

Birkebeinerrennet 2010 – One Family’s Adventure

By Bruce Walk

Saturday morning March 20, 2010, 6:45 AM with the sun coming up over the hills, clearing skies and the temperature in the low 30’s, three of us find ourselves pulling into the parking lot of the Vikingskipet Olympic Speed Skating arena in Hamar, Norway. Our bus to Rena is waiting and the three other members of our group from Rochester Minnesota are walking toward the bus to meet us. But this story really begins almost a year earlier with our daughter Julia scanning through the Luther College course catalog for study abroad opportunities for her junior year. She was reading aloud the options that held some interest to her as she made her way down the list. Somewhere in the middle popped out ‘Scandinavian and Baltic studies, Lillehammer, Norway’. Lillehammer was familiar to all of us as the location of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games. She stopped, heads came up, more was read, and someone asked ‘hey, isn’t this also where the Norwegian Birkie is?’.... and of course – it is.

From there, plans developed quickly. She could study her spring 2010 semester in Lillehammer, we could all go over for a visit in March. While we were there, we’d also take a day and she, her sister, and I would ski the Birkebeinerrennet. They also talked to some of their good friends and longtime skiing partners and before long, we had 3 others planning to come along as well. It seemed easy to talk about and easy to plan. Now from the parking lot with the start a mere 3 hours away, temperatures predicted to hit 50 degrees, 54k of ‘wet’ classic track ahead of us and still feeling tired from the trans-Atlantic flight, there were more than a few thoughts in our contingent along the lines of ‘what did I sign myself up for?!’

The bus was scheduled to depart at 7:00 AM. We’d given ourselves plenty of time for the hour ride to Rena and to get prepared for our 9:50 start in wave 20. We’d brought along granola, yogurt and bananas for breakfast while several of our fellow passengers were pulling out hearty sandwiches. The bus ride was uneventful. We were dropped off outside of the town center and walked into Rena. There was an ‘expo’ tent set up in the village square with virtually anything you might need to ski. The next leg was a short bus ride out to the starting area a couple miles outside of town. The start area again had a couple tents selling wax and even a Swix team waxing skis for those who still had that to do. Most people put down their equipment in a large packed field, took care of their pre-race needs, did their final kick waxing, put their bags in the truck and then proceeded to the starting area.

We had arrived in Lillehammer 5 days earlier and took the opportunity to ski each day. The trails in the Lillehammer area are basically one big network that ties most of the towns and villages together. One of our favorite sights was this trail sign to the right. It essentially mimics Norwegian road signs. All you need to know is what town you want to go to, and you simply follow the arrows. I don’t know if the trails actually have names but the system does work quite well as long as you know where you want to end up.

The first couple days we skied, temperatures where in the high 20s to 30 and V45 kick wax was working reasonably well. The forecast had an ominous warm up in it however and Thursday was well above freezing followed by more warmth and rain on Friday. I had a couple plans for waxing for the six of us and this weather pushed me directly to plan ‘B’ for warm and widely



varying conditions. I had experimented with Start Grip Tape for the last couple weeks when conditions were above freezing. It worked reasonably well but wasn't perfect. The Swix recommendation called for a couple different klister followed by a combination of hard waxes covering them. It didn't look simple and getting all six skiers comfortable with variations of this concoction seemed like a tough task. I talked to the Start representative Friday morning and they were now recommending the addition of moly fluoro yellow klister for several inches under the toe on top of grip tape. This seemed much easier than the Swix recipe so with two tubes of klister in addition to several rolls of grip tape I'd brought from home, I hoped we were ready.

Fortunately we were able to take care of glide waxing the previous day. The college has a wax room in the basement of one of their classroom buildings outfitted with 2 Swix wax benches, profiles, a couple vises, and 2 irons. We were able to get our skis ready quickly with these. We tested skis on Friday morning – reasonable kick but not perfect. I lengthened the grip tape 2-3 inches beyond the klister pocket and added more Klister... and hoped for the best!



Figure 1 - Waxing at the Lillehammer University College smøre room.

But back to the jumping off point in Rena, finally we were ready to head to the start area around 9:20. We each had our backpacks filled with a minimum of 3.5 kg of gear including extra clothes, gloves, hat, food, wax, and fluids. Some of our group had a race official test out their pack with a quick 'lift' in the palm of the hand and apparently passed the test. The girls were all smiles at the start line and it wasn't long before the gun went off and we began the long trek to Lillehammer.

