

Norwegian Birkebeiner, 2005

Scott Smith

*If you only want to read about the race go to page 8.*

Flying from Zurich to Helsinki on Finn Air, we were surprised to be viewing the runway from the pilot's perspective on the TV monitor. As the plane lifted off, the view switched to a vertical perspective of the ground so that we were looking straight down. It was surprising how clear the view was considering the window view was somewhat hazier, no doubt due to the greater distances involved. The TV shortly began showing prerecorded features as the plane rose into the clouds. A similar view was shown during the landing, which was even more interesting. At first it appeared that snow was only on the fields with stretches of forests that appeared dark and without snow. As we came closer it was apparent that the tree branches hid the snow on the ground below. Unfortunately we were just switching planes and so we only saw the inside of the airport.

Off we went to Oslo which appeared even snowier. After some machinations in the airport to get some 2000 Krone (\$330), we missed our train due to being unable to lug three suitcases, a large ski bag, a laptop computer, and a plastic bag of assorted stuff down a long flight of stairs (we found a lift on the return trip). The next train arrived in half an hour and it was packed. So we dragged all the luggage into the entryway between cars. Marianne went off down the train looking for an empty seat but none was to be found. Meanwhile the ticket taker appeared and looked up at me quizzically and asked, "Where's your ticket? ... and those skis will have to go in the next compartment."

"Oh, my wife has them, ummm, down that way. Yes, yes I'll move the skis." Thinking, "Are you nuts, lady, all my luggage is here and you want me to drag my skis to the next car with the train packed and the aisle narrowed by the throngs of passengers? But she was off collecting tickets. Shortly Marianne came back, not having found a seat and having encountered Mrs. Hitler and satisfied her that we indeed had tickets.

The first stop occurred in about 20 minutes and, as hoped, most of the riders got off leaving us room to put the smaller stuff on the luggage racks and deposit the skis in the requested location.

It was a relief to finally sit down and survey the countryside. I was surprised to see open water on a narrow but long lake with a sheer rock face plunging down to the water on the far side. On our side the train frequently passed



through rock faces or tunnels that had been cut through to provide a level rail bed. I am continuously amazed to see how the Europeans cut through stone and mountains, whatever is in the way, to lay track down. I realize it's necessary in this rugged landscape but all that work just astounds me.

I've probably been living in the Midwest for too long, We spoke with a fellow passenger who lived in Lillehammer - our destination - and we talked about the race to come and the Olympics from 1992 (he had been too young to appreciate it) and where to get a taxi to our hotel. All this information was very helpful and built our confidence. Our taxi ride was about \$15 for a ride up the hill to Ersgaard Guest House (Gjestehuset). The proprietor, on check-in at 7:15pm, asked, "Are you intending to have dinner? Oh, that's served promptly at 6:30." Right. We ate.

The hotel was not new but our room was nice with a heated tile floor in the bathroom. Can you imagine how nice that feels in the morning? Dinner is served family style. It generally consisted of a meat dish, bread, potatoes, a colorless vegetable like sauerkraut, and a whipped cream covered desert.

You can get up to the stadium where the race finishes from Ersgaard but it would be a hell of a climb and that would just be the start as the Birkebeiner trail goes continuously up from there for more than ten kilometers. Bob, a friend from Canada whom I had met in Australia and Bengt, a Swedish guy from Rhode Island knew a better way. The three of us took the



bus up to Nordsaeter (27 Krone, almost \$5). Bob commented that I was the master of obscure ski brands. I had used Trab's at the Engadin and now I had Kastle's for the Birkebeiner. We still had to do some climbing from Nordsaeter. As Bob quips, the Norwegians have no word for "flat". It seems true, for as soon as you crest one rise you ride down and face another. They're not like Wisconsin's rolling terrain where you ride down one hill and part way up the next. These valleys are much wider so there is probably 300 yards of skiing after the glide is spent before the next climb.

