

Little Switzerland debuts improvements

By GAY GRIESBACH
For the Daily News

SLINGER — A drift of snow and vertical course brought a heart-pounding challenge to those energetic enough to compete for a season pass Saturday at Little Switzerland.

The hill celebrated with an open house that drew hundreds of visitors who wanted to check out the terrain parks, store, refurbished lodge and restaurant.

Cathy Hesprih of Hartford was part of a knot of hopefuls who faced the steep incline.

She wanted her son Vincent, 9, to be able to snowboard at the hill this winter.

"We were excited when we heard about it re-opening," Hesprih said.

A novice skier, Hesprih didn't have the opportunity to try the Slinger slopes before it closed in 2007.

Andy Kashuba of Milwaukee said he's been coming to the ski resort since before the little red building was replaced by the lodge.

"It's still my favorite place," Kashuba said as he sat in the Swiss Chalet restaurant, which opened this summer.

Rick, Mike and Dave Schmitz of Schmitz Brothers LLC purchased the 47-acre park and ski lifts from Wayne Erickson, owner of Slinger Super-Speedway. Erickson retains ownership of the Little Swiss Chalet, located in the upper portion of the lodge.

Rick Schmitz, who has owned Nordic Mountain Ski Area near Wild Rose for the past seven years and Blackjack Resort near Bessemer, Mich., for the past three years, is contributing his knowledge and experience of the ski industry.

Dave Schmitz said they kept the best of Little Switzerland, but added new technology and features to the resort.

"Our snowmaking is state-of-the-art and the lifts have been re-done top to bottom," Mike Schmitz added.

Originally from Hubertus, the brothers learned to ski at Little Switzerland.

So did Bill Frick of Menomonee Falls.

"I've been coming to ski here since 1971," said Frick as he relaxed in the lodge. "This is where they set the hook — this is where I learned to ski. We'll be back," Frick said.

Outside, Dave Schmitz traced the uphill route. The term "under the gun" took on new meaning as racers passed under snowmaking machines that spewed drifts of icy, misty crystals.

"At the top of the hill it was icy. I wanted to run through the snow at the bottom, but they warned us about tripping and falling and I did not want to embar-



Gay Griesbach/For the Daily News

Owen Hanisko, center, runs to the top of a hill during a race to win a season pass at Little Switzerland. The race was held during Saturday's open house.

rass myself today," Willie Frick, 11, said.

Owen Hanisko of Hartford slid the last 20 feet to victory.

"I started out behind — by a lot," Hanisko, 15, said.

A varsity soccer player and snowboarder, Hanisko said the hardest part of the journey was going uphill.

"There's an ice spot at the

top that took a lot out of me," Hanisko said as he tried to catch his breath post-race.

Mike Raasch, owner of Expedition Supply finished the race, winning a second season pass that was awarded by random drawing.

Back in the lodge, Marianne Wilson was on a scouting mission for the Snowflake Ski Club from

Highland Park, Ill.

"Before it closed, our club used to have its Spring Fling here," Wilson said.


She said the group, which includes about 600 members, starts taking Saturday trips in December to places like Wilmot, Alpine Valley, and Cascade in Wisconsin and Chestnut Mountain in Illinois.

Dana Tyler, marketing director at Little Switzerland, said school groups and other organizations such as the Snowstar Ski Club have already signed on for visits.

Tyler said the ski hill operators would like to open for the 2012-13 season the day after Thanksgiving, weather permitting.

Little Switzerland has several events planned for its debut season, including a visit by US Airbag, a Derby Weekend and Swiss Fest.

For information on other events, ski packages or lessons, see www.littleswitz.com.



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