

## The Norwegian Birkenbeiner and Nordic Skiing Paradise

Ellie Bouffard and I returned a few days ago from a weeklong ski trip to Norway culminating with racing in the Norwegian Birkenbeiner. The race finishes in the Lillehammer '94 Olympic Stadium.

Mansfield Nordic Club Coach Sara Falconer, and her family who flew from Alaska, all raced. MNC master Craig Pepin was there to race as well after coming from a ski marathon in Switzerland the week before. During one of our pre race recon skis, we ran into Garrott Kuzzy, past MNC coach. Pretty good MNC representation for a race 3500 miles from home! This race is on the World Loppet Series and carries a huge historical significance in its country.

Every skier was required to wear a back pack that included a list of things such as extra jacket, gloves, hat etc. The 'kicker' was that it also had to be a minimum of 8 lbs. To make the mandatory weight, I had to add rocks to the pack. The race course and 8 lb weight signified the 13<sup>th</sup> century ski journey made with baby prince, heir to the throne. The ski journey was to save him from being murdered by the opposing party. Apparently it worked out well. Here's a more detailed history.....

*Following the death of the Norwegian king Haakon Sverresson, the two rivaling factions, the Baglers and the Birkebeiners, fought to gain control of the country. To keep Haakon Sverressons son - Haakon Haakonsson, from being killed by the Baglers, and by that securing the throne, a small group of Birkebeiners brought prince Haakon and his mother, Inga, north. Just after New Years Eve 1206 the two best skiers - Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka, carrying the child, chose the route across the mountains separating Gudbrandsdalen and Østerdalen. It was a strenuous journey, but the young prince was brought to safety in Trondheim. The prince grew to become the king who united Norway, after 1000 years of civil war, and led the country into its golden age during the Middle Ages.*

We heard that the final 13K had a reputation of being tricky. It was a descent from the Town of Sjujoen to the Lillehammer Olympic stadium. We had skied part of the descent the first day we arrived. True, we were both jet lagged and spacey, but the downhill didn't strike either of us as a problem. We went back a few days later and skied the remaining portion of it, just to make sure. There were some steep sections but nothing that concerned us. Still, both coaches, Sara and Garrott, warned us not to take it lightly.

They were right! On race day, after thousands of racers passed ahead of us, the tracks became icy and screaming fast. The untracked sections were transformed in two sheer ice chutes with 1-2' high berms of snow in between them and on both sides. It was a straight downhill run with little hope of getting an edge in to slow down. Add to that, racers on right, left, back and front, flying by and wiping out across the trails... It turned out that, on race day, the final 13K is not for the faint of heart!

Two days before Saturday's classic race, we heard that a storm was coming and talk about cancelling the race. They ended up moving the race to Sunday which turned out to be a great call due to the blizzard with 50 MPH winds on Sat.

MNC athlete Craig Pepin switched plans to skate in the Friday 'SkoyteBirken'. Ellie and Sara both did the 54K classic race. I skied the HalvBirken which was a 28K classic race. The Birkenbeiner website advertised the 'HalvBirken' as "Half the Distance, just as much fun". That sounded good to me.

The half and full Birkens merged for the last 17K and were on the same course for the final screaming fast descent.

Although terrified and shaken by that downhill, I didn't crash. In the end, I was thrilled by my time, and my overall and age group placing....and....My sore back, from carrying that rock-laden back pack, recovered a few days later.

Norway is truly a Nordic Skiing Paradise. There is seemingly no limit to the trail network. The entire country is connected by Nordic trails that are being constantly groomed. There is even an app for your phone to track where all the groomers are. Trails in green have been groomed within the past 3 hours; those in yellow, past 3-6 hours etc. Trails connect villages, towns, markets, restaurants with ski racks outside of all.

We skied as much as our bodies would allow during the week prior to racing. There was so much more that we wanted to do. I could have stayed there for months and skied every day.

The race is a blast. I love planning a travel destination around a race. However, traveling to Norway to just ski, ski and ski is well worth the trip with or without the race.

Also of note is how inexpensive a trip it is. We booked the flight well in advance - \$500/r.t ticket, 3 BR cabin that we could ski out the door (it was just the 2 of us but could have slept 6) - \$175/night rental car \$25/day. Food - both dining out and market shopping were less expensive than in Burlington.

We're already talking about a return! Perhaps a bigger MNC contingent next year - the date has already been set. 3/15/24.

Here's the link: [Birken | Ski \(birkebeiner.no\)](https://birkebeiner.no)





We brought our backpacks into the market to check weight on produce scales. In order to meet the required 8 lbs, Ellie added bags of pennies to hers, I added rocks.



Past MNC coach Garrott Kuzzy appeared on the trails one day! Garrott is a former US Ski team member and Olympian, who now runs his own cross country ski travel company



Sara in Rena waiting for the start of the 54K.



After the race, in Hakaan's hall next to giant egg used in Olympic opening ceremony.



It was a family event for Sara... all skiing the 54K.