

Skiers converge on Edmonton for annual Birkebeiner

Heavy snow, mild weather promise fast track at cross-country festival

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Competitors take off in the 31 kilometre event during the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival which started at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village and ended at Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area, 35 kilometres east of Edmonton on February 13, 2010.

Photograph by: Ryan Jackson , The Journal

In what is expected to be the highest turnout in three years, nearly 1,700 cross-country skiers from across Canada and overseas will be participating in the 23rd annual Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival this Saturday on the lands of the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area and Elk Island National Park.

The weekend is expected to be so mild that Canadian Birkebeiner Society general manager Glenda Hanna thinks it might end up being "T-shirt weather."

“It’s one of the few years we’ve had great snow and great weather,” Hanna said.

“Our meteorologist, Gary Atchison, predicts we will be within a couple of degrees of -9 C at the start.”

As a result of all the snow this winter, the trails are in great condition, with a 15- to 20-centimetre base. This allows organizers to use a unique \$200,000 snowtracker, which can chew ice crystals as it tills, creating a very fast double-track.

“The fastest snow is at -4 C, so we are going to be right in the middle of our range. It will be one of the fastest tracks in years,” Hanna.

The Birkebeiner will see a large number of participants from the greater Edmonton region, along with a host of eager skiers who come from around the world to compete.

“We even have one woman coming over from the Netherlands this year,” Hanna said.

Participants of all ages can choose to ski one of five courses ranging from 2.5 to 55 kilometres, but the première event is the 55-km Torskeklubben Birkebeiner. It’s a re-creation of a centuries-old Norwegian legend in which Birkebeiner soldiers rescued the infant Prince Haakon Haakonsson in the middle of winter and skied him to safety. Each participant in the traditional event is required to carry a 5.5-kilogram pack meant to replicate the crown prince, while skiing from the Ukrainian Heritage Cultural Village to the Waskahegan Staging Area.

Those who have completed the Torskeklubben Birkebeiner trifecta — skiing the Canadian, American and Norwegian events — are recognized with the Haakonsson Award, traditionally bestowed at the Canadian version of the event.

“This year we have seven or eight people, including some of our Paralympians, who will win the award. They will be given a beautiful, hand-crafted mug as a memento,” Hanna said.

But the Haakonsson Award winners will not be the only skiers getting special recognition this year. For the first time in the event’s history, skiers — including Hanna — who have competed in 20 or more Birkebeiners will don a royal blue bib. Red bibs are worn by those who have competed in every Birkebeiner, purple bibs recognize completion of 10 or more and yellow bibs are worn by last year’s winners.

“Our idea is that we wanted to acknowledge and celebrate the people who have contributed to the Birkie festival for so many years,” Hanna said. “It’s going to be a rainbow out there.”

Adding to the array of colours at this year’s Birkebeiner is green, as for the first time, the event is promoting an eco-friendly initiative.

“It will be a garbage-free Birkie. Everything will be combustible or recyclable,” Hanna said.

She added that the annual event would not be possible without the help of their more than 600 volunteers.

“They are the heart and soul of the Birkie,” Hanna said. “They are enthusiastic, loyal, organized and passionate about serving the skiing community.”

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