

2014

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Michael Counter

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Recommended Citation

Counter, Michael (2014) "Jump: Serious Celebration: The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping Tournament," *Upper Country: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: https://commons.nmu.edu/upper_country/vol2/iss1/5

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Serious Celebration: The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping Tournament

By Michael Counter

As Professor Michael Marsden, a popular culture expert at St. Norbert College, in De Pere, Wis., stated in a recent American Popular Entertainments class, “The only way we can tie the past to the future is by celebration.”

Marsden went on to say, “How we amuse ourselves is important, and play is serious business.” The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping Tournament in Iron Mountain, Mich., is a celebration. The ski club and local communities come together each year to stage a celebration of international proportions. The celebration has survived over seventy years, even though the sport itself has been on the decline in the United States.

According to Frank Manning in the introduction to his book *“The Celebration of Society,”* a celebration has four elements: Performance, Entertainment, Public and Participatory.¹ There are also three ingredients of a festive occasion: Conscious Excess (controlled chaos), Edutainment and Juxtaposition.² The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping Tournament contains all of the elements listed above and can, therefore, be considered a true celebration.

Skiing is quite possibly the oldest sport known to man. Since the dawn of history, northern Europeans have looked on skiing as more efficient than walking. A museum in Stockholm, Sweden, claims to have a pair of skis that may be 5,000 years old. In the Middle Ages, armies proficient in skiing controlled snow-covered areas of Europe. As skiing developed into a leisure activity, alpine and Nordic skiing evolved.

But the most spectacular forms of skiing clearly are ski jumping and ski flying, thrilling not only to the jumper but to those spectators who brave the cold to marvel at the sight.

The Birth of Skisport in the U.S.

Ski jumping as a spectator sport fulfills one of the components of celebration— performance.³ During the 1870s and 1880s, the first ski-jumping tournaments in the country were held in Ishpeming, a small mining community near Lake Superior in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Today Ishpeming is home to the U. S. National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame and Museum. For organized skiing, known as skisport a hundred or so years ago, Ishpeming is the birthplace in the United States.

Norwegian immigrants organized the sport of skiing locally and Ishpeming hosted what was touted as the “Greatest Exhibition of Skiing Ever Witnessed in America,” in 1905.⁴ The U.S. National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame has an extensive collection of artifacts and archives relating to the history of skiing. Its 20,000 square feet contain displays about 375 honored members, trophies, clothing and equipment. It also has a gift shop, library and theater (“U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame”).⁵

The first ski-jumping competition in Ishpeming took place on February 25, 1882, and has continued annually since 1888. On February 26, 1926, the new Suicide Hill opened for its first competition. The name “Suicide Hill” was given by a local newspaper reporter named Ted Butler

after jumper Walter “Huns” Anderson was injured in 1926.⁶

Another hotspot for ski jumping in the early years was Red Wing, Minnesota. The Aurora Ski Club, one of the first, held its first major Red Wing tournament in 1887. Mikkel Hemmestvedt arrived from Europe and stole the show. The 24-year old established the first recognized American ski jumping record. Hemmestvedt sailed 37 feet on the McSorley Street hill and earned \$35 in gold for his effort.

The Snus Box Trail

Decades later, local residents Harris Andersen and Bill Ward came up with an ingenious and inexpensive advertising gimmick to promote both Red Wing and the 1928 National Ski Jumping Tournament the city hosted. Noting the great popularity of “snuff” with Scandinavian immigrants – they called the tobacco product “snus” (“snoose”)– Ward and Andersen decided to use empty snuff boxes as a symbol for the ski tournament.

They convinced the makers of Copenhagen snuff to donate their distinctive red containers to Red Wing tourney leaders. Local promoters then tacked up the “snus boxes” on poles, trees, and fences in a wide path across the area. They got the Red Wing Shoe Company salesmen to deliver the boxes to utility poles and snow banks throughout the Midwest, all leading to Red Wing. “Follow the Snus Box Trail” became the watchwords for the 1928 U.S. Nationals.

