

Follow the journey--Northland 300 underway

BY USA HAGENS

Northland 300 and Lake County News-Chronicle reports

Northland 300 snowmobilers are leaving the trails from Two Harbors to Lily and back on Jan. 21-25, 2009. For the first time ever in the history of Special Olympics Minnesota and the Northland 300, a Special Olympics athlete and a Special Olympics coach will be participating in the Northland 300 together.

The opening ceremonies are always held early Thursday morning at Superior Shores. This year the Northland 300 teams are honored by the Two Harbors American Legion Color Guard. As of press time Wednesday, plans included a welcome by Two Harbors Mayor Randy Nolan Jr., Two Harbors High School senior Anna Sell singing the national anthem, and local Special Olympians Lani Staples and Lauri Mallory carrying the flame of hope.

Howard Mallory, Lauri's Dad, has coached area Olympians since 1975. This year he is sitting out the event, but only because he is in Lake View

Hospital. Reached by phone, he said it's fun coaching. (He also said people can come and visit him.)

In its 28-year history the Northland 300 has raised more than \$2.9 million to support Special Olympics Minnesota. This year participants hope to break the \$3 million mark to celebrate the 21st anniversary. Every year the riders also make an additional contribution to the Lake County Special Olympics program.

Northland 300 participants Steven Ehl and coach Jason Reinsch are raising funds for a cause they truly believe in. Steven's Mom, Patsy, has also climbed on board and will be part of the Northland 300's support team.

Ehl is a Special Olympic athlete who loves winter. He is very excited to be riding on the back of his coach's snowmobile to participate in the 2009 Northland 300.

He was born with Down syndrome and has been involved in Special

Olympics Minnesota since he was 8. He is a member of the Area 12 Flames team and competes in softball, swimming, track and field, bowling, golf, and downhill & alpine skiing. He also is part of the athlete leadership program where he has been trained to be a global messenger, speaking at public events.

Reinsch is a certified coach and has been coaching Steven for 11 years. Jason has wanted to participate in the Northland 300 for the past three years but his car found time in his busy schedule until this year. This will truly be a fun and exciting challenge for Jason.

Patsy Ehl is very active in her son's life. She is excited for Steven to be embarking in this new adventure. She is also a certified coach and coaches the Area 12 Flames team in the Twin Cities. In 2006, Patsy received the KARE11 "Eleven Who Care Award" for her outstanding contributions and efforts to the athletes of her Special

Olympics' team the Flames.

This dynamic duo is ready to have the time of their life and you can certainly tell that they are "best buds" the way they feed off of each other's excitement when talking about their upcoming snowmobiling adventure. Neither one of these individuals is a quitter.

Eleven years ago Jason began coaching Steven in downhill skiing. Jason was petrified to go down a hill but instead of starting out on a "bunny hill" Steven and Jason took a chair lift and traversed the slopes. "The first time I took Steven skiing, I skied backward with Steven in front of me hanging on for dear life and it took us two hours to get to the bottom of the hill," Jason comments and laughs. Today, Steven does black diamond and alpine. Determination is in his blood.

Steven's mother said, "I was just proud when Jason came back for his second round of coaching Steven in skiing." Jason has been a great influence

on Steven's life and vice versa. In the winter they go ice fishing and snowmobiling and he was Jason and wife Lynn's groomsmen for their wedding. It is truly a union of friendships and family.

Learning more about the ride, Steven asked "Are the trails nice?" The trails from Two Harbors to Lily are beautiful yet challenging. Learning about his role at the Northland 300 opening ceremonies, Steven's comment was simply "Sweet!"

After the opening ceremonies, the group headed out to Lily. They will return to Two Harbors on Saturday afternoon.

Special Olympics Minnesota provides year round sports training and competition for people with intellectual disabilities. Our mission is to bring physical fitness, personal growth and achievement. For more information, visit www.northland300.org or contact Kelly Karkula at 612) 684-1272 or karkula@snos.org.