

AT WISCONSIN'S 6,000-SKIER BIRKEBEINER RACE, THE BEST AND SERIOUS ARE OUT FRONT, BUT THE FUN-LOVERS ARE IN

THE THIRD WAVE

By Tom LaRocque

It's 4:30 in the afternoon when I emerge from my Chicago office. Bo is waiting there, a wisp of exhaust smoke visible at the tailpipe of his four-wheel-drive Toyota. By dark, if we're lucky, we'll leave rush-hour behind and be cruising north on eight lanes of asphalt to Wisconsin and the American Birkebeiner.

We spend the night at my brother Dan's home in Madison and meet Kemper, who drove from Sheboygan. The next morning, four grown men in their 30's, with jobs and families and children, set off like kids on their way to Little League.

The Birkie is the Boston Marathon of cross-country skiing, held every winter since 1973 on a 55-kilometer (34.1-mile) white path across an evergreen forest in northwest Wisconsin.

Birkebeiner was the name for 13th century Norse skier-soldiers who wore

birch-bark leggings. Today's Birkie skiers don't wear much birch bark, but the Lycra and polypropylene worn by the leaders changes to mostly canvas and cotton toward the back of the pack.

The first American Birkebeiner (Sweden owns the original) had 54 entrants. Last year, at the 17th annual, more than 6,000 skiers from 24 nations participated, including 14 skiers from the Soviet Union. At the finish, a Swede edged out a Swiss to win. The top American, Tim Miller, of Anchorage, Alaska, was 11th. Kemper, the only one of our foursome who completed the entire course, finished 2,536th in 6 hours 4 minutes 33.2 seconds.

The atmosphere of the Birkie is international because it's the only American race in the Worldloppet league, linking 11 top races of 42 kilometers or more in Europe, Japan, Canada, and the U.S. Cumulative points go to top finishers in

each race, and an overall winner is crowned at the end of the season.

Like most Birkie racers, Bo, Dan, Kemper, and I held no hope of wearing the Worldloppet crown. None of us could have prevailed even in the women's 65-and-over class. Thankfully, a 29-kilometer version, called the Korteloppet, is offered to the less ambitious. The beauty of the both races is that anyone can line up with the world's top skiers.

The course runs from downtown Hayward to the Telemark Lodge in Cable. The starting gun echoes off buildings at 9 A.M. sharp, and a flood of bodies spills down Second Avenue and onto Main Street. It flows over a frozen lake and onto land bordering the Chequamegon National Forest.

The race begins in seven "waves" spaced at five-minute intervals. Wave assignment depends on past Birkebeiner



SIGN UP

This year's Birkebeiner is February 24. Entries will be accepted until midnight before the race. The fee is \$55 before Feb. 1, \$65 after. Contact the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation, Box 911, Hayward, WI 54843; (800) 872-2753 or (800) 722-3386.

performance. The first wave contains mostly elite racers wearing sprayed-on multi-colored bodysuits and bibs with single- and double-digit numbers. A few hard-cores—teens on the rise and first-time Birkie entrants without qualifying times for the first wave—are found in the second.

In the third wave and beyond, where my friends and I ski, things loosen up. We smile more, and stretch a bit less. We linger longer at the aid stations, enjoying an extra orange slice or doughnut hole. Alongside, skiers carry backpacks. We stop to take pictures. A group of skiers calling themselves the "No-Wax Pack" happily waves to competitors who pass them on the long downhill stretches.

"When you write your articles," Betsy Youngman told reporters at last year's pre-race press conference, "be sure to make cross-country skiing sound like fun, because it is." Youngman won the women's division, proving, I guess, that even serious skiers know how to have fun.

After several consecutive Birkebeiners, my friends and I have gained a certain amount of savvy in securing lodging—within a budget. In summer, Hayward and other nearby towns have always relied heavily on tourists who came to fish. Since the birth of the Birkie, virtually every one of the area's thousands of tiny fishing cabins is rented at least once during the winter.

One year we stayed in a place we called The Bates. It was a comfortable cabin, but a shifty-eyed owner continually came around "just to check up on things."

Last year, we took our chances on a resort overlooking Spider Lake, near Hayward. It turned out to be another collection of cabins with threadbare carpeting and windows sealed shut with duct tape. But our cabin's little gas furnace worked well, and the closet was stocked with a reassuring inventory of blankets. Price: about \$500 for three nights (the minimum stay during Birkie week).

