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FROZEN ASSETS. FAT BLOATED

Idiots. Stiff Nipples. Chute to Thrill. The names are as silly as the costumes. And just as carefully selected, one suspects, as the wax.

The annual National Tobogganing Championships, held the first weekend of February at the Snow Bowl, is *the* winter wingding in Camden, the lovely Mid-coast Maine seaport better known to skippers than skiers. In addition to its famous toboggan chute, the town-owned Snow Bowl offers cross-country trails, a skating pond and a modest alpine ski area, complete with terrain and tubing parks. The rewards for riding its poky double or creaky T-bars are cruises along nautically named trails that ebb and flow down its 950 vertical feet, delivering glimpses of a salty Penobscot Bay. The area exists in a time warp, right down to the vintage A-frame base lodge, with its retro food and lift-ticket prices.

Financing it all is a perennial concern. In the early '90s, area manager Ken Bailey suggested putting the toboggan chute to work. Snow Bowl historian Jack Williams, who led the chute's rebuilding effort and for whom it's named, supported the idea of fundraising as a way of lessening the burden on local taxpayers. But he wasn't sold on toboggan racing. "I said, 'That's crazy. It's only a nine-second track.'"

Crazy, yes. But it caught on. Last February, 400 teams competed in the 16th annual championships, raising about \$36,000 toward the area's \$463,000 operating budget. Over the years, the event has garnered national attention—even a spread in *Sports Illustrated*. Teams have come from as far away as Australia to schuss down the icy chute and glide out onto frozen Hosmer Pond. But most are local. They come for the camaraderie and perhaps the glory that comes with a big event in a small town. As many as 2,000 spectators—some in costume, many with kids or dogs



FAST COMPANY Grim countenances like these say a lot about the seriousness with which competitors at Camden Snow Bowl's National Tobogganing Championships approach their challenge.

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in tow—line the course, ringing cowbells, waving flags and cheering as the announcer calls the play by play.

Veteran teams reserve special parking spaces and set up giant tailgate compounds, with waxing and repair facilities, cooking stations, special sled racks, party supplies and plenty of food. The aroma of hash browns, sausages and blueberry pancakes lures even race officials to the turf staked out by the Big Kahoonas and Throbbin' Boggins. "They feed us, and we shave a few seconds off their time," jokes one official, as he accepts a heaping plate from Throbbin' Boggin Art Dinsmore.

Strategies differ in a race that comes down to hundredths and even thousandths of a second. Rich Beauschesne, of Camden's Hogs & Heifers, spent a year in Switzerland researching sled technology: design and shape, finish and wax. "Our best year was in the early '90s, right before they changed the rules and outlawed our notorious sled, King Kong."

Big Kahoonas Ed Greenrose, of West Rockport, believes the start is crucial: "Get a good launch, gain a few hundredths of a second." One year the team practiced starts on his living room rug. "If everyone was in sync, we could slide across the carpet five feet."

"It's all about the conditions," Dinsmore says. This year, race weekend was so balmy and the ice so slushy that the East German Women's Team (all male, of course) wore life preservers. Weather and track conditions made base preparation challenging. "We've tried tons of waxes over the years," Greenrose says. "We have our own special blend, but we're trying something new this year."