

Good Trails, Good Friends, Good Times

The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival Brings Everyone Together On Two Skinny Skis

2009's Canadian Birkie was the first Birkie I had ever been to. I hadn't been on cross country skis for years, so I wasn't quite sure what I was doing there. I was new to the Birkebeiner Society, and although I wasn't going to be skiing in the festival, I was excited to see how it would all turn out.

There was a lot of talk leading up to the day of the festival about weather. 2008's Birkie had been cancelled due to very cold weather, and a few weeks before 2009's event we were actually worried about it being too warm.

That Saturday morning was a beautiful -18°C as I rolled into the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village parking lot. I thought I had arrived early at ten minutes to eight in the morning. I couldn't have been more wrong. With the first race scheduled to start at 9:00 a.m., I was probably one of the last people to arrive. Hundreds of people milled around the Red Barn building, and even more were down the path at the Goose Lake start line. A small campfire had been started off to one side with a group of women in blue spandex standing by it, trying to keep warm. The crisp air crackled with hoar frost and excitement.



Groups of skiers began to form. Old friends, people who hadn't seen each other since the last Birkie, were catching up before the first event. I passed by packs of people all saying the same things: "How have you been?" "I haven't seen you in so long!" "It's going to be good skiing today, eh?" Everywhere I went people were laughing, visiting, picking out points on the trails to meet up. It was going to be great skiing.



By 11:00 a.m., the Waskehegan Staging Area finish line had already seen a few of the faster skiers come through. At the same time, a little ways off, families with younger children were starting their races. Children no more than three years old were dragging their skis behind them, with looks of such

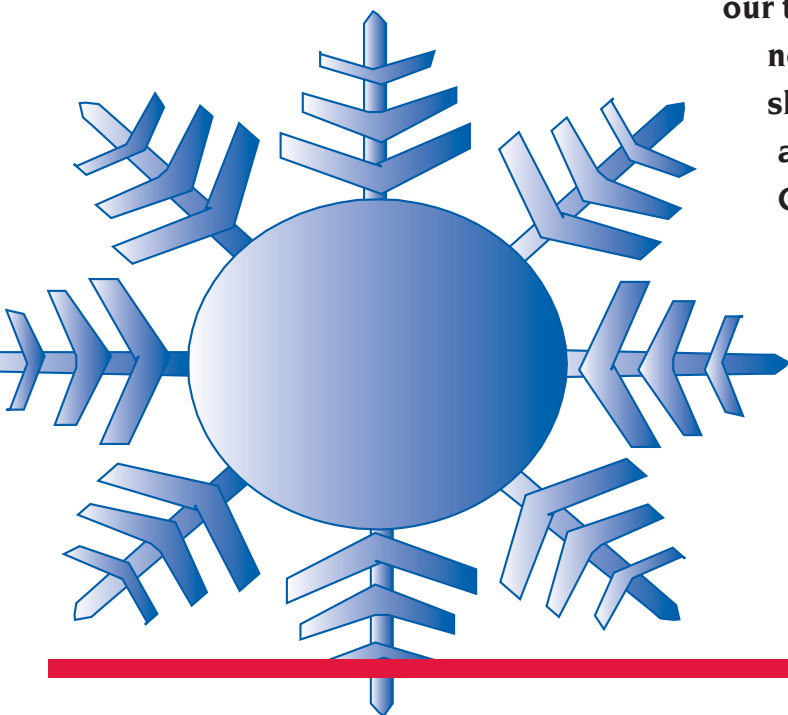
determination that they put the professionals to shame. They were here to ski, by gum. And ski they did. I can't say that all of them made it to the finish line, but I can say that all had fun.

And everyone made memories. The kids had fun skiing in beautiful weather with their families, and hopefully will keep coming back year after year. The older skiers couldn't have asked for better skiing conditions. The weather, the trails, the cheering fans at the finish line . . . everything came together to help us put on a Birkie that is marked as one of our best.

But weather and trails weren't the only aspects of a memorable Birkie. What made 2009's Birkie, and every Birkie we've ever had, really memorable are the three things the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival is about: *Friends, Family and Fun*. The Birkie has been made possible only by bringing together friends and families and providing them a place to have fun. As I walked around the finish line I found that the Birkie had truly become a family affair. I came upon a small moving blanket on a sled which quickly turned into a small, and rather chilly, puppy. Even the dog had come out to support his skiers.



For 2010, the Birkebeiner Society's slogan is "Ski with Friends in 2010!" The Society is running a contest for skiers who bring in their friends or family who have never before skied in the Birkie. We're bringing together everyone on our trails, making our own family bigger with each new skier. Whether you're a pro or have never skied a single stride, we look forward to one and all joining us February 13 for the annual Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival.



Ryan O'Byrne, Birkie Director