

Backgrounder: The Canadian Birkebeiner celebrates its 20th year in Feb 2007

On February 10th, 2007 the Canadian Birkebeiner will again entertain approximately 2000 cross country skiers at the largest classic style event in Canada.

It was the year 1206....A civil war raged in Norway. An infant prince and heir to the throne, Haakon Haakonsson was in danger and in hiding near Lillehammer. Two brave Birkebeiner warriors rescued the prince, carrying him on skis from the Gudbrandsdal valley over two mountain ranges to Rena in the Osterdal valley. The young prince was later crowned king and the civil war ended.

The dramatic flight of the Birkebeiner warriors is now commemorated every year in Norway, the United States and Canada. The English translation of "Birkebeiner" is birch leggings, which describes the warriors' birch bark footwear. Today Birkebeiner has come to mean a person strong in adversity and never daunted by trial or hardships.

The Canadian Birkebeiner was first held in 1985 with 127 skiers traveling from Devon to Fort Edmonton in -30 degree weather. By 1988 the event had grown in numbers and moved to Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area 35 kilometers east of Edmonton. This Park, with 100 kilometres of ski trails, became the permanent home of the Canadian Birkie in 1990. In 1992 the long distance events began for the first time at Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, a Provincial Historic Site. Since 1991 a Pisten Bully has been used to set tracks, but this year's Birkie will mark the first time that tracks will be set with a new modern groomer.

The festival has grown to over 2000 participants skiing one of seven events:

(a) 55 Km Torskeklubben with pack – The premier event with seven age categories. Skiers recreate the legend of the original Birkebeiner skiers by carrying the equivalent of the infant crown prince, a 5.5 kg (12 lb) pack.

(b) Special category this year: Participants will ski 55 km with pack on traditional wooden skis in commemoration of the 800th Anniversary of the Birkebeiner legend.

(c) 55 Km Birkie Lite – a personal challenge – 55 km but without the 12 lb pack.

(d) Edmonton Journal Tour – a 31 km event with seven age categories, and the same start and finish lines as the 55 Km event.

(e) 13 Km Mini Birkie – a loop course for those who want to taste the Birkebeiner.

(f) 5 Km Snow Shuffle – a fun event for novice skiers of all ages.

(g) 2.5 Km – Ski with a real Viking – an event for kids and learners.

In addition to being a fun family event with distances for all, young and old, the Birkie attracts elite skiers from the Canadian National Ski Team, the X-C.com Team, the Alberta Cross Country Ski Team, and keen skiers from coast to coast and south of the border. To date, fifty-seven persons have skied the Canadian, American and Norwegian Birkebeiner long distance events and received the Haakon Haakonsson award. Six persons have skied all Canadian Birkie 55 km distances since 1985.

The event requires 625 volunteers who graciously donate their time to a variety of needs and make the Birkie an annual success in February. Volunteer areas include food stations along the courses, a large festival food tent at the finish line, course patrollers, medical, communications, and time-keeping. Several groups known as "Friends of the Birkie" help out a great deal, and number of generous sponsors assist financially and otherwise.

The Festival begins Friday, February 9th, 2007 at Festival Place, Sherwood Park with opening ceremonies at noon followed by a Nordic Fair where participants pick up their bibs. The Fair also offers valuable information about the next day's ski events, product demonstrations, waxing information from local shops and much more. After the event are the "Vikings' Feast", award ceremony and slide presentation

The Canadian Birkebeiner is an adventure for all outdoor enthusiasts and fun for the entire family. Since November 2006 near record snowfalls have made trail conditions excellent. For travel, accommodation and further information check www.canadianbirkie.com or call 780-430-7153.