

## 72 km of skiing on a Sunday morning

### Local Sports

By Daniel Austin



On Sunday, Blaine Penny and Kirk Howell crossed the finish line of the Lake Louise to Banff Loppet and Relay together in first place. It was a fitting result for the two friends, who have been cross country skiing together for decades and made a lifelong commitment to keep each other fit.

Penny and Howell grew up an hour and a half away from each other in Newfoundland. After meeting at various Atlantic Canada ski races, they began training together with the Newfoundland team.

"We grew up ski racing together in Newfoundland and we both live here now," said Penny. "We just try to drag each other around the trails as much as possible."

Howell said he had made the mistake of trying to wax his own skis before the loppet, and had been left struggling to keep up with the pack for the first half of the race before catching up with Penny and skiing the last leg together.

"I waxed way too warm for the conditions up top and we started and I just couldn't keep up with anyone," Howell said. "But Blaine was nice to me at the end and let me hang on with him. I was just dead."

The two friends finished the race in a time of 4:44:18. The 72-km race is one of the Bow Valley's oldest sporting traditions—it was first held in 1929—and featured 160 skiers. Participants could enter the race solo or in a team of between two to six members, and this year's race had 40 individual skiers and around 20 teams.

Heavy snowfall in recent weeks contributed to ideal course conditions, although Penny said the deep snow in some sections of the course was just as challenging as last year's race—during which there was very little snow.

"This year there was quite a bit more snow which made it nice in one sense, but it was also quite soft so your poles would sink through. It was a lot more effort," he said. "All in all it was great, but last year I was 35 minutes quicker. It's amazing how conditions can make such a difference in a long ski like this."

Marg Fedyna, the 2005 24-hour world solo champion, was the first woman to cross the finish line with a time of 5:17:36. Fedyna said the course's fourth section was the most difficult because racers had to ski alongside pavement and contend with their poles hitting the cement. But Fedyna said that Sunday was her fifth time in the loppet, and she's come to love the race because of those unexpected variables.

"I've done a few of them and every one of them is different," she said. "I call this the adventure ski, because you never know what's around the corner. Every year is different."

In the 50+ categories, Carl Pryce had the fastest men's time, finishing the course in a time of 5:41:15. Val Thompson was the fastest 50+ female with a time of 6:00:23.