

Kangaroo Hoppet, 2004

Scott Smith

I had heard the conditions at the Kangaroo Hoppet in Australia were sketchy in previous years so I was delighted when reports of the best winter for the Australian Alps (Falls Creek) in years had accumulated two meters of snow by mid August. Of course nothing in this sport comes completely worry free so after spending two weeks touring Sydney, the Great Barrier Reef and Melbourne, weather forecasts predicted a warm up for Hoppet week. Having seen nothing lower than 60's (80's up north) snow seemed as foreign in Australia as in the U.S. in summer. The 5 hour bus ride from Melbourne was also devoid of snow



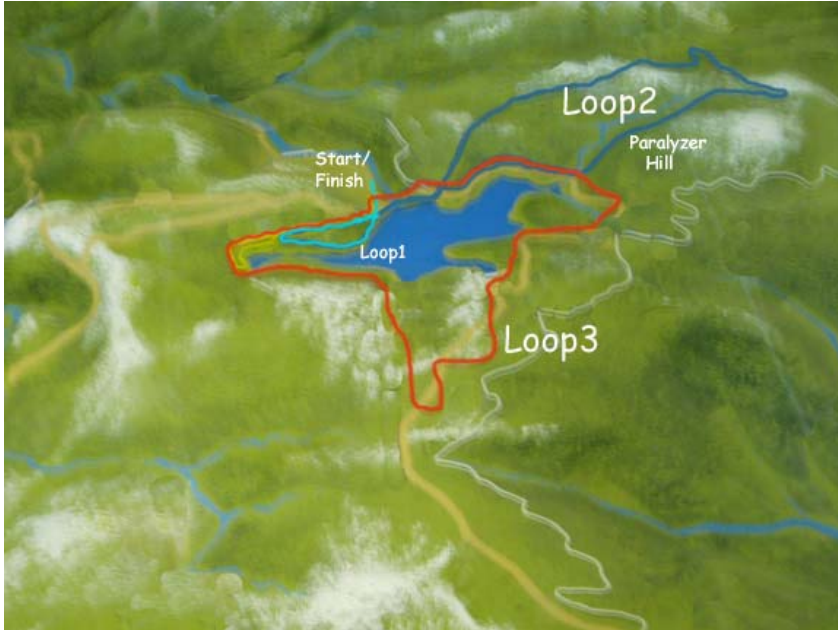
until our lodging destination (Howman's Gap) at about 1500 meters. If you ever decide to do the Hoppet, this is where you must stay. Skiers from around the world stay here and that is half the enjoyment of the race.

Much groaning was heard from the wax-misters: "Oh, high fluro, then pure fluro, then maximum structure." The temperature was predicted to only get down to +2C Friday night and then go up to 7C with possible rain for the race. But on the way to breakfast on race morning the sky was clear and the air felt cool. I grabbed at a snow pile and found it solid as a rock. Worry is a part of this sport but races often end up better than feared. In my 30 some ski races this turned out to be among the fastest conditions I've enjoyed. Very lucky for those of us who showed up this



year - last year's race was done with three laps of the 7 K loop in a raging blizzard!

The elite sprints were held on Thursday evening at the downhill area in Falls Creek. Three loops on a one kilometer, hilly course by teams of three racers,

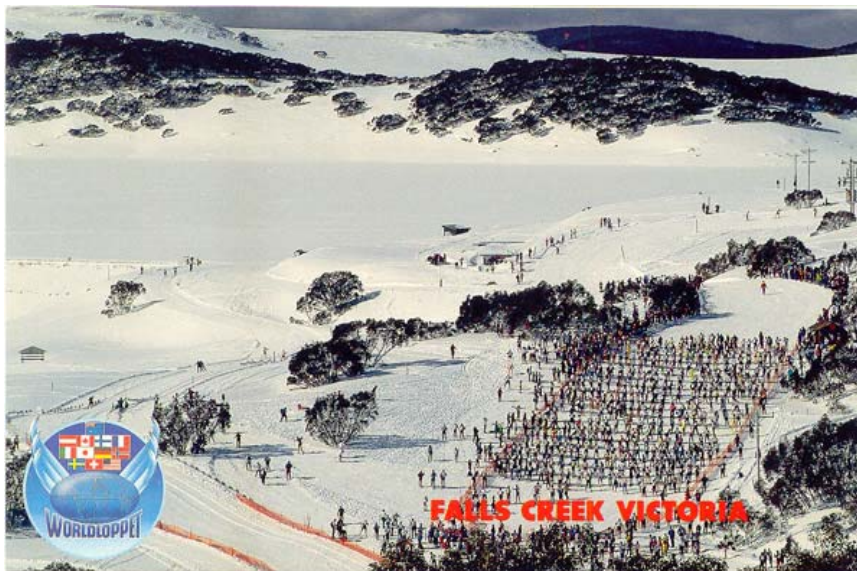


done three times each in succession made me feel exhausted just watching them!

A mountain ski race was new to me as I'd only competed in the mid-west before this. What's different are the climbs which go on and on, as do the descents. And no there were no trees to shield the wind but we

lucked out with very quiet day for the race. On Sunday skiing was nearly impossible because of high winds.

Three races departed with one wave each at ten minute intervals. In reverse order they were the 7 K Joey Hoppet (Light Blue), the 21 K Australian Birkebeiner (Light + Dark Blue), and the Kangaroo Hoppet (Blue + Red). The



Hoppet covered the flat Joey loop before heading up to the high point at 1780 meters at 16 K, a climb of 180 meters. A fast descent brings you back to the start/finish where the 21 K race ends. The Hoppet racers then head out on a second loop around the lake with

only slightly smaller hills. At 35 K the trail levels out providing a 7 K sprint finish with all you have left.

The race was won by Ben Derrick, an employee at Howman's Gap, for the fourth time at a blistering 2:15 min/K pace. He is said to train by roller skiing up the 1500 meters from Mt. Beauty to the Gap once a week in the summer. Things went well for me up the first big climb, termed "The Paralyzer" (100 meters in one



Race Photo Courtesy of Joe Sehnal



kilometer). I completed the first half in a little over an hour but that left me pretty bushed so that the hills on the second loop went much slower. On a downhill called "Blade Runner" I picked up more speed than I could handle and crashed off the course.

Fortunately nothing broke (inside or out) and I carried on but went down again on the last big downhill. Finally in the last section I was able to drop the racers around me and finished with only a few skiers. I was praying

for the finish line to appear, much as I do when coming across Lake Hayward.

And the best part? Less than four months to winter back home! I totally recommend this race to you. Many at Howman's Gap

had raced in New Zealand on the previous weekend. There were four ladies from southern Wisconsin who did that. The back of their vests read, "When it snows in Hell, I'll ski there too!" If you go, I wish you the weather we had in '04.