The best bet for a comfortable stay is the plush Telemark Lodge, where the Birkie terminates amid screaming fans and an announcer calling the race on local radio. Après-skiers staying at the Tele-

mark can relax in the bar or the whirlpool without traveling icy roads to isolated cabins. The Telemark also has an excellent restaurant, coffee shop, indoor pool, four indoor tennis courts, indoor ice rink, game room and alpine skiing directly in front of the hotel.

Unfortunately, the lodge is booked a year in advance. The day after the Birkie, people line up and reserve all available rooms for the following year. A two-bed room at the lodge goes for about \$100 per night, four nights minimum.

The checkered past of the Telemark is tied directly to the Birkebeiner. It was built in 1977 by Tony Wise, a pioneer of cross-country skiing in America who created the American Birkebeiner.

In 1947, Wise, a 26-year-old veteran of World War II, returned to his native Wisconsin with a Harvard MBA and a dream of developing a downhill ski resort. He purchased land, including a hill in Cable, and boldly called it Telemark Mountain.

During the next three decades he parlayed the resort into a multi-million-dollar enterprise. But Wisconsin's terrain held natural limitations for downhill skiing; Telemark's vertical drop is just 370 feet. So in the 1970's, Wise redirected his efforts toward creating a cross-country ski haven.

Then Wise's empire began to crumble. He had borrowed heavily to finance the resort, and had trouble paying the bills. Wise lost the lodge and control of the Birkebeiner in bankruptcy court in 1985.

The race is now run by the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation, made up mostly of Wisconsin and Minnesota residents. Corporate sponsors sometimes attach their names to the race. In 1986, to Wise's consternation, it was called the Whoppers American Birkebeiner for its

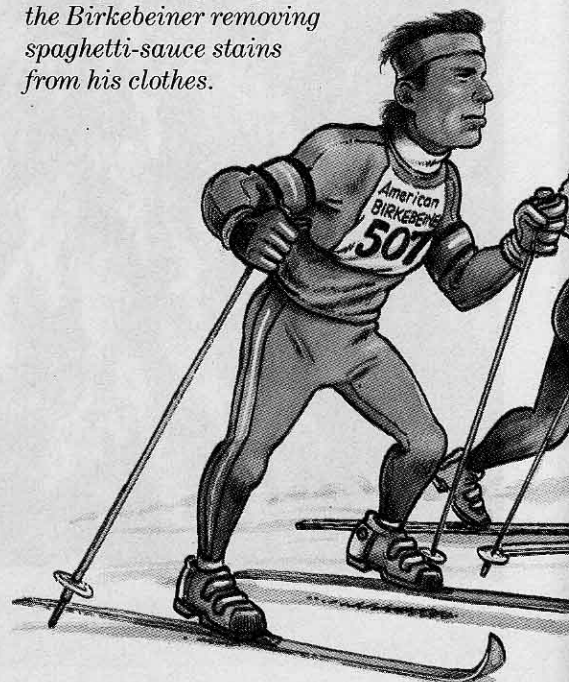
malted-milk-ball sponsor.

During the nights before the Birkie, Hayward bars and restaurants offer all-you-can-eat "carbo-loading" dinners, usually spaghetti. The well-accepted theory behind the carbo ritual is that complex carbohydrates slowly release glucose into the bloodstream, which raises energy and fights fatigue. For people in the third wave, it's a good excuse to stuff themselves with pasta.

After the race, the mood in town is reserved, mostly because people are too tired to do much of anything. Race organizers stage a post-race awards party. The Bronze Broom Award goes to a selected recipient among the slowest finishers "who best exemplifies the spirit of the Birkebeiner." In past years, that honor went to the last finisher, but people started hiding behind trees.

For Bo, Dan, Kemper and me, the Birkebeiner is tradition. It is a rollicking road trip that's more purposeful than a vacation. It's cold air, cramped cabins, waxing clinics, Scandinavians, spaghetti, sore muscles and tight bodysuits. After the race and dinner, it's one more beer and back to the cabin. The next morning, we strap our skis to the Toyota and slide down Wisconsin, through Madison and over eight lanes back to Chicago. △△

Tom LaRocque, who recently learned skating technique, spends the week after the Birkebeiner removing spaghetti-sauce stains from his clothes.



The boys of winter: Dan, Tom, Bo and Kemper lag happily behind the Lycra-clad limbs of the serious set.