“It worked,” said Jerry Borgen, author of *The Snus Box Kids*. “Over 25,000 people showed up in our town of about 6,000.”⁷ The system worked so well that when Red Wing hosted the 1936 tournament, organizers built another snus box trail⁸. (Johnson)

The Aurora Ski Club also added some glamour to the 1928 U.S. National Ski Jumping Championships in Red Wing. Club members decided to crown a Queen Aurora to reign over a week of festivities in February that year. But some people were disappointed in the process, as beauty took a backseat to dollars and cents in determining the queen. Those people backing the eight official candidates sold tickets to the tournament in the name of their favorite. Whoever got the most money would be declared the winner. Those supporting Viola Hofschute sold \$635 worth of tickets, the winning total. She proved a winsome choice for one Aurora Ski Club member in particular: Clarence “Babe” Lillethun, Aurora’s president, later married Hofschute.

The Aurora Ski Club hosted several national championships in Red Wing, but its membership dwindled, and it was disbanded in the early 1950s⁹.

One man’s vision brought ski jumping to Iron Mountain, Michigan in the late 1930s.

From 1935 through 1943, the U.S. government spent more than \$11 billion through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), employing millions of workers to carry out public works projects. (The Works Progress Administration was renamed as the Works Projects Administration in 1939.)

The WPA—Pine Mountain

One WPA project was the Pine Mountain ski jump, in Iron Mountain, about 80 miles from Ishpeming’s Suicide Bowl. Giant Pine Mountain, as it’s known (a 90-meter hill), was born of a local politician’s hunch that a giant ski slide would serve the community well.¹⁰

Harold Eskil, a Dickinson County chairman who assisted WPA planning, took time in 1968 to offer his recollections of the Pine Mountain project. When the Roosevelt

administration announced that recreation projects could be eligible for WPA funds, Eskil acted on a “dormant dream” to build a big ski slide. “I knew the spot,” he wrote, “—the northwest end of Pine Mountain.” He described a hike off an old logging road to approach the location: “Alone in zero-degree weather, on snowshoes in snow three or more feet deep, I climbed the northwest face of Pine Mountain. It was a difficult, lengthy climb to the top, but from the top I knew I had the right place for the ski slide. At the top of Pine Mountain, I was amazed at the scenery — the miles of it visible in every direction. With a good road to the top, what a scenic sight-seeing area this could become — with the slide and the ski jump adjacent to it.” The proposed \$26,000 budget for the scaffold alone would equal about \$400,000 today.¹¹

On Feb. 18, 1939, the eve of the inaugural tournament, the Iron Mountain News reported that slightly more than \$70,000 (\$1.08 million today) had been spent on WPA projects in the Pine Mountain area, nearly \$61,000 of it for labor. That work included the road, scaffold, landing hill, parking lot and a few amenities. A crowd of 10,000 to 15,000 was anticipated, the largest ever for a sports event in the Upper Peninsula. “The dual aim of the WPA was to develop projects which would prove to be a lasting benefit to the community and give employment to those in need,” Eskil noted.¹²

The 10th Mountain Division

Ski jumping was given a major boost after World War II across the country and in particular in the Upper Midwest. During World War II, the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division served in combat for only four months, but it had one of the conflict’s highest casualty rates. Of the 19,000 men who served (15,000 who trained, and 4,000 who joined as replacements in Italy), roughly 1,000 were killed. The 4,000 who were wounded included future presidential candidate Bob Dole. The division started out as an experiment to train skiers and climbers to fight in the most difficult, mountainous terrain in Europe. Some of the men who joined the division were skiers already, while others had never seen a ski in their lives. Their training at Camp Hale, near Pando, Colo., included skiing, snowshoeing and rock climbing. They also learned cold-weather survival tactics, such as keeping warm by building snow caves.¹³

The men lived in the mountains for weeks, working in altitudes up to 13,500 feet, in five to six feet of snow and in temperatures that dropped to 20 degrees below zero at night. At the end of 1944, the 10th Mountain Division was finally deployed and began the first of a series of daring assaults against the German army in the northern Apennine Mountains of Italy.¹⁴

