over snow. When using the sled on ice, such as a frozen river or pond, putting crampons on your boots gives you the traction needed to power the sled.

Flat surfaces or small slopes provide the best kicksledding surfaces.

"The Rec Path in Stowe is a great place to use the kicksled," Maison said. "I was there last year with my family. The snow is compacted and the path is quite flat. It wouldn't be good idea to use it at Mt. Mansfield."

Just how fast you can travel on a kicksled depends your physical condition, Maison said.

"You can go faster than running," Maison said. "You can go even faster on ice" if you have crampons on your boots.

Kicksledding is an environmentally friendly sport, since it doesn't create pollution or noise. The sleds are made from birch and other recyclable components and painted with water-soluble paint.

Unlike most winter sports, kicksledding doesn't require any special equipment.

"A pair of boots with good grip will do," Maison said.

Kicksleds are popular with ice fishermen, who use them to travel across frozen ponds, carrying their gear on the seat. Elderly people like them, because they offer stability traveling on ice or snow. Disabled people can use the seat as a winter wheelchair to enjoy the outdoors. Dog owners can even use them as dog sleds.

The kicksled comes in men's, women's and children's sizes, is easy to assemble, and folds flat for storage and travel. Kicksleds cost between \$209 and \$279.

Now, Esla kicksleds are available through retailers throughout Quebec or online at www.goSlide.ca. Maison is working to bring them to stores in Vermont soon.

Kicksledding tips

Kick economically, avoiding unnecessary movements. When you do things correctly, you will work only the muscles that do the kicking.

Don't put all your weight on the kicksled handles. Keep your weight on your supporting leg, and don't lean on your hands.

Change the supporting leg often. A good rhythm is about five kicks with the same leg. When changing legs, stand on both runners for a while and keep looking forward.

To turn, put your weight on one side, and turn the handle. The kicksled is very flexible and will not break when you turn the handle.

Let the sled slide. Use long kicks and enjoy the ride.

For braking, you can either drag one foot in the snow or you can dig your heels in the snow. When going downhill, use your heels to brake; that's the best way to maintain control.

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