

King Of The Hill

On the first snowfall of each year, if it landed on a weekday, all of the kids at Dorchester Elementary would invariably huck well-packed snowballs in each other's faces, running about this way and that in the fresh powder, screaming like wild animals. If you were to be nearby on any such fateful morning, you might notice another group, wearing bright red toques, hanging back by the south door's steps, merely observing the chaos in mild amusement. Don't think for a moment that my crew wouldn't enjoy taking a shot or two, because we did, and we do, but we were biding our time for something far more important and ceremonial than any old snowball fight.

In the winter of 1999, it was no different. Snow came on a Wednesday, and the entire afternoon was spent braced in uptight anticipation for the ringing of the final bell. When it eventually came, we all sprinted to our meeting place, hobbling about in our half-tied boots to march uniformly home together. Once we turned onto my street, each of us branched off for a moment, grabbing a plank of wood, a plastic saucer, or in my case, my trusty Snowslider®, red and blue like Spiderman. We converged again on my friend Jordan's front lawn, just under his ever-tall pine tree, to wait for him because he always managed to be late, though it helped that he was closest to our destination. As soon as he skidded out of his front door, nearly tripping on his own steps as he called goodbye to his mom, we were off. Another 10 metres, over the fallen fence, and there we were: the top of the Gordon Township Ski Hill.

We shuffled our way past the two-person lift and set up our gear, perched dangerously close to the edge of our reserved run, the Duck Hunt. Being the only black diamond on the hill, it was the favourite amongst kids in town, and since my older

brother Sammy had passed down the responsibility, we charged a users fee. It wasn't a lot, but it helped make sure that the Ski Patrol didn't bother us too much during the season. For the last 20 years, and many more to come, within that price came a teensy bonus, just large enough to buy oneself a special Christmas present or two. At snowfall, whichever kid from our street won the very first race down to the bottom got to keep it; better than that, they were crowned King Of The Hill. Sammy had been the first one ever, and it had rotated between most of us since its conception, but I had only ever come close. As soon as we settled at the top of that run, all of the friends surrounding me quickly turned into my competition.

Before starting, we all said a quick prayer together. None of us were vividly religious, but it was another one of those solemn traditions that had been passed down from the older generation, a time when some of them certainly were. To break those habits would be bad luck for all of us, so we kept them alive year after year. After that, we all lined up, creating small starting boxes from which we would push off and go careening down the 500 feet of measured track straight in front of the lodge. We were officiated by Jerry, a 15-year-old with a 5th-period spare who was technically ineligible, much to his yearly dismay, because he lived on the corner and his address said Clairmont St. instead of Buford. I was in box number five, coincidentally my lucky number, so I was feeling pretty good about my chances until Marcus pushed into position next to me.

"What are you staring at, hoser?"

I still remember those words, strikingly similar to the other taunts I heard each and every season. Marcus was my number one rival, ironically the younger brother of

my older bro's main man, Edward, and a real prick. In school, he took every chance he could get to humiliate me, and every winter, whenever I foolishly thought I had finally won, he was right there to swoop past me with his old reliable "Better luck next time, hoser!"

Needless to say, I didn't like him much, but I wasn't going to let anything he did bother me this time. As I lay down on my toboggan, mentally imitating my pushoff, I heard him pull out a pair of wooden fins. These were custom-made; designed to help him steer at maximum speed, and solid purple, but I already knew that because I had seen him making them. We both had Mr. Eakhart to thank for his impromptu lunchtime Physics lessons, because we were the only two that had devised this brilliant idea. I sat up, motioned to Jerry, and fetched my own set from my backpack, a perfect match for my sled, and meticulously strapped them on. Upon noticing, everyone else heaved a collective groan. Porter, my next-door neighbor, simply stood up and left. He wasn't going to win anyway, but apparently, he thought it wasn't even worth trying considering our advantages.

After a brief recess to mourn the loss of our friend (we just wanted to steal the hot chocolate he left in his canteen because he clumsily forgot his backpack), everyone reset themselves at the starting line, and prepared for the sacred signal. Jerry pulled out the ceremonial pellet gun, borrowed from my brother, loaded a single shot, and fired. Everyone stayed completely still. Seconds ticked by, and everyone lay frozen on their stomachs in the snow.

Thud

The projectile hit the ground and we were off, sprinting ourselves over the sheer edge like maniacal bobsledders. My foot caught and I lunged, narrowly skidding onto my ride as it sped away. I was behind a few of the other guys, but I had plenty of time. I activated my left fin, and drifted in that direction, positioning myself for the namesake of the Duck Hunt. The run was dotted with fir trees, positioned randomly like skeets, or more accurately, ducks in the famous NES game. I whizzed past the first one easily, narrowly sped between two others, and emerged on the other side of the first patch closer to the front of the pack. Others weren't so lucky, and I think I heard Colin Armstrong shriek as he slammed into a leaning trunk.

The hill was beginning to level out by now, and I whistled back to the right, silently approaching Marcus from behind. Between us was Louis, Colin's twin brother, but he didn't hear me and went flying when I landed a well-placed punch on the back of his saucer. I felt a little bad, but I couldn't dwell on it as I stalked ever nearer to my rival.

At the last moment before we hit the second and final patch of trees, Marcus finally stretched his neck and noticed me. I tactfully sped between the remaining obstacles, but when I bolted out the other side, Marcus was no longer in front of me. My heart began to thump faster, but as I was about to release a whoop, I picked up on the subtle swish of a sled, barely audible beneath my own. Marcus sped past, just out of reach, and my whole chest sank. We had just over 50 metres until the bottom, and he twisted his head towards me, a telltale smirk plastered all over his zit-filled face.

"Better luck next time, hos—"

At that moment, his sled struck a large bump in the snow. To this day, I don't know if it was a coincidental heap of powder, or if someone had been looking out for me, but what I do know is that Marcus Aurelius (yes, his parents really did name him after the Greek guy), went careening through the air, screaming straight into a snowbank. I maneuvered to the bottom of the hill, tumbled off my toboggan, and sat in the snow, dazed.

After a few moments of being stunned this way, I heard a long echoing cry from up the slope. I sprung up, released a resounding cheer, threw myself back to the ground, made a hasty snow angel, and drew a crown on its head. Thus began the most cherished winter of my childhood days, when I could still afford to spend hours on end endangering myself against the perils of the ski hill on a fashioned sled, receiving enough money from my bonus that I awoke on Christmas morning with a brand new Sega Dreamcast, much to no one's surprise. Marcus would win the following year, but by then I couldn't care less. Many winters spent on the hill would slowly fade from memory, but every once in a while, when I see a ragtag bunch of pre-teens throwing themselves down the incline after first snowfall, I recall the time when I was King Of The Hill.