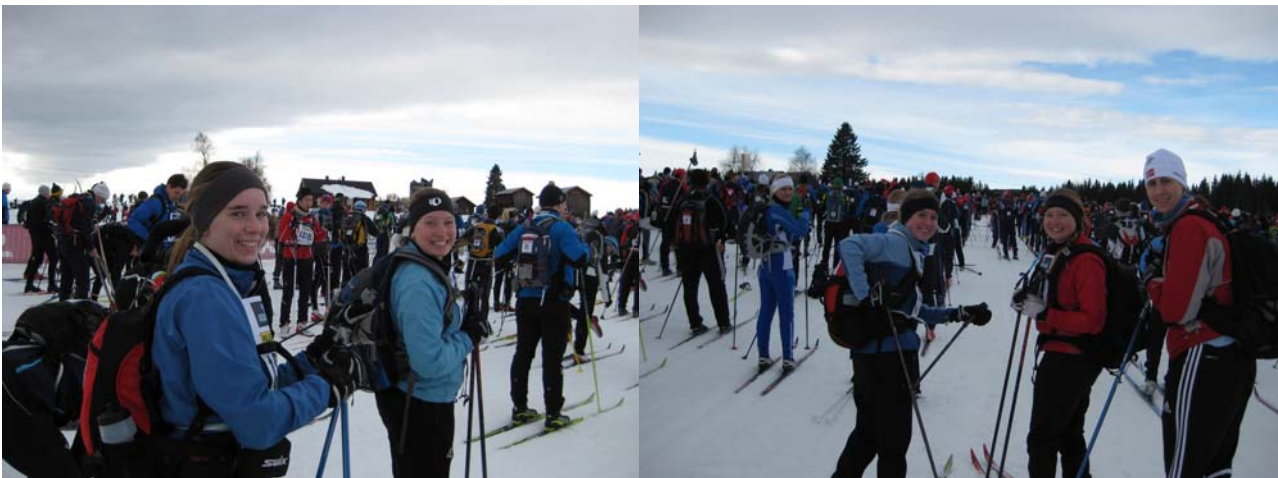
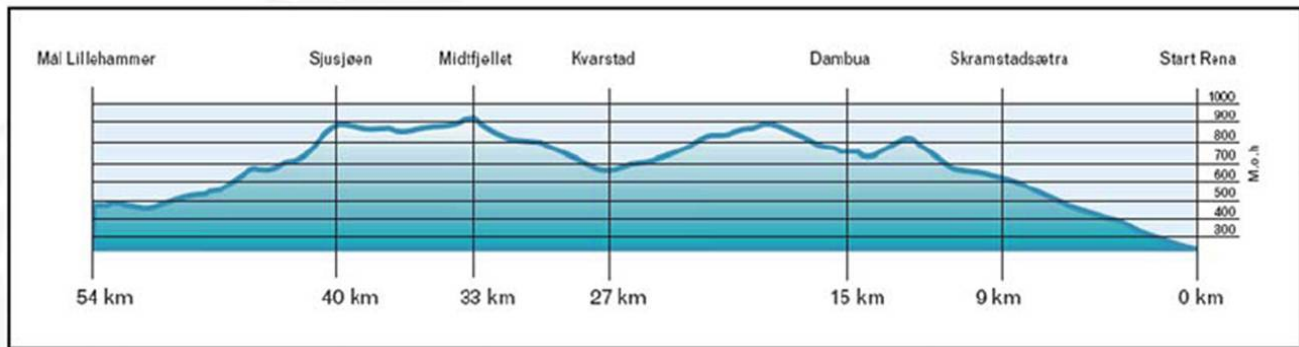


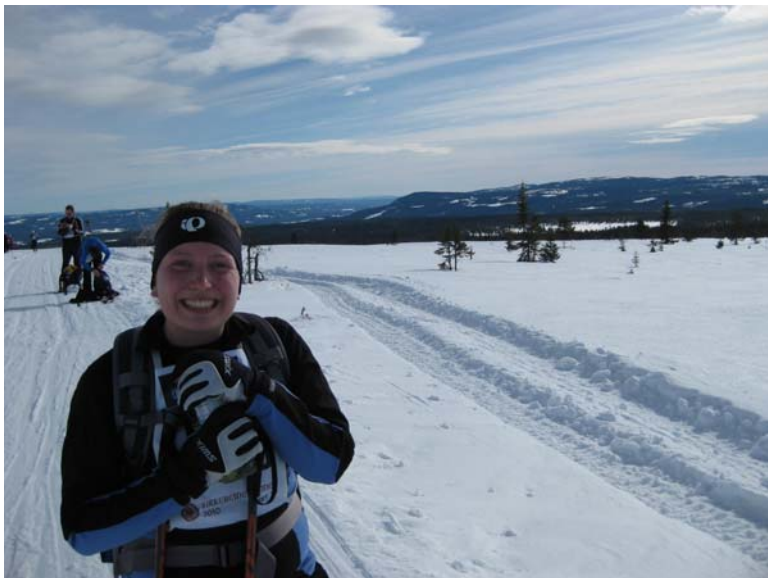
Figure 2 The start line: (left to right), Julia Walk, Lisa Harney, Emily Walk, Dana Harney, and Adrienne Walts

