

Local cross-country skier Emmett Shalla wins gold



By Bill Kilpatrick

Fourteen-year-old cross country skier Emmett Shalla, of Whitney, competed in his first Ontario Winter Games in Thunder Bay over the weekend of Feb. 17-18 and he blew the competition away. Emmett, who has been skiing competitively for roughly 3 years with the Arrowhead Nordic Ski Club in Huntsville, was one of 28 skiers who had accrued enough points on the Canadian points list to be chosen to represent the Southern Ontario District at the games. The Southern Ontario District represents 24 ski clubs and 5,118 members and according to their web page, "the district spans from Waterloo up to Parry Sound, and from the Bruce Peninsula to the Kawartha Highlands." Emmett competed in the five-kilometre classic, the sprint qualifier, and the team relay. His four-person team came in sixth in the team relay, but in the individual competitions for his age group Emmett managed a gold in the five-kilometer classic and a silver in the sprint qualifier. Emmett was very happy with his performance and said that it "felt pretty good" to stand on the podium. Emmett and his older brother Mathew, who also is a competitive skier and competed last year at the Ontario Winter Games, both began cross country skiing 10 years ago. Emmett, who has always loved the outdoors, said that he has his grandmother, Patsy Shalla, who was also a competitive cross-country skier, to thank for introducing him to sport. "My grandma brought me into it and taught me how," said Shalla. "She would take us to the Leaf Lake trails in Algonquin Park." This garnered a love of skiing with friends and family and from there Emmett and Mathew joined the Arrowhead Ski Club where they did some practicing, but it was more for fun said Emmett. That is, until things got more serious when they both joined the competitive team a few years ago. Emmett said that the competitive team is still fun, but the work out regiment that comes along with it is less fun. Emmett's mother, Suzy Shalla, was extremely proud of her son's accomplishments and explained that "cross country skiers are made in the off season," and that the brothers are given the month of April off and then begin the next year's rigorous training regiment in May. While Emmett has no doubt gained some bragging rights over his older brother, Shalla says that they train together and are very supportive of one another. During the ski season the brothers travel twice a week to Huntsville to train with the club, but Emmett finds that one of the biggest struggles is that he can't train with a team on a consistent basis as the closest team is two hours away. Nonetheless, Emmett and Mathew spend their summer months strength training, mountain biking, and roller skiing on the highways around their home, said Shalla. Their mother is just happy that they have found a sport that they love, "It's great to just see them enjoy a sport," said Shalla, "and if they have some success along the way that's a bonus." Shalla could not say enough good things about the skiers that both she and her sons have connected with, "The community around this sport is spectacular," exclaimed Shalla. While both Emmett and Mathew are fierce competitors there is one adversary that they may not be able to beat and that's climate change. Shalla explained that in order for the Winter Games to happen multiple volunteers had to do something called snow farming. An article from The Chronicle-Journal posted on the Lappe Nordic Ski Club Facebook page, the group that hosted the cross-country events in Thunder Bay, spoke about the unusual warm weather and the "miraculous effort" that volunteers and organizers alike put together to ensure that there was snow on the trails. A CBC article further explained that volunteers had to take 400 toboggan loads of snow and groom the trail by hand, because the snow was so soft. "When we drove into Thunder Bay we were like, "Oh my gosh,"" exclaimed

Shalla, "There's no snow. It looked like Peterborough." For the moment Emmett and Mathew are putting that out of their minds as they look ahead to competitions in Sudbury and the Nationals in Gatineau Quebec in March, but the worry remains whether or not there will be enough snow to compete. Emmett has some advice for those up-and-coming aspiring skiers, "don't get discouraged when times get tough," but it has to be discouraging for this talented young skier as snow, the one thing his sport cannot do without, becomes more and more scarce. For now, Emmett is enjoying his win, but how many years of competition he has left depends on a lot more than his off-season conditioning.