

The thrill of the hill

Snowy delight of sledding depends on conditions — and equipment, too

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By Eileen Dempsey THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

As the first flakes fall, sledders head for the hills — eager to try out their latest contraptions.

In central Ohio, of course, snowfall is iffy.

And, because most of the terrain is as flat as a mattress, sledding is sometimes challenging.

The first dustings of snow have already fallen, with the winter totals expected to be near or slightly below normal, said Mike Davis, chief meteorologist for WBNS-TV (Channel 10).

Columbus has an average annual snowfall of 28 inches, he said — although, during the winter of 2002-03, it received 50 inches, including 9 inches on a February day that seemed perfect for sledding.

January and February, typically the snowiest months in these parts, boast an average of 15 inches total. This year, however, residents endured 14 inches in January and 26 additional inches in February, Davis said.

"We're getting into our snow season now," he said.

With that thought in mind, Accent offers tips and trivia.

Slippery history

For thousands of years, sleds have carried heavy loads of food, supplies and people across snow and ice.



Baby Sled by WHAM-O, sold at stores such as KB Toys, Target, Wal-Mart and sporting-goods suppliers



Powderstick sled/snowboard by WHAM-O

Some sleds and sleighs move on runners. Others glide on iron or wooden bottoms, and still others are drawn by reindeer or dogs.

The first sled was a strip of animal skin stretched between two smooth strips of wood.

From that evolved the toboggan of the North American Indians. The term comes from the Algonquin word *odabaggan*, meaning a drag made of skin.

A toboggan is a runnerless sled usually built of thin, straight-grained wooden boards fastened by light crosspieces. Some are made of metal or laminated wood. The front end is bent up and back to form a hood and is braced by rope or leather thongs.

The Vikings used sleds in Norway, probably as early as A.D. 800.

The Flexible Flyer, invented and patented by Samuel Leeds Allen in 1889, has remained virtually unchanged in design and construction. Each features wooden seat slats bearing the distinctive red eagle trademark, wooden steering and handle bars and steel runners and struts painted red.

Sport's dangers

Each year, about 33,000 people — including 14,500 children — are injured in sledding accidents. About 1,500 more people are injured in toboggan accidents.

Most injuries were caused by sledders colliding with a stationary object, such as a rock, tree or signpost. The most common injuries, particularly to children 6 and younger, involved the head or neck.

Older children can suffer spinal injuries when they bounce off a plastic disc sled or inflatable inner tube.

Helmet help

During a recent five-year period, Children's Hospital treated 168 children who had been injured while sledding. Researchers found that only 3 percent were wearing helmets.

Parents who buy their children sleds should also buy a helmet and make sure their children wear it, said Dr. Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Children's Hospital.



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Youth Outrider Bicycle Helmet



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Flexible Flyer III

"Sleds and helmets should be sold together," Smith said.

Buying tips

Parents or grandparents considering sleds as holiday gifts should consider these safety issues:

- Sleds with runners and a steering mechanism, such as a Flexible Flyer, are the safest because the rider is elevated off the ground. The ability to steer is important in avoiding collisions with other sleds or stationary objects.
- Inflatable inner tubes absorb some shocks on bumpy hills but are dangerous because they cannot be steered.
- Plastic discs are even worse because they don't absorb shocks and cannot be steered.
- Sleds should have handgrips to help riders stay on when going over bumps.
- Makeshift sleds — such as plastic cafeteria trays, metal baking sheets, car hoods or plastic garbage bags — should be avoided; they provide little or no protection from objects such as rocks or tree stumps.

"Small objects could poke through the plastic and injure the child," Smith said.

Sources: Britannica Student Encyclopedia; Mike Davis, WBNS-TV (Channel 10) meteorologist; Dispatch archives; Guinness Book of World Records; Dee Jepsen, director for Agriculture Safety Programs at Ohio State University Extension; Peg Hanley, spokeswoman for Metro Parks; Terri Leist, spokeswoman for Columbus Recreation and Parks Department; National Safety Council; Old Farmer's Almanac; Gary Smith, emergency-room physician and director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Children's Hospital; www.target.com; U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission; www.uspto.gov/go/kids/flexflyr.htm

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Safe sledding

Tips for having fun and reducing the risk of injury include:

- Let children sled only under adult supervision.
- Use common sense.
- Do not sled alone.

- Wear a helmet.
- Wear layers of padded and insulated clothing, including a hat, and gloves or mittens to help prevent injuries from hands or fingers being run over.
- Do not sled on frozen lakes or ponds, parking lots or roadways. Avoid hills that empty into these areas.
- Inspect the terrain and avoid hills with rocks, trees, stumps, signposts or fences.
- Do not sled after dark unless the hill is lighted.
- Do not sled headfirst.
- Do not attach several sleds together for “train sledding.”
- Never pull a sled with a motorized vehicle.
- Wait until sledders have cleared the bottom of the hill before taking off at the top.
- Do not wear loose clothing. Dangling drawstrings or scarves can be caught and strangle a child.

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