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Gazette file photos

Skiers prepare for the slopes (above) and ride the ski lift (below) at Sundown in Dubuque, one of Iowa's 11 downhill ski areas.

SKIING

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seasons. But the long-term outlook for Nor-Ski's survival is uncertain.

Nor-Ski is one of the oldest ski hills in Iowa, started in the late 1950s by a group of volunteers who organized the Decorah Ski Association. The city of Decorah assumed responsibility for the hill 11 years ago through its Parks and Recreation Department.

It's the only hill in Eastern Iowa that doesn't own sophisticated snowmaking and lift equipment. To break even on costs, the hill needs 100 skiers a day, but this year it has averaged only 44.

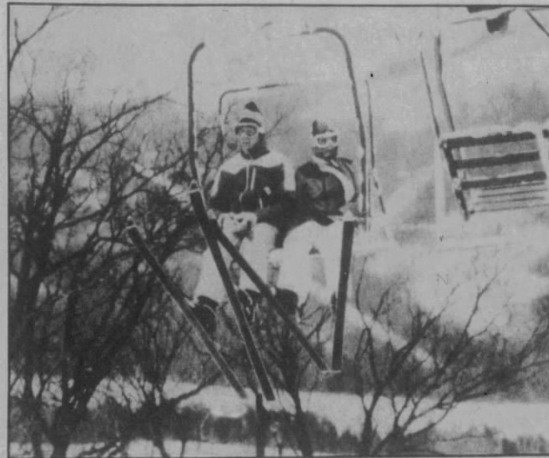
The commercial slopes have operated daily since late November but Nor-Ski has been open only 15 days.

Nor-Ski has five slopes, Sundown in Dubuque has 17 runs, featuring three chairlifts and three rope tows with a capacity of hauling 7,800 skiers an hour.

The number and capacity of chair lifts — single, double and triple — has become a sort of badge of honor among ski resorts.

At Nor-Ski there's no chair lift: skiers are propelled uphill with aging tow ropes and a "Mighty Mite" L-bar.

The sport was successful enough in the 1960s that Nor-Ski had money to buy a "Snow Cat" and rental skis, build a hill with a new tow and erect a warmup chalet. The hill was self-supporting until about four years ago. Lack of snow some recent years



may have cooled interest, Hunt said, and with no snowmaking capacity, "you never know if Nor-Ski will be open," he says.

Other winter sports have moved in to claim some of downhill skiing's share of attention.

In the 1960s, Nor-Ski "was the only game around," says Hunt. "There were no other ski areas and cross country skiing hadn't hit its stride. On weekends we used to rent out all the rentals (about 80 pairs of skis) and when people were finished, we'd rent 'em out again."

On the positive side, Hunt says tow tickets and rental equipment at Nor-Ski are not as expensive as some places: \$6.75 per day for an

adult tow ticket compared with \$15 to \$20 at a larger resort.

The newly revived Decorah Ski Association has been studying the feasibility of improving the hill but cost estimates run at about \$1.5 million to install good equipment. "It costs about \$500,000 for snowmaking equipment alone," says Hunt.

Money for improvements would have to come either from a fund drive or from the city. In tight budgetary times, ski hills aren't seen as a necessity.

"It's a beautiful hill," Hunt says of Nor-Ski. "I don't know if it can continue this way but that will not be my decision."