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(headline)

Hand surgery means **happy trails** for sports enthusiast

(body copy)

Gliding across the powdery countryside on a crisp winter day, silent but for the gentle crunch of skis on the icy ground. There's no place Allan Stenmark would rather be (except maybe on a rails-to-trails bike trip ... or kayaking). But osteoarthritis threatened the active life the 58-year-old retired chemistry teacher loved.

On his 50th birthday, Stenmark first noticed pain in his left hand—the beginning of basilar joint osteoarthritis, a deterioration of the cartilage at the base of the thumb caused by aging. It is often marked by difficulty with gripping and grasping activities, such as opening jars, turning doorknobs, using a toothbrush or holding a ski pole. If left untreated the condition can severely impede motion and function, cause extreme pain and, ultimately, lead to deformity.

After seven years of worsening symptoms and unsuccessful use of anti-inflammatory medication, surgery seemed Allan's best option.

He strategically wedged the operation into the year's jam-packed agenda. After a Ferry-to-Ferry bike loop from Milwaukee to Ludington in September, and an October camping trip, the procedure was set for November 2, 2004. That would leave just enough time to get back in shape for the Birkenbeiner cross-country ski marathon in Hayward, Wisconsin. He'd competed in 28 of event's 33 races. And this year would be no exception.

Joint surgery: Help at hand

The basilar joint, also called the **carpal-metacarpal** joint of the thumb, is formed by a small wrist bone called the trapezium and the thumb metacarpal bone. The unique shape of the bones allows the thumb to move in and out and bend across the palm to oppose the fingers.

During the surgery, the affected joint is removed and replaced with a strip of tendon to create a sling suspension. "It's very important to reconstruct the area so it is functional and stable," says John A. Schneider, MD, who was Stenmark's **hand** surgeon at St. Francis Hospital. "Otherwise, the patient will still experience pain and will not be able to resume normal activities."

Patients wear a **splint** for several weeks then graduate to a small splint that protects the thumb and wrist. A course of therapy, which includes gentle strengthening and stretching exercises, helps reduce swelling, minimize scarring and restore function.

On the road again

Allan was a model patient and made rapid progress. He began biking again in early January, and was back on skis at the end of the month. By Birkenbeiner time, he was ready to roll.

“Allan’s positive attitude made a big difference,” says Lori Bansemer, the certified hand therapist at the Performance Centers of St. Francis who helped Allan reach his goals. “A patient’s commitment to a home exercise program is also key—and played a large role in his quick recovery.”

Making life better

Allan’s story is just one more example of how advances in orthopedic surgery impact lives and futures every day. “As our population ages, problems with the **basilar thumb** joint can cause great difficulty in work and recreation, interfering with the ability to function in daily life,” notes Dr. Schneider. “Carpal metacarpal joint **reconstruction** can restore an **excellent** level of function. This allows people to work and play without severe pain, resulting in a significant improvement in the quality of life.”

Today, Allan is busy planning his next adventure. Down the road, he will likely need surgery on this left hand for the same problem. But, as far as he’s concerned, the future looks like an easy ride.