

BREAKING TRAIL

Can You Be A Better Member?

The title of this column is *Breaking Trail*. And that's what my snowmobile club did to get trails ready for this season.

What you ride on this season is all because of volunteers. I'm not talking about the snow. I realize that without snow it's not as easy to ride sleds, but I get frustrated with how many people still don't understand that without the help of countless volunteers there would be nothing to ride on, either.

Signs are up. Brush is cleared. Landowner permission has been obtained to secure another year of our snowmobile infrastructure. And it's club members who volunteer their time to handle the workload.

I'm talking about the thousands of miles of groomed and marked snowmobile trails. Did you know there are more than 200,000 miles of trails in North America, most of which were developed by volunteer labor?

I'm a member of the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club, part of an association of clubs in Wright County, Minnesota. On an October weekend our club had one of its designated weekends for trail maintenance. It was a fabulous turnout – about 20 of our members showed up to help out. We divided, and we conquered.

We signed a portion of our club's trails, establishing and marking the routes and posting caution signs where they needed to be. The crew I was teamed with started out by clearing out an overgrown ditch. We trimmed low-hanging branches and sawed off brush. We picked up litter while we were at it, giving our designated stretch a good once-over.

We went from one trail mile to the next. This year, we wanted to route a small stretch of trail differently from where it went in the past. There was a marshy area near the edge of a crop field that was wet year round, perhaps fed constantly by a spring, that we wanted to avoid.

The route our club wanted was through about 300 feet of woods. Once we had the green light from the landowner, nine people, three chainsaws, four brush cutters and a winch-equipped ATV began the work.

When we started, an ATV couldn't make a



straight path through the small, wooded section of private land. When we were done, we cleared a path wide enough for our groomer, and we made sure there was a small turn through the woods for a more entertaining ride, too.

It took about 2 hours to cut the trees, clear out the deadfall and build a short section of trail. But it took a lot of volunteers and owner permission to make it possible.

That new section of trail was that day's finale – for the work, anyway. After we were done and our machines were parked, we met at a local, snowmobile-friendly bar and grill for a round of appetizers, a burger and a cold beer. Appreciation came from the fellowship, from the work that went into it and from giving back to the sport. Year after year, I appreciate the trails more knowing the work it takes – from clubs like ours based on nothing but volunteers – to keep them open.

It may sound like I do a lot, but the truth is, I'm a pretty lousy club member. Even though our meetings are monthly, I only make them occasionally. Sometimes I'm traveling on business; sometimes I'm behind at work; sometimes I have something planned with family. I'm as busy as the next guy.

But I go when I can, and I help out when I can. I pitch in for trail prep, I try to work a shift at our fundraising activities.

Though I wish I did more, I get tremendous satisfaction from the little I contribute. I know the Foxtailers would appreciate more help from me, too, but I know they are grateful for the time I scrounge to volunteer. I'm trying to be a better member this year, being more active than in past years.

The trails are on the ground again this season from club volunteers, many of whom are better club members than I am. For those of you who are not club members, do you think you can become one, and be a better club member than me? It wouldn't take much to show me up. And I know whatever time you can spend volunteering with your local snowmobile club – even if it's no time at all, just your membership – will be appreciated. I think you'll find more appreciation for the trails that way, too. **SEB**