I’m going to take a wild guess here, and assume that you enjoyed middle school about as much as I did. **Yeah, brutal wasn’t it?** Of course, you and I did not get to attend Alma Oatley’s outdoor education class at Mather Middle School in Munising, Mich. With Ms. Oatley I could have spent PE snowshoeing rather than running for my life, as John Ferguson tried to remove my head with a rubber ball. Wasn’t “battle ball” just great?

But Oatley’s class does much more than protect a young fella’s melon; it’s trimming young waists. Consider Jesse, now 14, who entered Oatley’s first-semester 8th-grade class overweight. “Through all the activity we did, he lost about 20 pounds, and he was really proud of himself. Most of the kids in this class do lose some weight,” she said.

Snowshoeing has become a major part of this class, which also includes activities such as rock climbing and orienteering. The program is made possible through education grants and partnerships with snowshoe manufacturers.

Over years of covering the snowshoe market, I’ve always been impressed with the manufacturers’ efforts to reach out to participants through grassroots programs. Their initiatives seem timelier than ever, as the outdoor industry tries to attract young people and to counter the country’s widespread obesity problem. Snowshoeing has become more popular here in the upper peninsula, so we thought snowshoes would be a good way to go.”

With the help of Lawless, Michigan schools received a $435,000 PEP grant, of which $80,000 was appropriated for snowshoe classes. In the fall of 2002, 44 middle schools each received 35 pairs of Redfeather snowshoes. Snowshoe companies such as Redfeather, Tubbs, Atlas and Yakima have assisted such efforts by providing shoes for wholesale or less. “When I heard we were getting these 35 snowshoes, I almost did cartwheels,” recalled Oatley. “Otherwise, it would be cost prohibitive for a school to buy that type of equipment.”

Redfeather also sent out its reps to the different school districts in Munising to train teachers and students in using the snowshoes.
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Michigan to instruct the teachers on how to use the products, and help them understand other important aspects of traveling outdoors in winter. And, Sports Rack, a 14-year-old store in Marquette, Mich., helped supply the Michigan schools with 1,000 snowshoes.

Oatley has run her morning outdoor education classes for 8th graders for three years. Before her school received the PEP grant, she had to borrow wooden snowshoes from the National Park Service and return them after six weeks.

“When we got the grant, the snowshoeing really took off because we could use shoes as long as we wanted to. And these were aluminum shoes that the kids liked much better.”

As Oatley’s students get in shape, they are also becoming outdoor enthusiasts. “The kids have asked their parents to get them snowshoes. Many times, the whole family will get them. Plus, it gives them an appreciation that there are things in the outdoors other than snowmobiling and four-wheeling.”

Jim Segar, a middle school and high school physical education teacher in Mont Pelier, Vt., has worked with Tubbs to promote school snowshoe programs throughout the state. He says that in the United States, schools are beginning to implement PE classes with certain standards. In Vermont, standards have been produced by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, a non-profit, educational organization that promotes and supports creative and healthy lifestyles.

“The standards ensure that students are
When I heard we were getting these 35 snowshoes, I almost did cartwheels.

—Alma Oatley, 8th-grade teacher

getting some skill, some basis for lifelong practices,” said Segar. School snowshoe programs have been running in Vermont for about six years, starting in middle school, where students first learn safety aspects of the activity, then the recreational aspect.

The children are not the only ones who benefit from school snowshoe classes; the teachers do as well. The Vermont School Board Insurance Trust (VSBIT) operates a program that tries to involve all members of the education system in healthy lifestyle activities. Its Vermont Educator’s Health Initiative program serves 17,000 members who range from teachers to bus drivers. The idea behind the program is that healthy staff members are the critical first piece in creating a successful curriculum.

As part of the Health Initiative, VSBIT held a contest in 2002 where winners received money to purchase Tubbs snowshoes. Teachers paid $10, received a pedometer and walked a certain number of steps each day for 10 weeks. Along the way, they accomplished different missions related to healthy behaviors—improving eating, simplifying their lives, etc. Though the prize money went toward the purchase of adult shoes, VSBIT also matched funds to acquire kid-sized shoes. In 2002, VSBIT purchased about $50,000 in snowshoes from Tubbs to support snowshoe programs in 50 schools throughout Vermont.

While schools have ramped up their snowshoe programs for kids, so have a number of National Forests, National Parks and non-profit organizations. In 1995, Little Bear Snowshoes and the Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA) in Boise, Idaho, established Snow School, the largest national program devoted to on-snow winter ecology field trips for elementary school students. It began as a loaner program, where Little Bear provided shoes to WWA, whose main function is to promote human-powered activities on public lands. Now, the Atlas Snow-shoe Co. provides the shoes, and there are Snow School programs at 23 locations in forests, parks, private nature centers and colleges.

“The idea of Snow School is to provide science-based and physical education-based programs for 4th graders,” said Ken Miller, education and outreach coordinator for
WWA. “All of the sites are in some way not for profit, and they all have interpretive environmental and educational programs.”

WWA is now developing curricula and providing information to new sites that may not have them established. Many of the Snow Schools use a curriculum to work with local school districts to facilitate outings. An interesting twist is that WWA requires each site to make any and all educational materials available to other sites. As for Atlas, it not only provides Snow Schools with shoes at a discount, but it also puts WWA hangtags on products to help promote the program.

For the last 10 years, physical education programs in schools have withered away, but snowshoe companies are on the right track toward improving kids’ lives. If nothing else, 8th graders in upper Michigan are chilling out on snowshoes right now, while some poor Alabama kid is running for his life, trying to duck a deadly rubber ball.

In October 2003, SIA announced that the 2004 Winter Trails program would be expanded to include up to 100 Nordic centers that are members of the Cross Country Ski Areas Association.

Launched in 1997, Winter Trails is a one-day free program designed to introduce the public to snowshoeing and winter recreation. While Winter Trails has proved to be very successful, its reach has been limited because snowshoe manufacturers have traditionally served the demos, and they obviously lack the personnel and financial resources to blanket the country. Now, cross-country ski areas will also be able to host Winter Trails, using their fleet of rental shoes.

The Sunday River Cross Country Ski Center in Newry, Maine, will participate in the 2004 Winter Trails day, which will be held nationwide Jan. 17.

“Most Winter Trails events run a half day, but ours will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.,” said Eric Boyle-Wight, marketing manager for the cross-country center. He says snowshoeing is growing in this resort area, and snowshoe rentals and sales help make up for the slow cross-country ski market.

“We see snowshoeing as a growing market, especially for people who haven’t been interested in sliding sports, or people who want time off from downhill skiing,” Boyle-Wight said.

For the 2004 Winter Trails event, he expects to see about 100 attendees.
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