The start was like most other large race starts. With hundreds of people per wave, you just shuffle along as those in front allow. It took us several minutes to reach the actual start line which read our chips and from that point onward, we went up. The elevation profile for the course can be seen below and we can all now verify that it truly is all 'uphill' for the first 13K. The main trail was tracked with 7 classic tracks across. Within the first 2-3K many people had trouble with the combination of increasingly warm temperatures, sun, and wet glazed tracks. Many pulled off to the side to adjust wax including us. We had decided to stay together as best we could so re-waxing was a community event. The girls would hand me skis while I'd add another thin layer of klister, usually lengthening it a bit more each time. Overall, we stopped to adjust wax 3 times before the first food stop and I don't think we were alone.

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We happily arrived at the first food stop and took advantage of all the PowerAde we could tolerate. The sun was now out and the climb had all of us perspiring freely with most people down to 1 layer of clothing. We continued on wondering when the first down hill would come. We knew it was out there somewhere but we had exited the



forested area and were now headed into the open highland scrub and still, all we could see ahead of us were tracks heading up hill. Finally around the 13K mark, we came close to what we hoped was the crest. We stopped for a snack break to celebrate and let everyone catch up. The picture to the left is looking back down the trail. Far off in the distance is the valley we'd climbed out of. We then turned around and looked off in our direction of travel. Sure enough, there was a bit of a down hill ahead. Then it occurred to us to look a little more closely off into the distance. There seemed to be a serpentine line heading up the next long ridge. I zoomed in with the camera and sure enough, there ahead of us looking ominous due to the sheer miniscule size of the stream of skiers, was another long climb. This turned out to be the climb from 14K to

~19K and yes, it was another leg burning march upward.



Figure 3 Looking ahead at the stream of skiers making their way up the next ridge.

For the next several hours, we settled into a steady rhythm of skiing several kilometers, then stopping for food and drink and to let everyone catch up. By this time, we were down to 4 of us skiing together. Emily had gone on ahead, and Adrienne had dropped behind and was traveling at her own pace. Fortunately our kick wax had stabilized and we all had relatively good kick for the remainder of the race. Sometimes we would travel side by side chatting a bit while other times we'd keep our own pace knowing that the others were close at hand. We passed a number of hearty spectators who had traveled up into the high country to watch and cheer. Most were well settled in with fires and plenty of refreshments. One entertaining group was taking the opportunities to push skiers a couple hundred feet up hill before returning to pick out another subject and give them a break.

