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Snowshoeing is 'kind of like running in sand,' says Marc Campbell, the creator of Western Canada's only snowshoe running race series, the Yeti.

New racket in town

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Ryan Stuart

There aren't many sports whose sole prerequisite is the ability to put one foot in front of the other, but the advent of high-tech snowshoes has created just such an activity.

"If you can walk, you can snowshoe," says Marc Campbell, owner of Western Canada's only snowshoe running race series, the Yeti. "A lot of people think that snowshoes are still four feet high and three feet wide and you have to walk bow-legged to use them. That's not the case any more."

Gone are the wood and split-gut snowshoes perfected by aboriginal people. Modern manufacturers have created lightweight, low-bulk snowshoes that leave the old tennis-racket style stuck in the snow dust. Made of lightweight aluminum and equipped with dagger-like crampons, the new svelte snowshoes will take you anywhere,

in any snow conditions.

No wonder snowshoeing is the fastest-growing outdoor winter activity, based on equipment sales. In fact, stores like Coast Mountain Sports are having trouble keeping snowshoes on the shelves, even after ordering three times as many pairs as they did last year.

The high-tech binding systems on the new models make snowshoeing even more like walking, says Mark Lister, manager of the Raven Lodge at Mount Washington on Vancouver Island, where up to 150 pairs of snowshoes are rented on peak weekends. "Snowshoeing is great because you can go at your own pace and there's no need for lessons." The combination makes it an ideal family activity.

Rookies can pick up a pair, strap them on and go like a pro in just a few minutes. And if they're looking for more of a challenge, they can always try running in them.

Campbell dreamed up the Yeti series more than five years ago while he was helping to organize summer adventure races. Looking for a winter equivalent, he checked out snowshoe running, a new fad among top triathletes and runners,

GETTING FIT TO FEAST

The last snowshoe boom was in the 19th century, when snowed-in settlers used them to get to dinner parties. Following in their footsteps, local mountains are offering snowshoe-fondue dinners.

The virtuous part is a guided romp through snowy forests, on and off trails at either Cypress Mountain or Mount Washington. Dinner is a caloric feast of melted cheeses and chocolate in a cozy alpine lodge.

Cypress Mountain hosts snowshoe-fondue tours from Sunday to Fridays at 6 p.m., with dinner at Hollyburn Lodge. \$70. Book at least 72 hours in advance at 604-922-0825.

At Mount Washington, snowshoe-fondue outings depart on Fridays at 5 p.m. from Raven Lodge. \$44. Pre-register at 250-338-1386.

—Ryan Stuart



who were using tiny snowshoes to run on the edge of groomed cross-country ski trails.

"It's kind of like running in sand," says Campbell, who offers regular snowshoeing clinics. "It's perfect cross-training for almost every sport." The give of snow and the added weight of snowshoes makes pavement running seem easy in comparison, he adds. Plus it's easy on the joints, and an incredible muscle builder.

This year, 80 to 100 people have shown up to torture their quads, calves and lungs in the five- and 10-kilometre Yeti races. The season continues on Feb. 25 and April 9 at Mount Seymour and March 11 at Cypress Mountain (see www.theyeti.ca).

Snowshoeing does not have to be taxing, though. The new generation of snowshoes offers access to untracked powder for snowboarders, and a means of transport and good exercise for everyone else.

"They're so versatile," Campbell says. "You can go for a walk, you can run, you can hike or you can climb a mountain. Anyone can do it."

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