

Memories of Towner's Woods

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We know it is important to live in the moment. To be present. In a sense, that is all we have. But our minds range more broadly. We wander in the richness of our memories and of hopes for the future. Memories are indeed our greatest treasure. Without them we would not have stories to tell each other. And the older they grow, the more valuable they become.

I have memories of Towner's Woods, part of the Portage Park District, thirty years ago, in winter when I was a skier. When I go there now it is always those experiences that color what I see. Favorite trees are bigger. Paths have changed. The park is different but also the same.

I learned to cross-country ski in Towner's Woods. In my opinion, there is no better cardiovascular exercise. It is skillful, requires no great investment, and brings joy to grey Ohio winters. But you need a place to do it, and the bigger and more varied the landscape the better. Towner's Woods was perfect. I started with no experience, just a book on skiing, beginner's skis, bamboo poles and the need to challenge myself.

The skiing scene at Towners was already well-established when I started in the mid-1980s. Parallel tracks were regularly set, there were organized races, and sometimes a "warming hut" in the old switching station. Merrill Evans had a lot to do with getting skiing organized then and there. So there were plenty of people to ski with at Towner's Woods, and plenty of people to watch me fall. One particular sharp left-hand turn at the bottom of a steep run was my true nemesis. It was guarded by hay bales to cushion my falls. At the time I was convinced the course would have been much better without it. To tame that corner was my special challenge. Repetition is a great teacher and eventually I rounded the turn at full speed. A small victory perhaps, but hard earned.

I invested in skiing. Gone were my bamboo poles and blue jeans to be replaced by "hi tech" Woolrich woolen knickers, quilted cotton "thermal" underwear, wool knee socks, and longer, skinnier Rossignols. I bought an early model NordicTrack so I could train year-round. Things were getting serious. I skied every day there was snow, and it seems like there was plenty of it. I knew every rut, how much energy it took to climb a hill at a quick pace and exactly how tired I would be at a specific point on the course. I now rarely fell.

I skied elsewhere for variety's sake, but Towner's Woods was my home course. I raced a bit, but it was skiing by myself that was more satisfying. Me, the course, and a watch. I would take my skis in the car to work in the morning, change into my ski garb after work (which eventually became that Spiderman-like spandex) and at about 5:00 or 5:30 pm get in some skiing. Generally that was twice around the course just at dusk or sometimes after dark. No other humans. Quiet. Once, in a snowstorm in the dark an eight-point buck appeared close and ghostlike. To this day, I don't know if it was real, or magic.

I have skied Towner's Woods hundreds of times, but not once in the past fifteen years. There is less snow now, I am less motivated, and no doubt less able. But I can go there in my memories. I know every turn, every dip, every beautiful tree. Sometimes if I have trouble falling asleep I will play a Towner's race or a trip around the course that is etched by repetition in my mind. I doze off to the hiss of skis on snow.

When I go to Towner's Woods today, I wonder what memories it is making. It is a grand park that holds something different for everyone. Although we experience it differently, we are interconnected by the need to speak loudly for this quiet Portage Park District place.