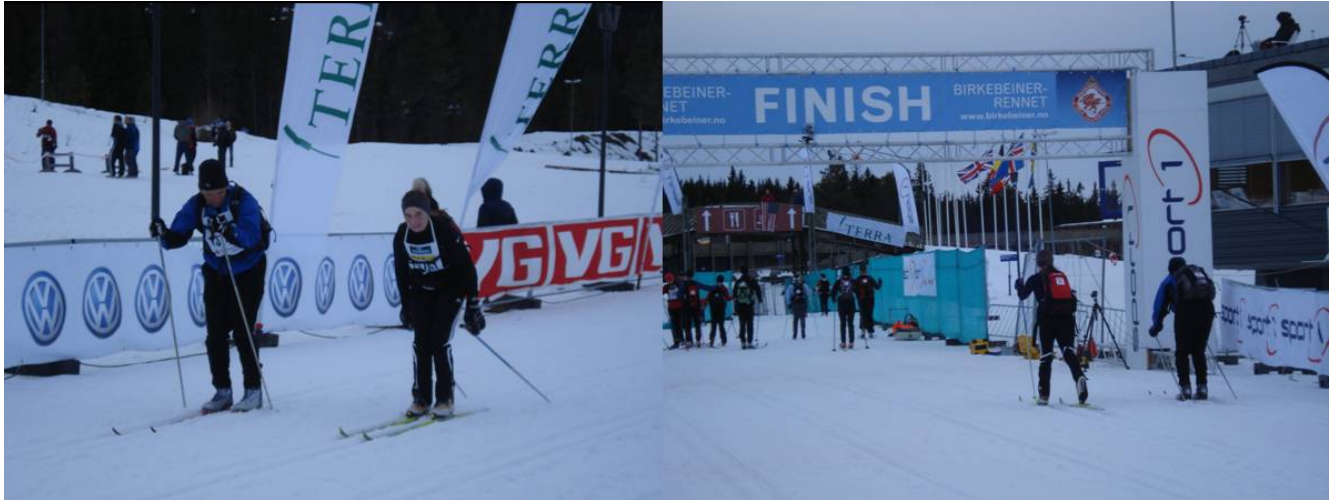
After the second food stop, there started to be more solid food available. By this time, we realized the combination of uphill climb, slow wet tracks and tired legs were going to make this a very long day for us. We had been eating from our backpacks and now started in on the bananas and 'biscuits' served at the food stops. The biscuits were actually cookies with the bottom dipped in chocolate. It was at this point that I realized that adding a couple thick sandwiches to my backpack would have been a great idea.

Dana had the foresight to write all the cut-off times on the inside of her bib. While we weren't in any immediate danger of missing them, it soon became clear that we'd better keep an eye on them and maintain a steady pace if we didn't want to be caught. With this in mind, we kept on moving with the climb up to Midtjfellet at the 33k mark being particularly steep and long. After that however, things leveled out and we could keep up a nice steady stride all the way to Sjusjoen. This was the last food station and the beginning of the long downhill run that we knew ended in the Birkebeiner Olympic Ski Stadium. We made it there with more than an hour to spare before the cut-off time and we all now knew we would indeed be crossing the finish line. Here we agreed that the next time we'd meet would be in the finish area.

Now was the first time that we were happy that conditions weren't cold and fast. This part of the course can be tricky if you're uncomfortable with downhill speed in the tracks. The warm conditions definitely slowed things down and even though the tracks were now a mere suggestion of their former selves, Julia and I were able to drop into a tuck for all of the downhill sections and watch the kilometers fly by. During her time in Norway, she would often take the bus up to the Birkebeiner Ski Stadium or even further up to Nordsteter. After skiing there, it was then easiest to make the downhill run toward Haakon's Hall in Lillehammer to catch the bus back to her

dorm. Consequently, she was now quite used to the long sweeping down-hills and as we skied down together, it wasn't long before we recognized the trail landmarks that we knew were close to the end.

The trail near the finish area doubles back on itself in a long sweeping loop before entering the final straightaway to the finish line. Julia had texted her room mates when we left Sjusjoen and sure enough, they had received her message and the entire Luther and Concordia contingent was there with signs and cameras cheering us on as we made our way into the stadium.



Crossing any ski marathon finish line is an emotional experience. Crossing this one together in Norway after almost exactly 8 hours on the trail, on a classic course that was easily the most difficult any of us had skied under less than ideal conditions, and finishing it in the Olympic venue, just can't be adequately described in words... but its one of those memories that none of us will ever forget.

Dana and Lisa Harney weren't far behind, and Adrienne Walts also made it with room to spare before the cutoffs. Emily had come in after a little over six hours. She and my wife Melissa waited patiently at the finish line until it started to get cold when the sun dropped behind the mountains. Unfortunately what we'd projected as finish times based on our American Birkie times turned out to be woefully inaccurate. This made a very long day for our finish line cheering section (i.e. 'Mom!!').

After finishing and getting food and drink, we were bussed directly down to Haakon's Hall to retrieve our luggage, change, and pick up our finishing certificates. There we gathered for a victory photo together and yes, everyone was still smiling even if they were a lot more tired than at the start line.

A year ago, none of us would have dreamed we would all be in Norway together and have just finished all 54 kilometers of the Birkebeinerrennet. Yet somehow, the lure of this fabled ski event coupled with the strong bond of family and friendships somehow

combined to make this a reality. We didn't set out to set any personal best times or beat any pre-set goals. We simply went out to ski this event together, experience the Norwegian country side, and finish... and that's exactly what we thankfully accomplished!



Figure 4 - Emily Walk, Dana Harney, Bruce Walk, Lisa Harney, Julia Walk (left to right) in Haakon's Hall