



# MANITOWISH WATERS SNO-SKEETERS

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This article is being written about one of the oldest groomer operators and trail bosses in the North Woods of Wisconsin - Not so much oldest in years, but years on the job.

Thirty-two years, same job, same club - The Manitowish Waters Sno-Skeeters snowmobile club was formed in 1968. We have had the same groomer operator and trail boss for all of these years and he has again agreed to be on the job for the up and coming season.

When the club was organized back then it was just a handful of local people that were interested enough, and had a snowmobile that wanted to become involved. From 1968 to 1971 a snowmobile was used to pull the drag, which was a bed spring, to cut more deeply into the snow pack, you would simply add some weight on the bed spring, cement blocks, stones, logs, whatever that was available at the time and location. I say location, because our first trails were more out in the open fields, where the snow was deeper, we would try to clear paths in the wooded areas, because of lots of trees, the snow wasn't as deep so the weight would have to come off. Way back then there wasn't too many problems in obtaining permission to cross private property, snowmobiles were more of a rarity and really not a problem. Soon we had about 20 miles of trail, so the trails had to be dragged or groomed 2 or 3 times a week, which really took some time and energy.

I think now would be the time to introduce **Ralph Hanson**, he is the man that has been talked about and still is the man for the Sno-Skeeters.

Ralph started with the snowmobile and bed springs and now we'll continue on what he's done next.

In 1971, one of the club members bought a drag to pull behind a snowmobile, which would cut down on the time it took to do the trails. Now we were getting into the big time, so it meant more brushing of the trails, trimming of some more trees and yes, signs were being placed on the trails. Ralph made sure things were being done right. Most signs were hand made for locations, trails were being increased and yes we were seeing more snowmobiles. The snowmobile and drag were used until the end of the 1974 season. Ralph knew that we needed a better way of grooming, especially with more trails and traffic.

A half track skidder was purchased used, the same type that was used for skidding logs in a lumber operation. Six cylinder, gas manual transmission, open cab. The drag from the snowmobile-drag operation was too small for this modern skidder machine, we thought it was modern at least to the Skeeters, so we had to have a bigger and better drag. Can't remember, who or why or what, but we started using a 6 foot wide homemade drag behind our skidder. Ralph figured now we really were in the big time. For the time and type of machine, it worked pretty good. Now with more trails, our trails needed more work, Ralph had some help to get these things accomplished.

Manufactured signs were put on the trails and it was possible to hook up with the other clubs trails, so that the trail network was being formed. This meant some planning meetings, where the trail bosses and groomer operators would get together to coordinate trails and who would groom and to what point.



Now subjects like bridges, road crossings, signage, trail funds and all the other things connected with trails became important. Our groomer operator and trail boss, Ralph Hanson made sure the Sno-Skeeters were always represented.

Well the skidder and homemade drag, with many of Ralph's and his crews improvements and up dates were used on the Manitowish Waters trail system until 1986. Don't know what happened to the drag, I suppose it ended up with another club or in the drag cemetery, but I can tell you the club still has the skidder and uses it in the off season for trail maintenance. This past fall it was used to clear fallen trees and some ground work, I think Ralph and his crew has a sentimental spot for this piece of machinery, from the many hours they spent grooming with it.

This part of the article brings us up to 1986 when the Chief groomer and trail boss probably said enough is enough and we purchased our first real groomer, a used 1978 Tucker Sno-Cat and drag. Now we were really big time. This was really working great and we had this machine for about four years. Really not too many problems, the usual with the early groomers. One major problem for Ralph was, one night he was far out on the Kego Road trail and when he was turning around, he blew out the ring and pinion in the rear end, but with lots of help the machine was brought back to Dietz's Garage, where the parts were replaced and only three days lost, Ralph and his crew were back on the trails again.

About 1990 it was decided we should look for another Tucker. After lots of looking, a 1984 was located in I believe Michigan. After Ralph's insight, the old machine was sold and the purchase of the 1984 mid engine Tucker was finalized. Same drag was kept, we didn't want to spoil Ralph and his helpers. Lots of repairs on this baby, new tracks, cleats, bolts and all - but Ralph was always there helping, besides making sure the trails were

being kept up.

1994 was kind of special, as we bought another Tucker. This time a demo - it was like new - Ralph thought he died and went to "Tucker Heaven". Now we had to have a new drag, which we purchased from Arrow Head Groomers. Ralph and the Skeeters were big time - trails were being expanded and being recognized as some of the best. Ralph trained some more members to help groom. I think he wanted to slow down a bit, not sure of this, but it never did happen.

Now that Ralph had a taste of the good life, demo Tucker, I guess I didn't mention diesel, automatic, etc. It was time for a new machine, so in 1996 our first new machine. WOW - one thing a lot of people can't figure out is why a green drag was purchased from Arrowhead, the machines are orange and the drag is green - Maybe Ralph or whoever, were hoping Tucker would change to Yellow. (That's a Packer joke) Now because of all this high living and new groomer, the club has had to hold more fund raisers. Ralph seems to always be involved in that stuff too. That brings us up to 1998 - something must be going right - now we have trail money and decent rates, and our groomer guys taking care of the machine - Yes, another new Tucker, but still the green drag. I left out something besides all of the things Ralph does. The club decided it was time for a groomer building to house our Tucker and signs, equipment, etc. So there's Ralph involved in that too. Now we have a heated building so we can de-ice after grooming. All the luxuries, and yes Ralph is still Trail Boss and Chief Groomer. Now it's the end of the past (snow shortened) season.



This article is only about one person, and we all know it takes more than one guy to make a club successful, but anyone that knows anything about the Sno-Skeeters and their trails, knows Ralph Hanson. Not quite finished - Yes, we just traded the 1999 Tucker in for a new 2001 Tucker Terra Track, our 5th Tucker I guess the club wants to keep Ralph happy and keep him working, however at the last club meeting, he made an announcement - He has been cooking "Brats" at the July 4th celebration since we started and he told everyone this is the last time, he is giving that up so someone else can have some fun too. We couldn't believe it after spoiling him all these years with these great orange Tuckers and a green drag.

Now the serious part - The Manitowish Waters Sno-Skeeters are nominating Mr. Ralph Hanson as the Groomer Operator of the Year.

After 32 years, we the members of the club believes he deserves this honor.

Submitted by Officers, Directors and Members of the Manitowish Waters Sno-Skeeters.

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