



The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival is the biggest cross-country skiing event of its kind in North America. Since 1985, the festival has attracted skiers to the Blackfoot trails for the annual wintertime race.

by Robin Collum
photos by Liz Durden

GO DOWN TO ONE OF OUR CITY'S MANY PARKS ON A NICE NIGHT WHEN the snow is good, and you're bound to find dozens of cross-country skiers enjoying the trails. They'll run the gamut in age, fitness level and experience, but what they'll have in common is a love of skiing and a desire to enjoy the outdoors. In fact, there's a good chance that you could see someone you know.

University of Alberta student Maryann Heacock has been cross-country skiing, by her own account, "forever." Her parents were skiers, and they brought her and her older brother into the sport. As children, they both participated in Jackrabbit lessons from Edmonton Nordic Ski Club, and the whole family would ski together. Ask around the University, and you're bound to find other stories just like hers, because northern Alberta is the heart of cross-country skiing in Canada.

Thanks to a combination of history, great trails and just plain old good conditions, cross-country skiing gets huge participation in this province. Competitively, Alberta looms large as well, producing some of the country's top skiers, and the Canadian national team trains year-round in Canmore.

The sport's appeal is obvious. It offers a good workout and the chance to be outside.

"It's the closeness to nature that's my favourite part," says Joan Skinstad, head coach of the cross-country ski team at the U of A's Augustana campus in Camrose. She's been skiing since she was four years old, and has a list of reasons she loves the sport. "There's the ability to go by yourself if you want, or go as a group. It's an individual-type commitment, so how fit you want to be is up to you, and it's a lifelong activity you can do into your 80s."

Skiers from all over Alberta can see each other this weekend, at the biggest event on the Edmonton ski calendar. The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival is the biggest cross-country ski festival of its kind in North America, and has been running since 1985 (though they have had to cancel a few times due to lack of snow). The festival is based on an event in Norwegian history; in 1209, two warriors rescued their infant crown prince during a civil war by skiing across the country. The modern Birkie offers races for skiers at various levels, from a 2.5 km race for kids to a 55km Torskeklubben, where racers carry a 5.5 kilogram pack to represent the medieval prince.

The race is held east of Edmonton near Elk Island Provincial Park, at Blackfoot recreation area. Blackfoot is one of the many venues available for skiers in the Edmonton area. It boasts an enormous trail system, and is a popular day-trip destination.

Skinstad says cross-country skiing helps make the cold winters fun.

"We all like to get out in the summer, but what can you do in the winter? [Cross-country skiing] is one of the few things ... besides

walking that you can go out and do in nature in the wintertime—and we have a lot of winter."

National team skier and Edmonton native, Madeleine Williams, agrees with Skinstad, and values the opportunity skiing gives to spend time outdoors.

"It's a pleasure to be outside," she says. "There's so much variety in the scenery, whereas a lot of sports you're just going around a track or in one place all the time. With cross-country skiing you get to be outside, and it's fun."

Albertans like Williams make up nearly half of the current Canadian Senior National team. Olympic gold- and silver-medallist Beckie Scott, who retired from competition last spring, hails from Vermilion, east of Edmonton.

Williams thinks that Albertans' dominance comes from more than just the sheer popularity of skiing in the province. She believes that Albertans generally have a more competitive spirit than their peers.

"I think partly why so many elite skiers come from here is because of the infrastructure we have here, and also I think it's the mentality of Albertans," she says. "It's not just in cross-country skiing that there are a lot of successful athletes coming out of Alberta. It has something to do with the way Albertans think of success and winning, rather than just participation, as being important."

That competitive urge aside, cross-country skiing is most popular as a recreational sport in Alberta, and in many ways Heacock and Williams' careers in skiing are atypical of the average skier because they've continued to compete and participate through their teenage years. Cross-country skiing is generally an adult sport.

"I think it's primarily a sport for adults," says Doug Wiens, a math professor at the U of A and avid cross-country skier. "I think what happens is that people do it with their kids but once the kids don't have to anymore, they quit, and maybe take it back up again as adults."

Wiens came to cross-country skiing as an adult, and only really got serious about the sport once he moved to Edmonton in the 1980s. He appreciates the social as well as the physical aspect of the sport, and skis with friends every week at Goldbar Park, taking a course through the Edmonton Nordic ski club.

Heacock knows her way around the local ski community as well.

"It's a subculture. It's surprising how many people, when you start talking to them, have skied or ski," she says. "Even in the University, there's a lot of people who ski; in a lot of ways, it's a really close community."

That sense of community and camaraderie is another part cross-country skiing's appeal. Heacock credits the social aspect of skiing with getting her interested in competition as a child, and with keeping her skiing even as many kids her age were quitting the sport. She continues to ski competitively, and will represent Alberta at Nationals at Mont-St-Anne, Québec, in March.

"I don't even know when I started racing, but it was loppets, which are just fun races anyone can do. After the races would be the really fun time, hanging out with my friends," she says. "It was fun for me, and it was my social group, too. I have lots of really good friends from skiing. It became easy to stick with it, even as my other friends stopped, because I was still having fun."

Williams likes that she can come home from training and reconnect with the people she skied with when she was younger.

"Edmonton is the biggest ski centre in northern Alberta, and it's not huge, but the community's close-knit," she says. "I know everyone when I come back to Edmonton for Christmas and see people on the trails. They know who I am and I know who they are, and it's a great feeling."

A wealth of trails is one of the ski community's biggest assets.

"Skiing is popular because the snow is reliable and there are great trails, like Goldbar and Blackfoot," says Wiens. "There are lots of trails, and they're well-maintained, largely through volunteer work."

Cross-country skiing is a growing sport, and the trend is likely to continue. It has received a lot of media exposure thanks to high-profile international athletes, and participation is also linked to the social concern about leading active lifestyles.

"I think there's no question that it's growing in popularity," says Skinstad. "When I started, you would hardly meet another skier out there, and now it's hard to get to be by yourself in many centres. And it's relatively low-cost, as well. For program fees: once you've made that initial equipment buy, you're good for a long time. For parents looking for activities for their children, it's great."

"Sara Renner, who won a medal for Canada at the Olympics, said that cross-country skiing is going to be the new yoga," says Heacock. "She was half joking, but actually it should be. It's rhythmic, relaxing and really therapeutic."

"It's my sport. It's what I do."



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