



Gene Hornbeck/World-Herald

Dana and Candace Crockett of Hastings head the tow line . . . Prairie Hills slopes suit beginners and more advanced skiers, the owner said.



World-Herald

Future Olympian? . . . Wade Williams, 3, of Loomis.

3 Out of 4 Are Beginners

Skiers Taking to Slopes on Nebraska Prairie

By Gene Hornbeck

Outdoor Recreation Editor

Kearney, Neb. — Who knows? Maybe someday 3-year-old Wade Williams of Loomis will be an Olympic skier, and his success will have started on man-made snow in the grassy hills north of this Platte Valley community.

The pint-size skier stood tall on his 2-foot-long skis as he tackled the slope with his 6-year-old brother Casey, dad Tim and aunt Jan.

"It's the first time on skis for Wade and Casey," the elder Williams said. "We're planning a trip to Colorado in the near future and thought this would be a good place to get tuned up a bit.

"I'm surprised that the kids take to skiing as quickly as they do, but I guess it isn't any different than any other new experience. If it's fun, they soon learn the fundamentals."

Opened in 1981

The Prairie Hills Ski Club, 10 miles north of town on Highway 10, offers a quarter-mile long slope with rope tows. Mr. and Mrs. John Weber opened the area in December of 1981.

"We've only missed one day of skiing since Dec.

7," Weber said last week. "Business has been only fair so far this winter. We have plenty of snow, but people don't seem to think about skiing Nebraska unless they have snow in the back yard."

Weber said the weather has been good for making snow with machines.

"We have some spots on the hill where we have five feet of snow," he said, "and actually all we really need is enough to cover the grass."

Weber said three out of four skiers who come to the hill are beginners.

"There are still a lot of people who don't know we have a ski hill in south-central Nebraska," he said. "It's hard to say how many people on the slope on a given day are skiing for the first time, but it is a significant number."

The hill is also big enough to test the experienced skier, he said.

"If it's cold and the snow isn't sticky the hill can be pretty fast," he said. "A good skier can get a workout and get in some good practice for the bigger slopes."

First-Time Skiers

Leanne Schrage, 28, a native of Elgin, Neb., who now lives in Omaha, said she was surprised to find a

ski slope near Kearney.

"I heard about the hill from some friends and we decided to try it," she said. "This is my first time on skis, and I'm not sure whether I'm going to like it or not. It's nice to just stand still for a while and rest. It's tough to stay on your feet even while hanging onto the tow rope to go back up the hill."

Weber said the two rope tows can handle about 35 people at a time.

"We can handle about 300 skiers on the slope," he said.

Skiing at Prairie Hills costs a maximum of \$12 a day if the skier rents equipment. The lift or tow ticket is \$6 a day on weekends.

Night skiing under the lights costs \$7 for a complete package.

Dana and Candace Crockett of Hastings and Eric Gerlach of Greenville were among the first-time skiers trying the hill.

"I think this could be fun if you get the hang of it," Gerlach said. "Yes, I'm sure it could be fun if it wasn't for the falling down and the trying to get back up on the skis again while standing on an icy hillside."

Meanwhile, young Wade Williams seemed to be enjoying the sport even though he found himself coming down the hill backwards. Not bad for a 3-year-old.