The sky was clouded over and temperatures were six below, Celsius; no one uses Fahrenheit in this neck of the woods. The light filtered through the clouds along with a few snowflakes, and when the rays fall in a certain angular range, the tracks seem to either vanish or appear inverted to their actual indentation. My eyes told me that I was riding on rails of snow raised above the track. I knew the skis could find their way without my help, but it was disconcerting none-the-less. At other angles the tracks were perfectly clear and you forget about the problem. Then the track bends around a corner and you get confused all over again.

So Wednesday morning we went from Nordsaeter to Sjusjoen (Shu-sen) using the long route. Sjusjoen is a prime location on the Birkebeiner trail signifying, in the race, the end of the long climbs and the beginning of a rapid decent to the finish some 15 kilometers to the west. However we skied east and south of the trail ending in Ljosheim where we planed to have a sandwich and fruit which we carried in our packs along with some soup we would purchase in a nice warm café located there. To our disappointment the café was closed and the wind had picked up. While Bengt and Bob read the flyers posted outside the building, Bengt deciphering the Norwegian for us, I ducked around the corner of the restaurant. While in a somewhat compromising position, I looked up to see a foot of snow hanging over the edge of the gable and I could only imagine that it would give way at that moment and I would be buried in a mini avalanche.



Of course I wasn't so unlucky and lunch proceeded rapidly as we were feeling the chill. We were off again back toward Sjusjoen (what's with these silent j's

anyway?), this time skiing directly north to join the Birkebeiner trail at about the 34 K mark and striding in from there. Soon my left tricep began to ache and my strength began to fade so that I started dropping behind my comrades. There is still some climbing to be done at this point in the trail and I was hurting. By not bending my left elbow - kind of stiff-arming with that pole - I was able to minimize the pain and continue to make progress.



Finally we got to Sjusjoen and the blessed downhill section, first Bob, then Bengt, and me. Now the early section is very steep and Bengt decided to jump out of the track for better control. However, the middle of the trail was very soft and instantly he was ass-over-tea-kettle in a cloud of

white. As I zoomed by, I asked if he was OK (what a nice guy I am, huh?) and hearing, "Yes," I continued down to the bottom where Bob had stopped. After a short while Bengt appeared, looking like the abominable snowman and without his sunglasses which had finished in three pieces. But he was indeed alright and felt that the glasses could be easily put back together. The last ten kilometers go by quickly though there are some flat places (did I say flat?) which were none-the-less painful to me in my present condition.



I tottered into the stadium where the big finish would occur on Saturday and we skied from there on back to Ersgaard on two kilometers of challenging technical downhill finishing with about 100 meters of bushwhacking from the trail to the lodging. We had skied more than the 54 kilometers of the race but not the difficulty, as I would find out.

Thursday night I had a weird dream (aren't they all?): I was at the start of the race, but in street clothes and gym shoes. My wave started and we were in a building doing imitation skiing with arm swings and heel push-offs. I'm thinking, how on earth did Bob forget to tell me about this? Isn't this a key feature of the race? On I go through this endless building with hundreds of other competitors around me. Now I'm looking at my watch and about 2 hours have passed. I'm doing pretty well. Now its 2:20, now 2:55. Suddenly I'm outside looking up at this enormous rock with ants streaming over it. No, those are racers free climbing this not-too-technical obstacle. So I'm up on it and it's not bad, plenty of holds. Now I'm near the top and it's more difficult. This girl has hold of my arm and I'm saying, "Let go!" but she apparently speaks only Norwegian and continues to hang on. I round this corner of the rock and lift myself up to the top. Next I'm running down a steep grassy hill, thinking "I'm allowed to run on the down-hills." Now I'm back in another building and I come to a locked door and I'm going up stairs to try to find a way through on the next floor. My time is 3:45, gotta hurry! Finally I spot Bob sitting in a lounge chair sipping his post-race beer. "Bob, how do I get through here?"

Calmly he says, "Try through the back of the stage." I remember that I had seen a theater with a stage so I head there... and I wake up! Now that was disappointing. No big finish. And I was doing so well...