After the war, the veterans of the 10th Mountain Division shaped the country’s ski and outdoor industry. More than 60 winter resorts were either founded by these experts or had ski schools run by them. In addition, 10th Mountain veteran Bill Bowerman co-founded Nike and developed the waffle sole running shoe. Veteran David Brower became head of the Sierra Club and one of the century’s most pre-eminent environmentalists. Many 10th Mountain veterans, with their ski skills, knowledge of the land, and enthusiasm, went on to become key figures in the development of the United States’ mountaineering tradition both in skiing and climbing.¹⁵

Volunteer Support

Today with the support of the Kiwanis Ski Club (an independent non-profit organization) and the local community, the Pine Mountain ski jumping tournament lives on as

a successful public event—another component of celebration.¹⁶ Kiwanis Club president Nick Blagec says, “A lot of people don’t know that the complex called ‘Pine Mountain’ is in the Dickinson County park system. It is about eighty acres from the top of the hill to the parking lot below.”¹⁷

Pine Mountain hosts the two-day weekend tournament every February.

Today, Blagec says the club has no debt and just wants to cover costs for the next year’s event.

“We (Kiwanis Ski Club) pay ground travel for all European jumpers and coaches and all airfare both ways. We pay travel expenses for all American and Canadian jumpers and coaches as well. We also pay for officials, judges, time and distance keepers and anyone else that must be here. We must also pay motel and food costs for about six days and what we call ‘day money’ while the jumpers are here. Costs are well over \$90,000. That is ballpark. The overall cost to put on the event is closer to \$150,000, give or take.”

Sponsors, concession stand sales, souvenir sales and booster buttons (admission) help defer the costs.

The Kiwanis Ski Club is about forty-five members strong. But Kiwanis Ski Club member Susie Fox says the organization needs some young blood to join.

“Finding able and young volunteers has been a challenge. The average age of the ‘working’ ski club members is easily 60, probably closer to mid-60’s. There are many tasks that require extreme physical labor and it is a lot to ask of someone that age.”¹⁸

But according to Blagec, “When tournament time comes around, the club members dig in and get the hill prepared and ready for competition. No one gets paid as a club member, it’s all volunteer. The local people and businesses in the area always come through with whatever we need to make it happen. I know when it is over on Monday morning and there are about ten or fifteen people cleaning up, there is a huge sigh of relief, and then about two weeks later we start all over again planning for the next tournament.”

The twin cities of Iron Mountain and Kingsford, Mich., have produced their share of ski jumping talent, and many who have jumped at Pine Mountain have gone on to great success in the sport. Mark Konopacke of Iron Mountain competed in the 1988 and 1992 Winter Olympic Games. He holds two national titles and is a member of the American Ski Jumping Hall of Fame.

“I started jumping when I was 5 years old,” said Konopacke. “There is a rich history of ski jumping in the Iron Mountain/Kingsford area with a number of past national champions and Olympic team members. The Miron Ski Bowl (smaller jump) was four blocks from my house and the local Community Schools program held competitions for kids of any age once a week. My brother, sister and I participated every week.”¹⁹

Blood on the Bedding

A third component of Celebration is that it must be entertaining, and that seems to be an integral part of ski jumping.²⁰ Spills are part of the entertainment value in ski jumping. For the same reason people go to watch crashes in auto races or hard hits in a football game, the danger element sells. It has been said that ABC’s *Wide World of Sports* program and its show opening—when announcer Jim McKay says, “Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport! The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat”—has contributed negatively to

the sport of ski jumping. As he is saying the words “agony of defeat,” you see ski jumper Vinko Bogataj of Yugoslavia go somersaulting off the end of a ski jump in Germany in 1970. Bogataj survived, but his spectacular failure was shown over and over again. It has been said that the sport has struggled to survive in the U.S. and Canada, and that video, repeated weekly for years, sure didn’t help. The United States ski team believes this misconception reinforced by *Wide World of Sports* persists to this day.²¹

But Konopacke doesn’t totally agree. “I’m not sure I agree that Bogataj’s fall continues to have an impact on the sport today,” said Konopacke. “The U.S. and Canada have lost focus on the sport, which is evident in the fact that a lack of funding exists for grass-roots programs that existed when I was growing up. I agree the video didn’t help, but if we had more ski jumps with grass-roots programs the sport would be in a better place in North America. Ski jumping recently broke away from the U.S. Ski and Snowboard team to form its own governing body. Only time will tell if it was a good decision. Funding is critical and not having to compete with alpine and snowboarding for funds will be great but the jury is still out as to whether or not ski jumping can stand on its own.”

