

## **Brave Vikings Storm Norway**

By Dave McDonald

The decision to go in the Birkebeiner was made last September over a number of glasses of aquavit at my friend Bruce's home in Stockholm. In the glow of the warm fall evening it seemed like a good idea.

This loppet commemorates the heroic journey of two soldiers carrying the future king of Norway to safety in the midst of a civil war on Christmas day in the year 1205. Part of the challenge of this 54 km course is carrying a 3.5 kg pack to simulate the two year old crown prince. He must have been a scrawny lad.

Why Norway? What could be more appropriate than a Viking returning to the cradle of cross-country skiing? And even more important in my case, this could be the return to my genetic roots. The McDonalds emigrated from Scotland to the Gatineau hills of Quebec in the early 1800s. And genetic maps have indicated that the Vikings liberally spread their seed in Scotland. With my blue eyes (still), light blonde hair (now grey), my red beard (now white) and my fearsome physique (okay, three out of four), Viking blood must be coursing through my veins. This was a pilgrimage to my homeland! This belief is reinforced by memories of a past life that sometimes bubbles into my consciousness.

### **Training begins**

Ten years ago, I was promoted to an executive position and this had a detrimental impact on my physical conditioning. However, a little over a year ago, they gave me 52 weeks of vacation a year to focus on more important endeavours like skiing. The last time I entered a competition was almost ten years ago as a gold coureur de bois in the Canadian Ski Marathon. So I was familiar with training for a long distance event and thought I could avoid over-training injuries. I was doing really well until in January when skiing on Rigaud Mountain, an unleashed canine thought my leg would make a tasty treat. As I nursed my wound, I was reminded of the inscription on a Viking rune that loosely translated reads "Here we left food for the eagles". The implication was that this rune commemorated a battle where the Vikings slaughtered their enemies and left their bodies to rot in the field. As I raised my broad sword (in my mind), a thousand years of civilization intervened to spare the wicked beast and his master. Next time they might not be as lucky. I was out of commission for several days but returned to training with a new resolve.

### **Training continues thanks to the CSM**

At the last moment, I signed up for the Canadian Ski Marathon as a tourer. I had mused that I might enter again as a gold coureur de bois but carrying the pack for a few training runs convinced me otherwise. The organization and conditions for the marathon were excellent on an alternate loop from Montebello. On day one, all was going well until the 50 km mark in section 3 where I had

sticking problems with my right ski. There had been several pieces of plastic on the trail and I thought that one had stuck to my kicker wax. I put up with this for about 5 km but finally I decided to take action. On inspection, there was a thin, white layer in the kicker zone and the distinct smell of spearmint. A new type of wax? Yes, if you include spearmint gum. Even with a metal scrapper, it was almost impossible to remove. In the end, I just mixed it with more kicker wax and it seemed to work (and smell) okay. Maybe this is a new product opportunity.

As the date of the Birkebeiner approached, I had skied over 600 km and overcome several difficult situations. The Viking warrior was ready to deliver the crown prince to safety.

### **And on to the Birkebeiner**

I flew to Stockholm almost a week before the event, was upgraded to business class and all the baggage arrived as planned. The gods were on my side! The next day we drove north several hundred kilometers north to Bruce's cottage in Leksand where we did some tune-up skiing on several of the excellent trails in the area. Leksand is on Lake Siljan which was formed by a meteorite impact and is in the heart of Sweden's mid-summer celebrations. The surrounding hills are formed by the rim of the crater which makes this an interesting place to ski. The day before the event we drove to Lillehammer to pick up our kits and then south to Hamar and our hotel. Saturday was a clear, gorgeous day. As the sun rose, the trees sparkled with hoar frost from the night before. Everything was going as planned. We just had to drive about an hour and a half to Rena to be bussed to the start.