On Thursday and Friday we again cheated gravity with the bus lift to Nordsaeter but skied progressively shorter routes. My elbow still bothered me the next day but with a little rest and Advil, it was OK by Friday and gave me no problem during the race. All three days we had skied to the finish and would again on race day. On these last two training days I found it to be glorious fun with U-turns at the bottom of long screaming hills. Skis were in both tracks until approaching a turn at high speed when I stemmed one ski out to help me steer around. Of course most Norwegians keep both skis in the track at all times and I knew why, as I saw kids of 6 or 7 blasting down terrifying hills - it's in their blood, their genes.

Thursday night Hanas arrived. He's a Finn living in France and very involved with the Worldloppet organization. He's 74 and has done twelve sets of ten WL races, (each set qualifies you as a master worldloppet skier). Thus you're likely to see him at any given race you attend and he was at all four of mine this year. We were talking about the two Birkes (Norwegian and American) and I referred to each as "the Birkie" whereupon he corrected my pronunciation. The first three letters of our Birkebeiner are pronounced like

"burr" whereas the Norwegian race begins like your favorite beverage, "beer". To shorten it is something like Beer-kin-et.

Another thing I learned was that there are some unique race starts in Europe. At the Tartu marathon in Estonia, they have option called, "open track". This means they have a starter available all day and when you decide to begin you just go. No crowds, no worries, just you and the course. Another method, using waves, allows skiers (with chips) to begin at anytime during the time interval of their wave start so that they're not competing the typical large start pack. That would be interesting to try at our Birkie.

A word about logistics here; you can fly in to Oslo on Friday and get a bus to Rena at 4AM where you pick up your bib and chip, hand your luggage to a truck with identifying stickers, ski the race, get bused to Hakkon Hall for a bowl of soup and finally get bused back to Oslo for your trip home. They say jetlag doesn't have time to affect you - but I wouldn't want to try it. In any case, the earliest you can pick up the race packet is Friday at noon in Hakkon



hall. It's an impressive place on that day but the expo is nothing great. There is almost nothing available in the way of souvenirs that say "Birkebeiner Rennet". The prices are not at all competitive either.

My dream of a few nights before turned into a nightmare on Saturday morning. Unfortunately I was fully awake. Arising at 4:15AM (9:15PM Chicago time), getting breakfast and then laying down again for too long, I jumped up to catch the ride we had booked for 5:25. Grabbing my skis, poles, and coat I ran out to the waiting van (cab). Just as we pulled up to the bus station that would take us to Rena, I realized the pack that I was required to carry during the race had been left in my room. Someone said, "Does everyone have their chip?", CHIP!!!!!!!!!! I had forgotten about that too! I found a regular cab that had just dropped off it's passengers and was off, back up to Ersgaard where I jumped out and ran to my room. The pack was sitting right there, but where



was the chip? I had left it with my racing clothes last night but now it was no where to be found. Marianne and I were frantically going through everything in the room but it didn't appear. After about ten torturous minutes I had to give up and just leave without it. As I went to

the door I looked in a mirror and hanging from my zipped down shirt was the Velcro strap with chip attached. I got back to the bus station just before the 6 AM last bus, but in fact there were many racers still waiting around to get on a bus.

So no harm was done except I was out another 200 Krone (\$34) and I was totally stressed. I tried to calm down on the bus to Rena talking briefly to my seatmate and then closing my eyes and trying to get some rest. The bus trip took almost two hours with a bathroom stop halfway. The start area was reminiscent of the American Birkie with crowds of colorfully clad skiers, each

a pixel in a painting that would have made Jackson Pollack proud. It was 8 AM and my start time was 10:10 so I had plenty of time. Fortunately it wasn't intolerably cold so I took pictures of the elite wave leaving at 8:30 and then went over to warm up. There was an L-shaped loop that was about half a



kilometer around with eight sets of tracks. Early on there were easily a thousand skiers on the loop at a time - equaling the total number of racers at many a big-name Midwestern ski race. And yet it wasn't crowded. People would just hop from track to track if they wanted to go faster or slower. I felt very intimidated as old guys sailed by me without seeming to put out the least bit

of effort. I strided the loop four times, resting in between, in a little over an hour. There were only slight up-grades in the loop and I felt my skis were gripping pretty well.

