



Herald Archive, CanWest News Service

Loppets owe their origins to an escape almost 800 years ago.

Race pays tribute to ancient warriors

East of Edmonton, skiers remember heroics

TRENT EDWARDS
CALGARY HERALD

Surrounded by rebels bent on killing the royal family, two brave warriors spirited an infant Norwegian prince from his hiding place to safety almost 800 years ago.

The Birkebeiner warriors — named after the birchbark leggings they wore — carried the prince to the throne in a bundle on their back.

They skied from Lillehammer through Norway's Gudbrandsdal Valley over two treacherous mountain ranges by cover of forest to the town of Rena, 55 kilometres away in the Osterdal Valley.

Haakon Haakonsson IV, the illegitimate son of King Sverresson and Inga of Vartieg, lived to become a great king who helped shape northern Europe.

In 1932, the dramatic flight of



Herald Archive, CanWest News Service
A volunteer, dressed in period costume, starts the Canadian Birkebeiner near Edmonton last year.

the warriors to save Haakonsson in 1206 was reborn as an annual classic cross-country ski race over the original escape route in Norway.

On Feb. 12, more than 250 skiers will each don a 55-kilogram pack, symbolizing the weight of the 18-month-old prince on the warriors' backs, and race 55 kilometres across mostly flat woodlands an hour's drive east of Edmonton during the 19th annual Canadian Birkebeiner.

Likely another 1,800 skiers will attempt more modest feats at the Birkebeiner Festival in the

Blackfoot Recreation Area that day, skiing as little as 2½ kilometres, in a race many toddlers ski, or as much as 55 kilometres without a pack in the Birkie Lite race.

In 1985, Canada became the third country to hold an annual official Birkebeiner race (the other official Birkebeiners are held in Wisconsin and Japan).

Instead of sheepskin robes and birchbark leggings, the skiers now wear skin-tight bodysuits with high-tech insulation. Even the few octogenarians in the race will leave their wooden skis in their attics, preferring the new carbon-fibre and metal skis.

Usually, the only people wearing authentic Birkebeiner outfits at the Birkie are two middle-aged volunteers representing the Birkebeiner warriors. The pair shoot the cannon that starts the huffing and puffing as racers kick and glide from the Ukrainian Village to Waskehegan (Cooking) Lake. A half dozen clowns will also be on hand to add more colour to the most storied annual nordic skiing event in Western Canada.

"The kids think the vikings and the clowns are the greatest. They'll be out on the course performing antics," says Brian Lucas, a spokesman for the Canadian Birkebeiner.

A two-day festival surrounds the race. An eight-hour nordic fair, with product demos, Birkie souvenirs and wax advice from the local ski shops, will kick off the weekend Feb. 11 at Festival Place in Sherwood Park from noon until 8 p.m.

A dinner, awards ceremony and slide presentation follow the race Saturday night.

"What I like about the Birkie is the huge mass start (instead of staged groups) on the lake. It's fun to see the groups fan out. I like the people, the festival and the awards ceremony, too. It's my dream to do the Birkes in Edmonton, Wisconsin and Norway," says Allison Husband, a 45-year-old from Calgary who has skied the 32-kilometre race in the past three Canadian Birkebeiners and plans to attempt the Birkie Lite this year.

Registration closes Feb. 9. Call (780) 430-7153 or visit www.canadianbirkie.com.

TRENT EDWARDS@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM

Loving the loppet

Casual, fun cross-country ski races draw crowds

TRENT EDWARDS
CALGARY HERALD

Most of the people from Calgary who do it have no clue what the word means, but they'll drive six hours to join a loppet.

Loppets are the most popular yet least understood Alberta tradition.

For the record, while it may sound vaguely bunny-related, a loppet is actually a Norwegian word referring to a cross-country ski distance race. Most modern loppets are between 10 and 55 kilometres long. Their mass starts allow recreational racers to socialize instead of skiing alone against the clock.

While most Albertans will say "Pardon?" when asked about loppets, hundreds of Albertans train almost year-round to prepare themselves for loppets held between January and March.

A hardy group of 45 skiers from the Calgary area drove six hours to Salmon Arm, B.C., for the Reino Keski-Salmi Loppet on Jan. 15. Unfortunately for them, a cold snap cancelled that race for the first time in 21 years.

The superstitious among the skiers must have suspected this bad omen would lead to more loppet cancellations, but they couldn't have predicted a 2½ week cold snap immediately followed by a few weeks of warm weather and rain.

This wonky weather has forced the cancellation of the first three loppets this season.

This has forced about 500 loppet-mad Calgarians to ski tiny loops of the remaining snow like gerbils, their mental health deteriorating in the sun. If the next major loppet in Alberta — the 19th annual Canadian Birkebeiner east of

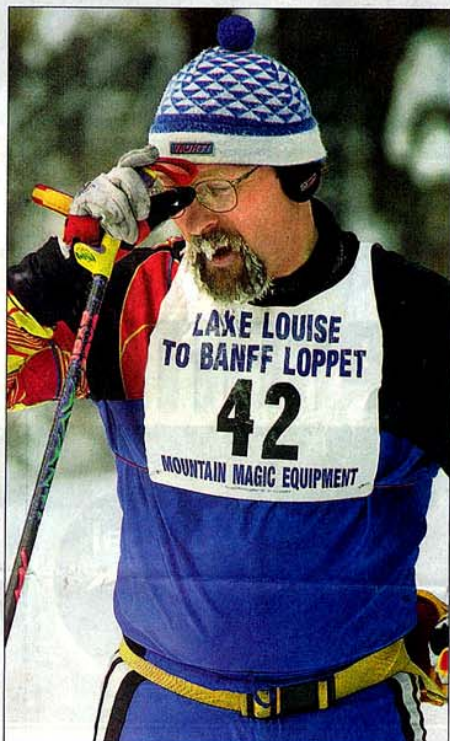
Edmonton — is cancelled Feb. 12, some skiers might snap, giving up on the season to end their misery.

"The popularity of loppets seems to fluctuate with the weather," says Lee Speed, a spokeswoman for Cross-Country Alberta. "There's lots of people looking for races now because of cancellations, but if people aren't able to get out skiing, then a lot of them won't enter loppets."

Organizers of the annual Birkie report that, despite the bad weather, almost 200 skiers from the Calgary area have registered for their loppet races — double what they had last year at this point.

"There's gotta be a couple hundred diehard faithful loppet racers in the area," says Norm Person, owner of the cross-country ski equipment store Lifesport in Kensington and a loppeter who has led groups of Calgarians on trips to Europe for races that attract tens of thousands of skiers.

SEE LOPPET, PAGE E7



Calgary Herald Archive

Loppets' mass starts allow skiers to socialize rather than race against the clock. Still, it's a workout.