Having read Erik's and Howard's (Vikander and Bussey) excellent adventure of the Vasaloppet in 1999, I was anticipated similar problems such delayed flights and lost luggage. However, when my trip progressed so smoothly, I started to worry that I have would nothing interesting to report. As you will see later, be careful what you wish for.

We arrived in Rena early because we were worried that there would be mass confusion as 16,000 skiers converged at the start. But as we approached Rena, Norwegian soldiers were there to guide us to parking and buses that delivered us to the starting area 45 minutes before the start. Everything was very orderly and uneventful. Yes, this was a military exercise...

The course is relatively flat with an initial climb from Rena of 600 m over 20 km followed by a slight downhill for 10 km then another climb of 200 m over 5 km followed by a final 400 m descent into Lillehammer. Only a few, short sections require herringbone technique so this is a course for poling. The high point of 900 m is above the tree-line which gives spectacular views of the rolling, snow covered mountains. At these elevations, the winds can be dangerous and we were advised to bring heavy clothing to provide protection. My pack weighed almost 5 kg and contained a windproof jacket, water, treats and a complete set of

waxes. I had grown my beard long to protect my face from the wind. This is a very isolated course with limited road access but many spectators ski into this area, dig holes to provide shelter, build campfires and have elaborate picnics in the snow. If you wish, you can imbibe aquavit and other liquors which are generously offered by the revelers along the course.

Both Bruce and I were unseeded which gave us numbers in the 15,000s starting in wave 22 at 10 am. It was disheartening to think that the first wave started at 7 am and the elite skiers would be finished before we started. Each wave started about 10 minutes apart and consisted of about 700 skiers. For the first ten kilometers, the trail was about 15 tracks wide but it was difficult to pass. We started near the front of our wave and after a few kilometers; we started to pass stragglers from earlier waves (the wave number was marked on your pack) and later were passed by a few rabbits from waves that started behind us. However, for the entire loppet we were in a pack of skiers and basically had to go with the flow. At the first station, we were advised to keep to the right if we wanted water. I went to the left to bypass this station but still had to wait 5 to 10 minutes because of congestion at this point. So we proceeded at a leisurely pace and very early on we realized that we should not worry about our time.

### **Perfect conditions – but not always the perfect wax?**

The conditions were perfect: -5 C and clear blue skies. As we climbed above the tree-line, the wind was in our face and became stronger but was never a problem. There were several checkpoints that a first provided only water and later flavoured drinks and a bread with a sweet filling. Our blue kicker wax was great for the climbs but we ran into some problems with sticking on the flat and downhill sections. We stopped several times to re-wax but were unable to find the magic potion. The tracks were almost perfect and were re-groomed during the loppet.

At about 30 km, as I double-poled, I fell flat on my face. The prince was unharmed but my left shoulder was aching. Had the enemy ambushed me with a crossbow? As I examined my equipment, I realized that my carbon fibre pole had broken about six inches below the handle. As an expert in the failure of materials, I recognized the classic signs of fatigue. Damn, I should have used my metal poles. The wounded Viking warrior had no choice but to continue and deliver his precious cargo. He soldiered through the uphill section with one pole until the next check point where advanced forces (Swix) armed him with a replacement.

In the final descent to Lillehammer, the snow had been scraped away to create a bobsled run. Under better conditions, these downhills would not be difficult. However, at the end of the loppet, many of our fellow warriors were falling from exhaustion. Bruce and I were able to negotiate this slalom run without incident but it was harrowing experience.

We finished to cheering crowds at the former Olympic site in Lillehammer. The crown prince was delivered and he became King Haakon who unified Norway in the Middle Ages. And the rest is history...

Following our successful mission, we spent several days in Trysil, Norway which is Scandinavia's largest downhill centre. We were there for downhill skiing but also explored the excellent cross-country trails that surround the mountain.

A few days later, the wounds had healed and aided by some aquavit, the Viking warriors planned their next campaign. What about repatriating the eastern territory of Finland? Yes, in 2012, the Viking warriors will storm the Finlandia loppet. Victory or death!



