

MCNL: Great Bear Chase Concludes Defiant Season, Twin Cities Crowned Midwest Collegiate Champions

TCN Men defend cumulative title; TCN Women unseat Badgers

A small but determined field of collegiate Nordic skiers made their way North of the Portage this weekend to decide the final standings of the 2020-21 Midwest Collegiate Nordic League. As the sun rose over the steam hoists and smokestacks of fair Calumet, athletes representing Twin Cities Nordic, the Buckingham Badgers, and Michigan Technological University gathered at the 40th annual Great Bear Chase to test their strength – and wax – on the winding Swedetown trails.

The Great Bear Chase was the third and final event on the MCNL's 2020-21 racing circuit. Team points snatched from the jaws of this Beast of Copper Country were added to points won at the Vasaloppet USA and the American Birkebeiner to determine the Midwest Collegiate Champions. Unchallenged by the Men's Division runners-up, the Duluth Area Golden Retrievers, the Twin Cities Nordic Men expanded their lead and secured the cumulative points title for the second consecutive year. Meanwhile, the Twin Cities Nordic Women maintained their points lead to win their first cumulative title – denying the 2019-20 champions, the Buckingham Badgers, a return to the top spot.

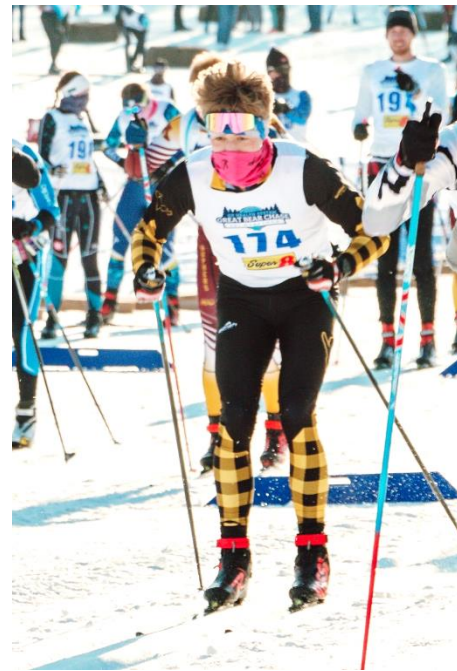


Windblown and sunburnt, Twin Cities Nordic skiers (from left) Alex Gude, Lily Den Hartog, and Luke Dykowski recover at the finish line. Are visions of post-race pasties dancing in their heads?

Photo courtesy of Izzy Valento

Except for a handful of skiers in the Rocky Mountains and on the East Coast, the MCNL was the only club collegiate Nordic league to race this year. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, unpredictable weather, university restrictions, and the suspension of USCSA competition, Midwestern teams demonstrated laudable conviction and commitment in simply *having* a competitive season – let alone a season with more teams, more institutions, and more skiers than in 2019-20. This year was a defiant testament to the strength of Midwestern club collegiate skiing, and irrefutable proof that there is not only the desire, but the determination to make a league work in a region that, until [October of 2019](#), had lacked club collegiate competition since the late 1980s.

Such sentiment was clearly visible in the aftermath of Saturday’s race, which proved more challenging than anticipated. In addition to the deceptively demanding terrain (including “the longest last 2k known to man”) at this ‘spring fling’ of Midwestern skiing, rapidly warming temperatures turned fast snow into a speed-eating quagmire halfway through the 50k Skate. However, sunny skies and friendly competition seemed an ample antidote to any bogged-down blues, and athletes were enthusiastic in reflecting on their races – and in voicing their support for expanding and strengthening league skiing in advance of the 2020-21 season.



(Left) TCN skier Nathan Bich stays strapped with plenty of Gu for the 50k ahead.

(Right) MTU’s Cal McNabb starts his race. TCN skier Luke Dykowski’s shins are visible in the background.

Photos courtesy of Great Bear Chase / Brockit Inc.

Great Bear Chase Breakdown

While both the Great Bear Chase 50k Skate and 50k Classic races were scheduled to be scored, MCNL skiers may have gambled wisely in avoiding the latter event, as the warming snow quickly rendered kick a distant memory. With no entries in the 50k Classic, this was a contest of glide – which itself proved sorely lacking after the first of two 25k laps.

Undeterred, **Anna Engel** (Buckingham Badgers) led the MCNL field in the **Women’s 50k Skate** with a time of 2:42:00.6. Engel’s win in Calumet rounded out an impressive personal season – with a first-place MCNL finish in the Vasaloppet 47k Skate, and second-place in the Birkebeiner 45k Skate.