Konopacke doesn’t deny the sport is dangerous. “I have seen a number of bad physical injuries and even a death in my career. Like any sport, you need to have a short memory and focus on your abilities to move past.”

“I believe the danger of the sport is part of the attraction—as much as none of us want to admit it,” says Kiwanis Ski Club member Susie Fox. “In some ways, we all wish we could fly like the athletes – what a cool sensation that must be.” Jerry Borgen of Red Wing, Minn., agrees, saying there are those people who like to see “the blood on the bedding.”²²

But Konopacke says: “The sport is not as dangerous as people think. Obviously there are exceptions.”

There are statistics to support his claim. In the skiing world, the International Ski Federation is known by its French name, “Fédération Internationale de Ski”, abbreviated FIS. The FIS has an injury surveillance system in place. According to their report, elite skiing and snowboarding are a concern. Nearly 1/3 of World Cup athletes interviewed experienced a time-loss injury and about 1/3 of the injuries were so serious that the athletes lost more than 28 days of training and competition. The highest injury risk was seen in alpine skiing, freestyle skiing and snowboard, with approximately 30 injuries per 100 athletes per season. The numbers in Nordic disciplines (ski jumping, Nordic combined and cross-country skiing) were much lower. For ski jumping, it is roughly 15 injuries per 100 athletes per season.²³

Another entertaining component of ski jumping at Pine Mountain is its inclusion of female jumpers. Female ski jumpers have petitioned to join every Winter Olympics since Nagano in 1998, and each time they were denied by the International Olympics Committee (IOC), citing several reasons. “I don’t think there’s any discrimination going on,” says Joe Lamb, the U.S. ski-team representative for the International Ski Federation’s (FIS) ski-jumping committee. “It may seem like that, but there are hundreds of other issues at play, including a history of world championships and a sizable number of athletes.” In fact, ski jumping was the only Olympic discipline to remain men-only. (Technically, Nordic combined was also limited to males, but that’s because it includes ski jumping.) But finally, the IOC conceded and women will participate in the 2014 Olympic games in Sochi, Russia. (Suddath)

Women Welcome

But well before the Olympics admitted them, women were welcomed to Pine Mountain. In 1977, Therese Altobelli of Iron Mountain became the first woman to ever jump a 90-meter hill as she flew off Pine Mountain in front of the hometown crowd. Her best jump was ninety meters, which is 295 feet. Altobelli was inducted into the American Ski Jumping Hall of Fame in Red Wing, Minn. in 2009. She called it “a great honor.” (Altobelli, Therese, YouTube, 6 Dec. 2009)

The women jumpers I spoke with agree with Konopacke. Alissa Johnson and Jessica Jerome, both members of the U.S. Women’s Ski Jumping team, told me they believe the sport is safe. “Ski jumping is actually a very controlled sport,” says Jerome. “There are weather variables which can make things a little sketchy at times, but the idea is that the jumper is always flying with the profile of the hill, so we are rarely more than 15 feet off the ground. It is very technical and the officials are always trying to make it as safe as possible during competitions, so if the weather gets out of hand, the officials will either hold the competition until it passes, or cancel it.” Johnson says, “At a young age you learn how to fall and the necessary ski skills that make the sport a lot safer.”

Burn-barrels and Pasties

A final component of celebration is participation. Ten to fifteen thousand people come each year to Giant Pine Mountain to watch what can be best described as a “visual spectacle.” Today, nearly 60 jumpers from all over the world converge on Iron Mountain every winter to see who can tame the world’s largest artificial ski jump and fly away with the annual Pine Mountain Continental Cup title.

Many area residents look at the Pine Mountain Continental Cup as one giant party.

During the two-day event, tens of thousands of brats, hamburgers and pasties (U.P. traditional meat and vegetable pies) are consumed — along with the beverages of choice. With the large crowds each year, fans stake out their “camps” hours in advance and come equipped with food and burn-barrels for heat, then lounge in their camp chairs and enjoy the competition.

