



Enjoy The Glide

If you build it, they will... well, you know that story. But here's one you may not have heard.

By Dean Acheson, Minocqua, Wisconsin

Editor's Note: *Dean Acheson, a longtime contributor to Our Wisconsin, passed away in April 2025. He'd filed this winter story just a few months prior.*

I'M DWARFED and a bit intimidated by "Ollie". Not so Henry Royer, who starts the imposing Oliver 1655 farm tractor. It dates to 1972 when Henry had a hobby farm near Cooksville in southern Wisconsin.

Now a full-time professional artist (wood, metal and stone sculptures) and Boulder Junction resident, Henry is a member of a group that carved out a unique Northwoods attraction.

I'm at Boulder Junction's Winter Park, and except for my car, the parking lot is empty. This will change dramatically in just a few hours as ice-skaters from across the state and beyond filter in to experience The Glide.

It's an 8-foot wide ice-covered rink that loops 8/10ths of a mile through the second-growth forest here. This Vilas County resort town of 300 residents boasts the first



Boulder Junction

such forest rink in the state of Wisconsin.

This ice trail needs regular care, so Henry creeps Ollie down the frozen ribbon that weaves through the snow-covered pines. Behind the tractor he tows a bright-blue Zamboni to scrape off ice bubbles, which threaten to turn a skater's ankle.

A Northwoods Yarn

So, how did this come about? Thank a couple of knitting ladies who got together back in February of 2024.

Henry's wife, Cathy, enjoys this craft with friends, and one of them showed her a video of a wooded skating trail at Arrowhead Provincial Park north of Toronto. When Henry saw it, he had an immediate reaction.

"Bells and whistles! Boulder Junction absolutely has to have this!" he remembers saying, chuckling at his exuberant response.

Henry showed the video to Dennis Duke, a retired mechanical engineer in the aerospace industry and former motel owner, also living in Boulder Junction. The idea gained even more traction when Steve Weber saw it.

In the past, he'd voiced support of such a ribbon in Boulder Junction. The semi-



DOING THEIR LEVEL BEST. Making a smooth skating surface on the wooded skating trail in Boulder Junction is a two-step process with a couple passes of the water tank, followed by the Zamboni to clear ice chunks and bubbles.

retired limnologist worked for a company that builds ice-skating venues, including ribbons, in cities.

All three are members of the local park board. Their proposal to build an ice ribbon in Winter Park quickly snowballed its way to the town board.

"They had lots of questions," Henry recalls of town supervisors, but no objections as plans unfolded. Coupled with a blessing from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources—the town has a lease agreement to use this part of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest for the park—work began in earnest.

Blazing a Trail

The park's rarely used cross-country ski trail was the ideal Glide candidate: local, level and, coincidentally, the same length as the one in Canada. The town's maintenance crew put in fill and leveled the trail. The three men mentioned installed 13 solar-powered lights for nighttime skating.

The town used room tax funds to buy the \$15,000 Zamboni. Laura Bertch, park board chair, was instrumental in securing a \$5,000 grant from the Boulder Junction Community Foundation to further make The Glide a reality.

On the day of my visit, skaters of every ability passed as I snapped photos. Moms and dads with little ones clutching walkers paraded by, as did a young man swiftly making his fourth lap, nodding a greeting each time.

The one-way loop is wide enough for comfortable passing. Skaters naturally spread out, so crowding isn't an issue. One trail section has a slight incline; otherwise, it's smooth sailing.

Earlier that morning, I rode along to see



Photo above: Sherry Murren

the watering operation when Dennis pulled a 500-gallon tank behind his Ford F-250 pickup. We made two passes over the rink as water slowly dripped from nozzles, then quickly froze to form a smooth surface.

I wondered what the resident white-tailed deer must think as they cross the slippery strip. Deer often roam this little town and, much more rarely, timber wolves too. Dennis shared a rare sighting of a pair.

“I thought the first one was a bear,” he says, “or a Newfoundland. People walk their dogs here in summer.” Edging closer, to his astonishment, he discovered it was a black wolf accompanied by a gray one.

Farther along while watering, he points off to the side and says, “This is an ideal place to put in a trail extension.” He notes that the portion we’re on was once a railroad grade that served Boulder Junction.

Let’s Go Skating!

The Glide opened on Dec. 23, 2024. As the big day approached, news of this forest rink began to spread on traditional and social media. Eager skaters dug 40-year-old skates out of closets and began calling: “When will it open?”

Dennis posted a video of Henry’s family skating the day before the opening.

“We had 1.5 million hits on Facebook!” Dennis says, and adds, “About a thousand

people came opening day...and it went crazy after that.”

A few drove 4 hours from Minneapolis. Another small group flew in from California to do a video, according to Steve.

The town had widened the road next to the park entrance to handle the overflow from the parking lot, which at the time accommodated only 30 vehicles. Additional parked vehicles lined Highway K for some distance.

It took many hands to create a top-notch winter attraction for locals and visitors alike. Dennis and Henry praised fellow park board members, the town board, Town Chairman Dennis Reuss and many volunteers, including the Wild Ice-Skating Explorers and volunteers who clean the park. A Canadian official from Arrowhead Provincial Park shared helpful suggestions.

After finishing the morning’s work,

GO FIGURE! Clockwise: Skaters head inside the warming shelter. Andrew and Valerie Paquette from Weston cozy up to the fire. Carol Heitman, Missy Drake and Julie Hillary enjoy the trail. A rubber mat spreads the water dripping from a water tank as volunteers prep The Glide. Krystal and Chad Conkle of Janesville skate with their kids Dailey, Eli and Lucy. Extra pairs of skates can be borrowed.

Henry and Dennis say that high on their list for improvements is more parking, an expanded warming shelter, more trail benches and permanent restrooms.

The park board is also considering special events here, including “fire and ice” outings with luminaries lighting the trail.

Whether you whip around the loop as if the Abominable Snowman’s hard on your heels, or go hand in hand with a loved one, The Glide is an exhilarating winter experience like no other.



IF YOU GO. Winter Park is open daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. The park has a large traditional skating rink (lighted and groomed), a small sledding hill, bonfire pit, pavilion, portable toilets and a warming shelter. Skates, sleds and walkers are free to use. (Make sure to return them!) Admission is free; ice cleats in non-rink areas and helmets are encouraged. No concessions, but downtown Boulder Junction is within walking distance, with shops, eateries and pubs. Skate rentals are available at Coontail Sporting Goods. For updates and trail conditions, visit boulderatplay.com.