Engel was followed by Twin Cities Nordic teammates **Lily Den Hartog**, who finished in second, and **Paige Levendusky**, who finished in third. This was Den Hartog’s third appearance on an MCNL podium this year – she was third in both the Vasaloppet 47k Skate and the Birkebeiner 45k Skate.

Meanwhile, **Caleb Novitch** (Michigan Technological University) dominated the MCNL

Men’s 50k Skate with a time of 2:39:36.3. Novitch’s was the first podium finish for an MTU skier in the 2020-21 season. **Alex Gude** (Twin Cities Nordic), who was second in the MCNL Birkebeiner 45k Classic, was second; he was followed by **Luke Dykowski** (Twin Cities Nordic) in third.

In the Women’s Division team results, Engel brought home 50 points for the **Buckingham Badgers**. They were followed by **Twin Cities Nordic**, with 11 points.

Competition was tighter in the Men’s Division – with only three points separating **Twin Cities Nordic** from **Michigan Technological University**. TCN led MTU 71 to 68 points.

Team Scores: Women (Great Bear Chase)		Composite Score:			
MCNL Rank:	Team:				
	1 Buckingham Badgers	50	Engel (50)		
	2 Twin Cities Nordic	11	Den Hartog (10)	Levendusky (1)	
Team Scores: Men (Great Bear Chase)					
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Composite Score:			
	1 Twin Cities Nordic	71	Gude (37)	Dykowski (27)	Bich (7)
	2 Michigan Technological University	68	Novitch (50)	Jensen (17)	McNabb (1)
Total Teams: 3					
Total Skiers: 9					

Great Bear Chase Team Standings, 3/15/21. Calculated using the Mathie-Halvorson Scoring System.

From the Athletes

Women’s Skate field leader Anna Engel took note of the variety of challenges this year’s Great Bear Chase posed. With high temperatures across the Midwest turning trails to mud from Minneapolis to Madison, Engel confessed that she “hadn’t been on snow for the week prior [to the race]”. While she “felt like [she] had a good race,” it was hard-fought: “Conditions were fast the first lap and considerably slower the second,” and “with the small [starting] waves, it was hard to know if you were being chased or doing the chasing.” Although Engel said that such staggered starts were “maybe not ideal” from a racing perspective, they were a public health precaution well-worth taking, and without which she may not have raced at all.

Reflecting on his race, Caleb Novitch remarked that drafting – especially in the face of the strong westward wind that slowed the descent onto the Bear Loops – and hydrating extensively through the increasing temperatures helped secure his Men’s field win. “It was very enjoyable and rewarding to compete with teammates and family in a great race towards the end of the season,” Novitch said.



(Left) Identifiable at great distance by her signature Hodag hat, Anna Engel moves on to lap two of the 50k skate. Don't be fooled by her Minnesota racing suit – Engel was the leading scorer for the Buckingham Badgers in 2020-21. (Right) MTU's Caleb Novitch, who led the MCNL field Saturday, glides into his second lap of the 50k Skate.

Photos courtesy of the Great Bear Chase / Brockit Inc.

Lily Den Hartog seemed to share Novitch's sentiment, reporting that "overall it was a beautiful day in great company." She started her race with Alex Gude, who praised the event as "a great place to enjoy the last race of the season," and noted that the warm temperatures did not detract from the "beautiful course," or the satisfaction of being back on natural snow after many laps on Minneapolis' manmade loops. Den Hartog and Gude both expressed that simply being able to race in-person was worth appreciating. "I think it's awesome that we skiers have been able to still have races and some sense of normalcy this season, despite the circumstances," said Gude. Den Hartog agreed. "We've made the most out of a pretty restrictive season and have ended up with some non-traditional but still fabulous league competition."



Alex Gude and Lily Den Hartog (center, identifiable by their Minnesota racing suits) converse before the race.

Photo courtesy of the Great Bear Chase / Brockit, Inc.

