

It's Sibley time

By David Trifunov

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Forgive Diane Ambro if she starts sounding like a broken record between now and March 4. "Don't forget your chip," is Ambro's rallying cry for the 29th annual Sibley Ski Tour. You're bound to hear it more than once as she prepares to headman the annual cross-country skiing races at Sleeping Giant provincial park.

Each racer entered this year receives an electronic microchip that is used to measure a racer's time from the second she crosses the start to the instant she finishes. Racers receive their chip when they pick up their registration packages, which is why Ambro is a little worried. It's something new and small that can be left behind.

"That's the goal," Ambro said at a noon-hour luncheon Tuesday at Kamview Nordic Centre to kickstart the hype. "To give everybody a more accurate time. And there is less congestion. I think it just makes it more fun for the skiers."

Chip timing is just one of the many new wrinkles to this year's event, which features children and adult races at 10, 20 and 50 kilometres. The shortest distance now features a new "out-and-back" loop to accommodate renovations at Sleeping Giant.

Also, there will be staggered starts to alleviate congestion. "It's to make it better for the skiers, rather than having the mass start," Ambro said.

"It used to be the gun would go off and, because the trail was so narrow, the front-runners would go, but the people at the back of the pack sometimes had to wait five, 10 minutes before they even crossed the start line."

Perhaps the most dramatic change, however, is Sibley's inclusion into the Solomon Marathon Cup Series, a cross-Canada string of 10 long-distance loppets with fat cash for the racer that accumulates the most points.

A total of \$8,000 is to be given away by Solomon in different categories after the final race. Thunder Bay is the eighth stop of the tour, which starts in Salmon Arm, B.C. and ends in Chicoutimi, Que. "If it draws some big names up here, that's wonderful," Ambro said.

But there is also plenty of local drama. On March 5, the 2006 Ski Nationals begin in Thunder Bay to decide Canada's best Nordic skiers. Liz Inkila, chairwoman of the event, said there is plenty of cross promotion between the events and there may even be some additional entries to Sibley with all the athletes, coaches, parents and support personnel arriving in Thunder Bay from across the country. "They'll have lots of time," Inkila said. "We've linked the two web sites. We're promoting them, they're promoting us, so it's a good relationship."

Racers can enter up until March 4, but are encouraged to do so as soon as possible. The Sibley headquarters is at the DaVinci Centre on March 2-3. Also, there will be no local faxed registrations accepted after Feb. 28.



NTDC head coach Eric Bailey, left, accepts the No. 1 bib on behalf of Cross Country Canada executive director Al Maddox from Diane Ambro.