The burn-barrels are always a wise choice, as Pine Mountain Continental Cup competitors have leaped off Giant Pine in temperatures ranging from 2003’s 31-degree “heat wave,” down to the bone-chilling 14-below first-day temperatures in 2006. Despite often-harsh conditions, some foreign competitors look at the Pine Mountain Continental Cup as more than just another day at work. “Of all the jumps in the world, Pine Mountain is my favorite,” Austria’s Stefan Kaiser said. “The people of Iron Mountain make us feel like we’re home. (*“Pine Mountain Party Attracts Thousands”*)

“All our sponsors have their shelters at the hill and they come up with things like bleachers, ice sculptures, some very different foods such as alligator, buffalo and more,” says Blagec. “Drinks are something else. They make certain drinks through ice blocks with holes drilled in. The ice is tinted in all kinds of colors. Or they have several shot glasses glued on a ski with multiple people drinking at the same time. You also see classmates getting together every year or family gatherings for people who live out of town.”

John Jessen, who lives in Quinnesec, Mich. and regularly attends the jumps, says, “For many, it is the last big event of winter; after the ski jumps, you know that spring is just around the corner.”

Jumpers get a chance to mingle with the fans after the competition. Olympian Mark Konopacke shared an anecdote about some of his friends who attended the ski jumps. “Growing up in the area it was always nice for me to be able to go back home and compete at Pine Mountain. It was always a bit tricky to balance the ‘being home’ part with the competition. I typically would hide out at home or the hotel so I could focus on the event, but would always make it out to the parking lot after the event each day. It was always humbling to see the amount of support but I always wondered how much fun I was missing not being part of the crowd. My favorite story was back in 1985 when I won the tourney on Saturday. I had a great event and went to find some friends at a tailgate to celebrate. After a beer, I heard, ‘Hey, Kono’s here.’ After a few hellos, they started asking how I did. That was the great part; they had no idea. That may not have been the norm but it does speak to the fact that it’s just an excuse to have a tailgate party in the snow.”

Conscious excess (controlled chaos) is an important ingredient in a celebration. (Cox) This is apparent in the crowds at the Pine Mountain Ski Jumping competition. Officials say they keep the party from getting out of control.

“We as a club want to make it a family affair and work with local law enforcement to keep it that way,” says Kiwanis Ski Club president Nick Blagec. “It’s not a ‘get drunk and stupid’ affair, as we close everything down and everyone must leave by 7 p.m. each day, and this works quite well.”

As Cox stated, celebration must also be “edutainment”—it must amuse and instruct. (Cox) Some of the top foreign jumpers in the world come to Pine Mountain each year. The American, Canadian and European jumpers are exposed to the local faithful a few different ways. A “Meet The Skiers” event is held at Pine Mountain Lodge on the Thursday evening before the weekend competition. “It allows the public an opportunity to interact with the jumpers, get autographs and talk with officials,” says ski club member Susie Fox.

“We also send them to schools in the area to speak with the younger kids, which goes over very well,” says Blagec. “Each team (example: Austrian ski jumpers) will also spend a night at a local family’s house for supper and talk, and this almost always starts long-term relationships with the families and the skiers.” Blagec says that most foreign jumpers speak “pretty good” English.

Side by Each

Another part of a festive celebration is juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is simply the placing of two things that are different near to each other. It has the tendency to draw attention to the qualities of each. (Cox) At Pine Mountain there are other things to see and do. For example, right next to the ski jump is the Pine Mountain downhill ski area and resort. Timberstone Golf Course, built around the ski hill, is considered by *Golf Week Magazine* as one of the top 100 resort golf courses in the United States. Atop giant Pine Mountain there is the Upper Peninsula Veterans Memorial, which pays tribute to members of the armed services. The Upper Peninsula Veterans Memorial represents all 15 counties of the U.P. as well as recognizing in granite the eras of Vietnam, Lebanon-Granada, the Gulf Wars, Korea and World War I and World War II. At the base of each granite marker are paving bricks with the names of those whose memory is honored and shared by others. These pavers are available for sale to honor loved ones. Space has been allocated at the U. P. Veterans Memorial to honor service men and women engaged in the war in the Middle East. (“*U.P. Veterans Memorial*”)

To get to the Veterans Memorial, fans can leave the comfort of their burn-barrels and the parking area and walk the 500 steps that bring them to the top of the hill. Along the way, they can get breathtaking views as jumpers ride Giant Pine Mountain. The steps are a story and an athletic challenge in themselves. Tourists and locals walk the steps year-round.