MCNL Championship: Final Standings

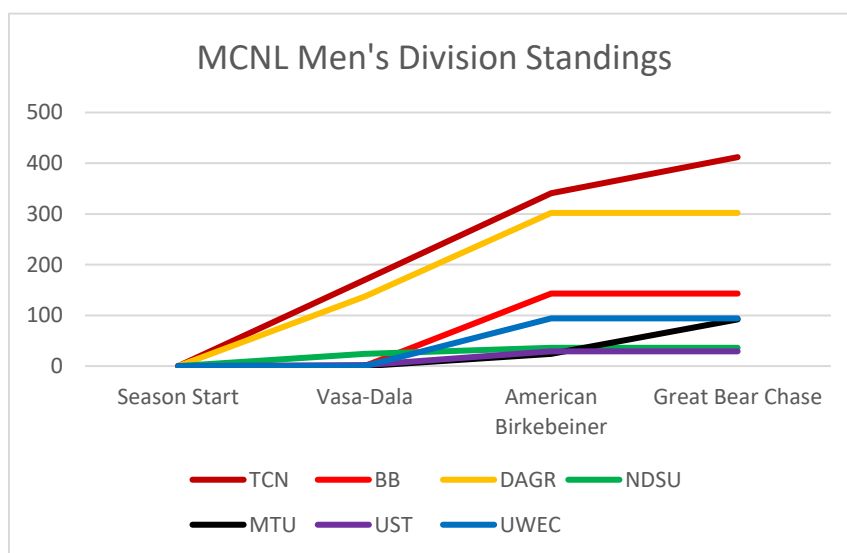
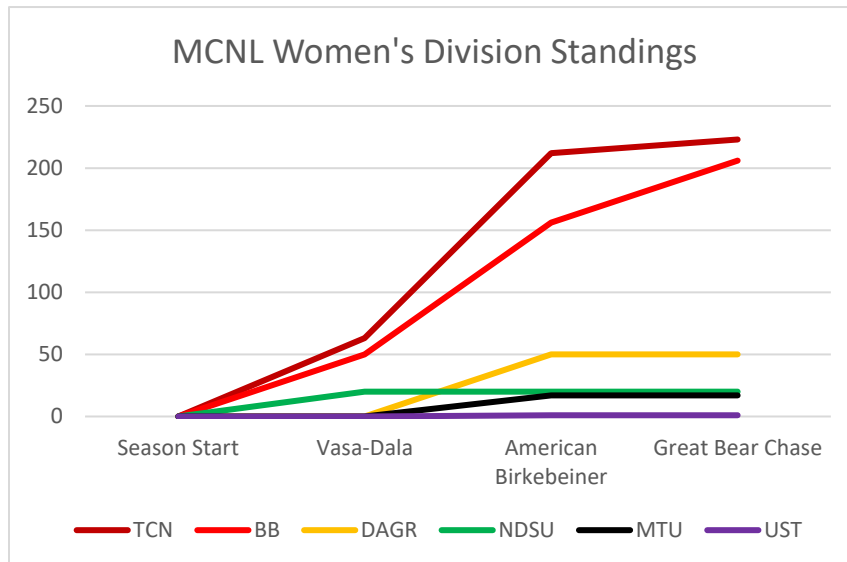
Saturday gave **Twin Cities Nordic** skiers like Den Hartog and Gude ample reason to celebrate that “fabulous league competition”: TCN defended its leads in both the Men’s and Women’s Divisions, with both teams finishing the season as the **Midwest Collegiate Champions**. The TCN Women’s cumulative score rose to 233 points; the TCN Men ended their season with 412 points.

The TCN Men will now bring their second cumulative championship trophy in as many years back to Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Twin Cities Men won the MCSA’s cumulative racing circuit (then called the [Northern Division Championship](#)) in 2019-20. The TCN Men are joined on the 2020-21 MCNL podium by the **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers** in second place, with 302 points, and the **Buckingham Badgers** in third place, with 143 points. Meanwhile, their Great Bear Chase performance moved **Michigan Technological University** from seventh place into fifth, with 92 points, behind **UW Eau Claire** (94 points). **North Dakota State University** (sixth place, 36 points) and the **University of Saint Thomas** (seventh place, 29 points) round out the Men’s MCNL Championship standings.

The TCN Women were only narrowly ahead of the **Buckingham Badger** Women, with Anna Engel’s performance bringing the Badgers’ point total to 206 – a mere 17 points out of a championship title. The **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers** finished in third, with 50 points. They were followed by **North Dakota State University** (fourth place, 20 points), **Michigan Technological University** (fifth place, 17 points), and the **University of Saint Thomas** (sixth place, 1 point).