The starting procedure consisted of a single holding pen in back of the current starting wave. Along side the starting pen were gates where the next wave would enter the holding pen. So skiers had to do a U entry to the start. At about 9:40 the 12<sup>th</sup> wave was lined up to enter the holding pen and I wanted to be near the front of my wave (13<sup>th</sup>, second to last). The 10<sup>th</sup> wave was released and, after they cleared, the next wave moved up. Finally it was my turn to move into position and everyone ran with equipment in hand into position. Without thinking I got on the left side of the pen. Some foresight would have put me on the other side where slower skiers are supposed to place themselves. The thing is, everybody near the front of the wave is fast, but front left are young and fast. I set my skis down and removed my pack and warming jacket to stuff it into the hydration backpack. For the first time this winter the insulated hose on the pack had frozen up putting me at the mercy of the water stops on the course. Also I had an extra pound of water to carry that I couldn't use and didn't need to qualify for the 3.5 Kg minimum. With everything reassembled, our wave was released and we double-poled up to the starting gate.

Now another ten minute wait; the temperature was ominously... comfortable. I had ironed in a base binder and then corked in 3 layers each of Toko carbon green and blue. I was sure that would provide grip for the expected temperatures of (minus) eight Celsius. If you ask a Norwegian the temperature in winter he'll just say it's eight degrees; the minus is understood. The waxing theory was that as the temperature of the day rose, the skier would be at a higher elevation so that the actual temperature experienced would be nearly constant.

I was the eighth guy back in the left-most lane of probably 20 tracks and there were maybe thirty racers behind me in my lane. What was I thinking to put myself in this position? The gun went off and I double poled like mad but I was swallowed up by skiers flying by. Second-to-last wave and I was humiliated. I had been told that the track climbed for ten kilometers from Rena but the first half K was pretty flat. I managed to move across about eight tracks knocking only one skier out of his tracks in the process and receiving a brief curse. Once the speedsters were gone I was able to stay with those around me and felt much better. The climb started and things were going pretty well. The grade was not continuous but very gradual,

frequently punctuated with steeper rises. At 5 K the trail entered a heavily wooded area and narrowed to 4 tracks causing a traffic jam. Fortunately, after a while, six tracks became available again.

On the steepest grades I started to slip. At first I thought it was poor form on my part but the problem worsened. Finally, over an hour in, at about 12 K, it was clear that my grip wax was not performing. I pulled off the trail from the rightmost track and applied two layers of orange Toko. It cost me 7 or 8 minutes, but I had excellent kick the rest of the way. It was a great feeling to be confident that my skis wouldn't slip on the hills.

Early in the race I experienced the weird track inversion mirage. It really upset me for a few seconds before I gave myself a mental slap and stopped looking down at the track. It was quite flat between 10 and 15 K but then we began to climb again. I knew there was a significant downhill coming up and I was really hoping for some relief at this point. Trail markings were at 5 K intervals from the start, 54 kilometers from Lillehammer. Thus I saw white signs with large red letters at 49 and 44 K. At about the 39 K sign the downhill began and I found myself in the left lane with two guys, 10 and 20 meters in front of me. We were all in a tuck and flying when these two dolts stood up! I closed on them rapidly and had to stem a ski to slow up. The track was straight down so there was no explanation except that they didn't want to cope with the speed.

There were many enthusiastic spectators along the way. Right in front of one group I made a move around a competitor and they yelled, "Haya, haya, haya". They really threw themselves into cheering you on and there were groups at intervals over the whole course. The trail went on and on and I hadn't seen the 34 K mark. It seemed interminable and I became convinced that I had also missed the 29K mark. On and on and I thought surly the 24K mark must appear at any minute. Finally there it was, the, the, 29 K mark. I shouted out loud, "Son of a bitch... son of a bitch!" How could it be?