Former San Francisco 49ers and Detroit Lions head coach and now NFL Network analyst Steve Mariucci, who was born and raised in Iron Mountain, told me he used the steps at Pine Mountain to train for athletics when he was in high school. Mariucci, who ski-jumped as a youngster and tries to attend the ski-jumping tournament every year as a fan, was recently involved in a fundraiser with the local YMCA and the Kiwanis Ski Club to replace the worn-out steps.

“We had to pour 500 brand-new steps, wider, with two rails, not just the one down the middle but one on either side, and sell them and put the name of the person who bought the step on a plaque in front of the steps that will be there forever,” said Mariucci. “The steps sold for \$10,000 to \$200 depending on where they were. You know: It’s John Doe from the class of 1979 from Kingsford or Iron Mountain High School, or the score of the Iron Mountain-Kingsford game, or in memory of a relative, or some crazy saying, it was all kinds of things. Now obviously we censored some of it. Brett Favre bought the fourth step for \$1,000. On the bottom, fourth from the bottom, it’s number four, yes it starts down with number one and then number 500 on top. Quite a project, but what was awesome was that we sold it out fast and that’s kind of the civic pride people have back in Iron Mountain/Kingsford and Dickinson county, to recognize a need for not only new steps at Pine Mountain, but for the Kiwanis Ski Club and the YMCA. So that got done, and I was happy to be a part of it.”

The hope is that ski jumping will continue for years to come at Pine Mountain. It won’t be easy to sustain. In European countries like Norway, Austria and Finland, ski jumping is as big as the Super Bowl in the United States. Ski jumping in the U.S. is on the decline.

“Think about how easy it is to go skiing or snowboarding versus ski jumping,” said Konopacke. “You have to grow up in an area that has a program and this limits the potential talent pool to draw from. Women’s ski jumping is on the rise and the U.S. has been one of the pioneers. The U.S. women’s team has a great chance to win a medal in the 2014 winter games but long term I fear they will face the same challenges as the men’s team.”

“Ski-jumping facilities are also very expensive to build and maintain,” says U.S. Women’s ski-jumping member Jessica Jerome. “Alpine resorts are located all over the country while equipment for ski jumping is very specialized, and it isn’t something you can just buy in a sports store. All these things are small contributing factors as to why it struggles. I think that with the inclusion of women’s ski jumping in the Olympics, it will help develop the sport as a whole. But unfortunately, people in certain parts of the country don’t have access to a ski-jumping club as well as they do a skating rink or an alpine resort.”

Other challenges club members face at Pine Mountain include the ever-unpredictable weather. Strong winds especially can cause tournament officials to cancel one or both days of the tournament. There are no refunds on button sales, so some people get upset when the tournament is canceled. Kiwanis Ski Club officials have a solution, but it will cost money. “We are just getting started on our next project to light the hill,” said Blagec. “We want lights so we have more time on the weekend to get two competitions (Saturday and Sunday) in as the wind dies down in the evening and it gets dark or shadows about 4 p.m. We want to have two

tournaments when the skiers are here and our fans deserve two tournaments.” It’s not going to be easy with a struggling economy and businesses closing their doors after many of years of financial and/or material support to the Pine Mountain tourney.

“The Kiwanis Ski Club is unique because it only survives on the donations from area businesses and individuals,” said Mark Pontti, who works for Verso Paper Corp. of Quinnesec, Mich., a local sponsor. “To pull off an event of this magnitude versus our European counterparts (where government funding is commonplace) is truly an amazing feat!” The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping tournament gives people “a chance to renew old friendships and make new ones,” Pontti added.

As Dr. Marsden stated, “The people that play together stay together. A true community is a festive community. They will celebrate together. If they don’t, it’s just not a strong community.” The Pine Mountain Ski Jumping Tournament “is the ultimate celebration and one our area takes great pride in,” added Pontti.

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