Cumulative Team Scores: Women					
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Cumulative Score:	Vasa-Dala	American Birkebeiner	Great Bear Chase
1	Twin Cities Nordic	223	63	149	11
2	Buckingham Badgers	206	50	106	50
3	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	50	0	50	0
4	North Dakota State University	20	20	0	0
5	Michigan Technological University	17	0	17	0
6	University of St. Thomas	1	0	1	0
Cumulative Team Scores: Men					
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Cumulative Score:	Vasa-Dala	American Birkebeiner	Great Bear Chase
1	Twin Cities Nordic	412	170	171	71
2	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	302	137	165	0
3	Buckingham Badgers	143	0	143	0
4	UW Eau Claire	94	0	94	0
5	Michigan Technological University	92	0	24	68
6	North Dakota State University	36	24	12	0
7	University of St. Thomas	29	2	27	0
Total Institutions: 7					
Total Teams: 13					

(Above) MCNL Final Cumulative Standings, 3/15/2021. Calculated using the Mathie-Halvorson Scoring System.



MCNL Cumulative Standings, 2/13/21 – 3/15/21. Calculated using the Mathie-Halvorson Scoring System.

Twin Cities Nordic Team President, Izzy Valento, said in a statement that she was “super proud” of the Minneapolis-based skiers. All teams on the MCNL podium this year were entirely student-led clubs racing without sanction, funding, or resources from any university – which made team travel and competition for no easy feat. However, Valento continued: “Despite the challenges of this year, we were still able to get in lots of skiing and races. The double-win on top of that makes it even more amazing!”

Jordan Woods, Duluth Area Golden Retrievers Team President, also indicated that DAGR’s second- and third-place finishes elevates the excitement of an MCNL season that could well have been cancelled entirely. “We just want to say how thankful we are to have some form of a season,” Woods said. “The organizers did an incredible job, and the race coordinators did everything they could to create a normal race experience.” Woods went on to commend his skiers’ performances on this year’s circuit, including Gabi Brinkley for “single-handedly giving [the DAGR Women] bronze in the league,” and concluded: “We can’t wait for a (hopefully) more normal year” in 2021-22.

Sam Hagedorn, League Liaison for the Buckingham Badgers, professed similar satisfaction with the season and eagerness for what lies ahead. While he noted that “this was a strange season,” he was happy that the Buckingham Badgers and their fellow Midwestern teams “took it in stride and were able to put together a good, competitive atmosphere.” With an eye towards the MCNL’s re-accession to the USCSA and MCSA, Hagedorn said that he “looks forward to what the future holds for the MCSA,” and is “happy to say that UW Madison will be a part of that future.”

A Season to Celebrate, and Work to be Done

In addition to the comments quoted above, team leaders from across the Midwest were unequivocal in expressing their support for an expanded, strengthened club collegiate league.

Zach Marien, Team Co-President at the University of Saint Thomas, said that he and his skiers were “thankful” that they were able to participate this year, and “very excited to be a part of this league in the coming seasons, as we were impressed by what it was able to do during such a tough year.”

Henry Campbell, President of the Michigan Technological University Nordic Ski Club, was also pleased with the MCNL’s resilience, and eager to see MTU continue to function as an integral member of Midwest intercollegiate scene competition. “We are grateful for the opportunity to be scored in races against other collegiate skiers despite difficulties due to the pandemic. Though many of our skiers switched to virtual options for events, we had participants in every scored race,” Campbell stated. “Seeing the great turnout from other clubs inspired excitement for next year’s season,” he continued. With the MTU club growing “substantially” this year, the Huskies are “looking forward” to their continued league involvement, and the opportunities for intercollegiate friendships and national-level competition it offers. Matthew Fier, President of the North Dakota State University Nordic Ski Club, also reported that NDSU was “excited to ski next year,” and expressed his hopes that NDSU would continue to help “build the league.”

The MCNL – coordinated, scheduled, scored, and publicized entirely by student athletes – has demonstrated that these statements are not mere words. Nordic clubs in our region *want* to engage in robust, inclusive, and dedicated intercollegiate competition. The 2020-21 MCNL season, executed without outside support or oversight, proves that they have the capacity to do so, guided by their own vision and operating on their own terms. Galvanized by the hard-earned successes of this past year, the resourceful and experienced MCNL teams will be extremely valuable additions to the USCSA and MCSA when re-accession to these regional and national leagues is finalized.

Although it was said at the [end of the 2019-20 season](#), and although the circumstances have changed dramatically since the first weekend of March, 2020, it brings this league coordinator great pride to say it again: season *two* of many for Midwest Nordic is done. We are alive, we are strong, and we are eager to continue growing. So – tell your colleges, tell your competitors, tell your teammates: we will be back next season. We hope you’ll be there with us.

Luke Dykowski is the Vice President of the University of Minnesota Nordic Ski Club, the Nordic Student Coordinator for the MCSA, and the Nordic Student Representative for the USCSA. With questions about joining these regional or national leagues, please email dykow003@umn.edu, or visit uscsa.org.