

Waterski Loons on the Mississippi



The waterway here on the shores of Lum Park offers two uniquely different aquatic worlds.

First, there's the Mississippi River, which is almost as prominent as the lake it runs through here.

Then there's the lake factor. The Minnesota DNR says Rice Lake spans over 300 acres, but it's essentially just a good-sized widening of the river here in northwestern Brainerd.

Regardless, this is a popular fishing hole, and it gets its fair share of personal watercraft users and the like, too – activities you'll find on pretty much any stretch of the Mississippi; nothing out of the ordinary here.

Enter the Brainerd Ski Loons.

The water ski show team debuted in 2014 and continues to build on the success it enjoyed in that inaugural year.



And why not? Lakes are synonymous with the Brainerd area – both for fishing and recreation. And while the area might be best known for its fisheries, water skiing has long been a tradition in the area, too.

“It’s definitely a Minnesota Tradition,” Ski Loons founder and team member Chris Dens told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates passionate Minnesota pastimes like water skiing, embracing the resources that make these Minnesota traditions great. (For more, go to www.minnesotatraditions.com.)

“It goes with all the lakes and being around the lake culture. That’s water skiing.”

The sport did get its start in the Land of 10,000 Lakes: Water skiing was invented in 1922 when Ralph Samuelson used a

pair of boards as skis and a clothesline as a towrope on Lake Pepin in Lake City.

But water skiing where river meets lake?



“I think it’s cool that I’m skiing on the Mississippi,” said Ski Loons team member Elle Bruggeman, who was 14 years old and a ninth-grader at the Brainerd High South Campus this past year. “It’s cool to tell people that we ski on the Mississippi. I like it.”

The concept is clicking with the community, too, with about 1,000 spectators taking in one show in 2017, Dens said.

“It’s been positive,” he said of the reaction to the team. “We’ve had great feedback from the community and businesses for sponsorships. And the people who attend, they say it’s fabulous.”

Since 2014, team numbers have swelled to about 60, Dens said, although not all team members participate in each of the four scheduled shows, held in July and August. Team members range in age from about 12 to 60, and a good number of the members – Elle included – didn't do much water skiing until the Ski Loons were founded.



“That’s one of the really cool things about show skiing. With everything else, it’s 12-year-olds (participating) with 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds with 13-year-olds ... They’re not on a team with older people,” added Dens, who also got his start skiing on the Mississippi with the Twin Cities River Rats. “And there’s kids and their parents – one girl joined one year and her mom joined the next, and the girl was teaching the mom some things. It’s a very unique thing you don’t get anywhere else. You’re part of a community.”

A community that has embraced the Ski Loons.

“We have a great relationship with (Brainerd) Parks and Recreation,” Dens said. “And the Mississippi and Rice Lake – it’s an ideal location.”

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