



A passion which is getting more and more Canadians on the move.

IN PRAISE OF CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

by DONNA HAYES

Skiing marathons are a winter example of Sport for All. A Scandinavian tradition par excellence spectacularly demonstrated each year by the Swedish Vasaloppet and Norwegian "Crete Waitz" races, it has caught on in Canada where the winter is just ideal. More and more Sunday sports fans are setting off for the great snowy expanses.

It's 8 a.m. on a crisp Saturday morning in January. Frosty breath skiers hurry to test waxes and quickly return to the start line. Bouncing up and down to keep warm among the starters is 30 year old Fred Bushell and farther back in the pack is 67 year old Minn Sjolseth. Fred and Minn don't know each other but they both have the same obsession — it is called ski loppeting (a loppet is a ski marathon). They feel compelled to jump in

a car every Friday night from January to the end of March — drive seven hours — only to rise at 6 a.m. and ski 50 kilometres (31 mi.).

The growth of participation in ski loppets has exploded over the past five years. What makes 60,000 Canadians, age eight to 80, feel compelled to follow in Fred and Minn's tracks? A desire to be challenged by a cross-country ski marathon.

For Fred, who carries a 14 kilogram (30 lb.) mail sack for Canada Post when he's not skiing, the motivation is fun, social and a goal for staying fit. Minn, who is a professional artist, didn't start skiing loppets until age 60. For her, the health aspect is motivation enough. Regular participation leads to improvements throughout the whole body ; oxygen intake, muscle tone, stamina, power, circulation and mental well-being.

For the loppet skier, a ski marathon is a collage of moments held together by desire and determination. During the course of the day, the loppet skier will experience emotional highs and lows comprised of intense rivalry and kindness, comedy and boredom. Next July, as he or she pushes the powermower over the back-yard, particular images and sensations will come welling back into memory — the rush of adrenalin exploding at the start, the excitement of being neck-to-neck on the course, the sense of profound accomplishment which comes with crossing the finish line 20, 30 or 60 kilometres (12, 19 or 37 mi.) away from the start.

For many beginning loppet skiers, reaching the first or second checkpoint, five or 10 kilometres (3 or 6 mi.) out, has the same reward. How many activities in our daily lives allow us to set an immediate goal, strive to achieve it and obtain satisfaction of accomplishment in the timespan of three to nine hours! Possibly, immediate loppet satisfaction is one of the many reasons loppet skiers are up at 6 a.m.

Canada has perhaps more loppet events to choose from per capita ski population than any other country in the world — ranging from two day challenges such as the *Canadian Ski Marathon* to organized series such as the *British Columbia Loppet Series* (12 events in B.C. and the Yukon) and the *Canadian Ski Odyssey*.

Nine loppets from across Canada were invited to join the *Canadian Ski Odyssey* series in 1987 with additional events being added in 1988. The objective for a skier is to complete all events in a skiing lifetime. This national series is seen as a stepping stone from provincial loppets to the prestigious World Loppet League.

The 1988 *Odyssey* kicked off on January 16 with the *Reino Keski-Salmi Loppet* in the Shuswap area of British Columbia at Salmon Arm. On January 30, the *Canadian Birkebeiner* took place from Devon to Edmonton, Alberta. This event follows a Norwegian tradition where skiers are

required to carry a 5.5 kilogram (12 lb.) pack. The *Kawartha Tour* near Peterborough, Ontario was on the same weekend. This is a two day event and skiers have the choice of skiing between 12 and 83 kilometres (8 and 51 mi.).

February 6 features the largest loppet event in western Canada. The *Cariboo Marathon* at 100 mile House, British Columbia, features 50 kilometres (31 mi.) over rolling ranch country, and through woods of pine and aspen groves. On February 7, the *Grand Beach Classic* follows a loop through the sand hills along the shores of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba.

Canada's World Loppet event, the *Gatineau 55* in Hull, Quebec is on February 14, winding its way through scenic Gatineau Park. The Maritime event, *Les Aventuriers Marathon* at Campbellton, New Brunswick (February 21), begins in Sugarloaf Park and follows tracks through challenging spruce forest. Skiers can avail themselves of a hot meal at the half way point.

A new event in the series is the *Saskaloppet* in La Ronge, Saskatchewan (March 5). In addition to the 60 kilometre (37 mi.) tour, skiers have the



option of a two day, 90 kilometre (56 mi.) event with a winter camp out. On the same weekend in Quebec, the *Loppet Mont Ste-Anne* takes place at Ste-Anne de Beaupré.

Elite class loppet skiers travel around the world competing in the 11 event *World Loppet League*. In 1984, an American, Stuart Stevens, became the first loppet skier to participate in all World Loppet events in one season. In order to accomplish this feat, Stevens flew to Canada from West Germany after completing the *Konig Ludwig Lauf* 65 kilometres (40 mi.), the *Marcialonga* in Italy 70 kilometres (43 mi.) and *Dolomitenlauf* in Austria 60 kilometres (37 mi.), held on consecutive weekends. Stevens was given an early start (before daylight) for the *Gatineau 55*, the flew directly to France to ski the *Transjurasienne* 76 kilometres (47 mi.). He immediately returned to North America to ski the *American Nirkebeiner* 55 kilometres (34 mi.), jumped on another plane and 18 hours after he completed the *Birkie*, arrived by helicopter at the start of the *Finlandia* in Lahti, Finland 75 kilometres (46 mi.). This event had already started and needless to say, Stevens was feeling a little secondhand.

After completing the *Finlandia* in the dark, Stevens went on to ski the gruelling *Vasaloppet* in Sweden 85 kilometres (52 mi.) and the *Birkebeiner* in Norway 55 kilometres (34 mi.).

The amazing feat was certainly loppet madness but now with the inclusion of the *Sapporo Ski Marathon* in Japan it is logistically impossible to undertake. Date conflicts also make it difficult to complete the Canadian Ski Odyssey events in one season. However, the goal for the Odyssey and the World Loppet League is to ski all the events in a lifetime. If the philosophy and age of the late Jackrabbit Johanssen are adhered to, Canadian skiers will have a long, healthy lifetime within which to participate in all the Odyssey and World Loppet events. (Johanssen was Canada's guru for cross-country skiing. He died in 1986 at the age of 111 years and his prophetic statements about lifestyle — being one with nature and skiing fast and hard — have left a legacy for future cross-future skiers to follow.)

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