

Loppet lures hardy skiers

By: [Justin Brisbane](#) | Posted: Thursday, Jan 23, 2014 06:00 am

Local lore indicates cross-country skiers have raced between Lake Louise and Banff since 1929, when hardened mountain men on wooden skis thrashed their way from outpost to outpost in just over five hours.

In homage to those point-to-point pioneers, John Groeneveld struck gold for the third time in race history while Kathryn Stone double-poled the entire 50 kilometre course to win the women's solo division at the 2014 Lake Louise to Banff Loppet on Sunday (Jan. 19).

Groeneveld used the first 20 km of the race to feel out his competition before laying down the hammer in the final 10 km to finish in a time of 3:03.9.

"I just went hard off the start to see what the competition was gonna be like. Once I got a gap, I just tried to maintain an even pace. My son was giving me splits, so I went hard on the last 10 km to make sure I had enough of a gap to finish alone," Groeneveld said. "Midway through the race, I slowed down and tried to drink and eat a bit, but that helped me in the end."

Groeneveld had a slight 30-second lead on Calgary's Jeff Holmes at the 15 km mark, but was able to extend that to a six-minute lead by the finish line.

Although flood damage shortened the course this year by 20 km, Groeneveld still paced the race perfectly, saving enough energy for the finishing uphill kick.

"The toughest part is the Hillsdale split. The conditions are fairly rugged. There were lots of pine needles by Baker Creek, but I'm getting used to that by now," Groeneveld said.

Sean Higgins-Chan finished third overall.

In the women's division, Stone, 25, strapped on her skate skis and double poled the entire 50 km course for the win, finishing the rolling course in 3 hours, 13 minutes. Although records are spotty at best, organizers believe Stone may be one of the only athletes to ever ski the course in such a fashion, as she eschewed grip zones and relied on her core muscles for the win.

"It was so much fun to have these guys pushing me. I always wondered if I could do a 50 km double pole," Stone said.

The technique helped her rocket through the downhills and flats, and she simply had to gut it out on the climbs.

"That last uphill was tough. It's such a steep grade and hard to (climb). At 45 km in, it's kind of rough," Stone said.

While she joked her five-week training plan powered her to victory, Stone is no slouch on the Canadian ski scene. She retired from biathlon last spring after representing Canada internationally on the IBU Cup tour and finished 11th in the first skate sprint at cross-country ski Olympic trials last week in Canmore.

Most of her summer was spent logging nine-hour trail runs in the mountains, which she credits for strengthening her mentally and physically for the loppet.

"After a nine-hour trail run, this didn't feel so long," Stone said.

Skiing in the 50-plus category, Mary Young was the second-fastest woman on the day, finishing with a time of 3:25:47. Jana Jurackova finished third (3:41:37).

Race organizers also convinced Parks Canada to keep part of the trail open for the rest of the winter. The 10 km section between Castle Lookout and Baker Creek Lodge will be trackset for the rest of the winter after an environmental assessment was completed.

For full results, visit www.loppet.ca