At least six times during the race I pulled off to the side to take a pull on my apple gel with actual bits of apple in it that I had purchased in Switzerland before the Engadin. They saved my life giving me the energy to continue without the dreaded bonk. It was a long haul to the 24 K mark and I really don't remember the terrain too well, but I certainly will never forget the climbs from 24 K up to the 19 K mark; murderous climbs, far steeper than the early hills near Rena. And they were unrelenting. Up one pitch and over the crest and there was another. It broke your spirit but you had to go on.

Finally I was in familiar territory where I had been on Wednesday. That buoyed my spirit. I knew that the rest of the race would become more and more familiar as I would soon get to kilometers that I had skied two and three times. I could smell those final down hill runs. But first there were some long open flats that I mostly double poled across. This week, during training, I had realized the true value of the double pole. On the right terrain - flat or slightly down - the double pole required less energy and yet kept me going faster than the skiers around me who continued to stride. The old abdomen is quite a muscle and combined with your upper body weight, it becomes a real piston propelling you down the trail. It makes sense since you are lower, out of the wind, and the grip wax has less interaction with the snow. And my poor striding technique relative to the Norwegians became less of a factor.

It's not possible to explain how weary I felt. If you race, you know what I'm talking about, but not otherwise. You run on instinct after a while. I'm used to skating 50 K but I've not trained to stride that distance. I crossed a familiar bridge and up a recognized hill, the objective was nearing. Finally through an underpass, up a short steep hill, across a few hundred meters of flats and the trail mercifully turn ninety degrees to the left and my scream of joy was released. The first big down sweep to the finish had started. A couple of upgrades that I'd forgotten were only pimples in the way of my urge to find the next big free ride. And there it was, the hill Bengt had become one with the snow, days earlier. I crouched and rode the straights, stemming a ski to safely make a high-speed turn. Norwegian, I'm not. The last 10 K to the finish are counted down one by one, and it's fun to see them click off so quickly. A big U turn was well gouged out by this time and I gingerly made the turn at a controlled speed. Ten and nine come and go quickly but eight and seven you must work for as the course flattens quite a bit. The tracks then tip down again and six and five fly by. So it goes and three K marks the beginning of another quick run. At two kilometers to go, a sight familiar to Birkie skiers appears. Power lines! But they don't foretell of huge climbs at the start of the race but rather flats at the finish. Shortly after the one K mark, the course takes a sharp turn to the left and heads directly into the ski stadium where Olympians have tread. The course takes a double hair pin in the stadium, first climbing and then dipping rapidly around the first U turn where you must ride a berm to hold the line (see photo, next page). The rest was a celebration: they were scanning my barcode and pulling off my chip. One unique feature was that the chip registered my time at three points along the course allowing me to compare my times with other skiers. Like the American Birkie, there's a

25 percent club but in Norway it's called "making you mark" Here it's a very big deal. It's apparently a sign of your manhood and while I've achieved it the last four years in Wisconsin, I was lacking more than an hour here finishing in 5:14, about two hours slower than I have skated the 51 K Birkie the past two years. Bob's excellent time was 4:34 and he was still half an hour off his mark. The results list gives the number of races a skier has finish as well as the number of times a mark was made.



My experiences in Europe have been exceptional. I've been extremely fortunate to train with and be guided by men who have done these races numerous times. Bob suggested where to stay in convenient lodgings that included meals. While convenient, they were not inexpensive as we spent about \$200 per day for the two of us.



My goal is to compete in six more races to achieve the status of a Worldloppet Master. Also, I think when I turn 70 I'd like to come back here. They start the skiers 70 and over an hour before the elites so that they'll have the pristine course to themselves for much of the race. Then I'd get to see the top skiers come by and be able to finish the race about one o'clock. There were 143 skiers in the 70+ group this year including six women! I would have finished 11<sup>th</sup> out of 33 in the women's 60-64 group. Humbled, indeed.