

The 2005 Birkie - An Epic Tale

It's time for a sometimes controversial, but always entertaining Bill's race report.

So the venue is Edmonton; the race is the Canadian Birkiebeiner - 55 kms of classical x-c skiing through the Elk Island National Park Trails. To compound the misery, our hero opts for the Full Birkie this year - that's 55 km with a 5.5 kg pack, kids! It promises to be interesting.

Of course, what's a good race without talking a bit of smack? So starting in October, our hero starts calling out Penny Thompson, 4-time Womens champ and Grovedale resident, predicting her demise at the hands of the older and wiser Corcoran. Naturally, she's not worried, given our hero's penchant for bold predictions followed up with sub-par performance.

In a pre-event showdown three weeks previous, Thompson ends up with a 1:45 victory over our hero in a 6 km free technique race. The older and wiser Corcoran is hopefully. To quote Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber* after the hot chick tells him he's got a one-in-million-shot with her, "So you're saying that I have a chance!!"

The day dawns and it's going to be a warm one - +5C by the end. The ageless Eric Chislett, waxing guru extraordinaire, confirms our hero's waxing choice. On the way to the starting line, Thompson is encountered; she murmurs something about being sick all week. Our hero offers his heartfelt sympathy; something like, "Oh ya, the excuses are starting already."

Out to the start. At the pack weigh in, disaster strikes - the pack is too light. Scrambling around for the next eight minutes, our hero adds a toques and some ski wax to the load to make weight. Unfortunately, precious time has been lost and a preferred spot on the starting grid is out of the question. He lines up about 15 rows deep - about 100 spots behind where he should have.

The gun goes off and our hero quickly gets caught in traffic. For 8 long kms, it's gridlock as our hero valiantly tries to go around the aged, the lame, and the just plain slow who lined up in front of him. By 10 km it gets a bit better, but our hero misses a tight corner and ends up in the trees - at least he's still on his feet.

At 12 km, disaster strikes when some dude falls on a flat part for no apparent reason. Our hero skis right into prone dude and he's down. Fifteen or more people go by as he picks himself up. He's still cursing the falling idiot when skids out of the inside track and performs a highlight reel body check on some older lady skiing beside him. The pair end up in a heap in the willows, hopeless tangled. Being the true gentlemen that he is (or more accurately, because he feels guilty as hell for causing the crash), our hero lets older lady get up before him.

Finally back on his feet after losing another 90 seconds and 20 places, our hero pulls his head out of his posterior region and starts to get

back into the race. He catches Body Check Lady, apologizes profusely, and then proceeds to bury her.

(Note: Upon further reflection, there's a good chance that Body Check Lady was Joan G. - ex-national x-c team member. If you're going to take down a fellow competitor, it might as well be a Legend.)

He's moving well now, catching people and slowly clawing his way towards the front. At 15 km, he's 3 minutes ahead of 4:00 km pace; at 20 km it's 3.5 minutes.

At half way, he's feeling strong, still passing people, but the snow is starting to slow. At 30 km, he's 1.5 minutes up on pace, but by 35 km, he's behind by 1.5 minutes. Time to revise the finishing goal, maybe 3:45 is possible?

The day is heating up and the course is slowing, but our hero soldiers on. At the marathon mark he's just under 2:50 - 3:45 is slipping away, but maybe 3:50 is possible. The good news is that people are still coming back.

At 46 km, two non-pack skiers come buzzing by. Our hero decides to "nut up" and go with them, but that doesn't last - by 48 km they're gone. Fatigue is starting to set in. Still, he's catching folks. One more non-pack guy goes by at 50 km, but that's it. The Parade of the Walking Dead is starting, but our hero refuses to join. Six more people are run down and spat out, including one with a pack, before the end.

At 52 km, our hero has 12 minutes and change to make the 3:50 barrier. He puts his head down and starts gutting it out. Finally, the 400m to go mark is there - he can see the finish. He cruises through the line, wobbles a bit, and looks at the time - 3:48:59 - nice finish!!

So now the question becomes, where is Thompson? Either she's been done for a good amount of time or she's way behind. A few minutes later, all doubt is removed. Thompson shows up - she's broken her own course record with a stellar 3:38 clocking. But all is not well, as she is narrowly defeated for the win. Bottom line - our hero has been CHICKED, but good, by two women. The male ego takes a major bruising.

Post Script (anybody still reading?) - It was an ok day, once our hero got going - he'll grade himself C+ or B- for the day. Allowing five minutes for the traffic at the start and three minutes for basic clumsiness and stupidity, puts him at about 3:40 and change. That's close to Thompson ... or "So you're saying I got a chance!!" Just wait until next year.

Bill Corcoran, Wapiti Nordic Ski Club, Feb. 13, 2005