

## Looking Back

### **The First Australian Birkebeiner** (6<sup>th</sup> September 1979)

Norway's gruelling 56km Birkebeiner tour race is the Lauberhorn of Nordic skiing but most Australians know little about it until March, 1979, when Colleen Bolton scored second place in the women's class. Then on September 16, at Falls Creek, the first Australian Birkebeiner was staged by the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club. The Australian course was only 25km long, but like their overseas counterparts, the local contenders all carried the traditional 5kg pack.



*Lauri Jortikka*

The name "Birkebeiner" originated during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Norway was torn by civil war between two factions, each with a pretender to the crown. The smaller faction, consisting mainly of poor people, was often on the run, its members forced to live out in the open. These people were in such dire need that they wrapped their feet in bark torn off birch trees. Thus they were nicknamed the "Birch-legs".

When their 18-month-old Prince Haakon was pursued by the enemy in January 1206, two of the best skiers among the "Birch-legs" brought the little child in safety over the Lillehammer Mountains. Later, Haakon became king, established peace in the country, and under him Norway enjoyed its heyday.

Now, every year, on the third Sunday in March, Norway commemorates this historical event with the "Birkebeinerrennet" (Birkebeiner race), the 5kg pack carried by contestants representing the weight of Prince Haakon.

Members of the Birkebeiner Club spent an uneasy night on the eve of the first Australian Birkebeiner. The track for the race had taken all Saturday to prepare and the weather prospects were not good. Early on the morning of the race, threatening clouds billowed in, driven by a stiff breeze.

With this threat hanging over their heads, 90-odd participants made their way to the Rocky Valley Dam wall, anxious not only about the weather, but also their ability to race 25km – a distance which to many usually means a full day's tour. Adding to this doubt was the load of a 5kg pack to be carried by young and old. Scales were available before the race to check the weight, but the packs were officially checked at the finish.

The start (*on the east side of the Dam wall*) was ideal, 150 metres wide, and slightly uphill, with about 250m before the tracks converged into a mere two grooves, which were then followed for



*Lauri Jortikka competing in the Finlandia*

most of the course. From that point on, it was a typical tour race scenario.

By the time the tracks converge, competitors are already strung out. But only the stronger skiers manage to hang on to this pace for long. The usual jostling up front for position, and "Snap!" in typical tour race fashion, a stock is broken. Undaunted, this poor unfortunate carries on, looking like the ugly duckling as the point of the broken stock digs into the softening snow and throws him off balance. But, thank heavens, a control point is on the ball when they hear a bellow, heard all over the High Plains, "STOCK!!!!"

The race has settled down by now, the finishing order being more or less established for the first dozen or so.

Aching bodies flog themselves up *Watchbed Creek Road*, paying the penalty for a fast start. Once at the top, It's a beautiful ski across the plains into *Fitzgerald's Hut* where the drink station attendants are caught off guard, having themselves skied in before the race and taken a little longer than anticipated. But they cope very well, and most are grateful for a drink at this stage.



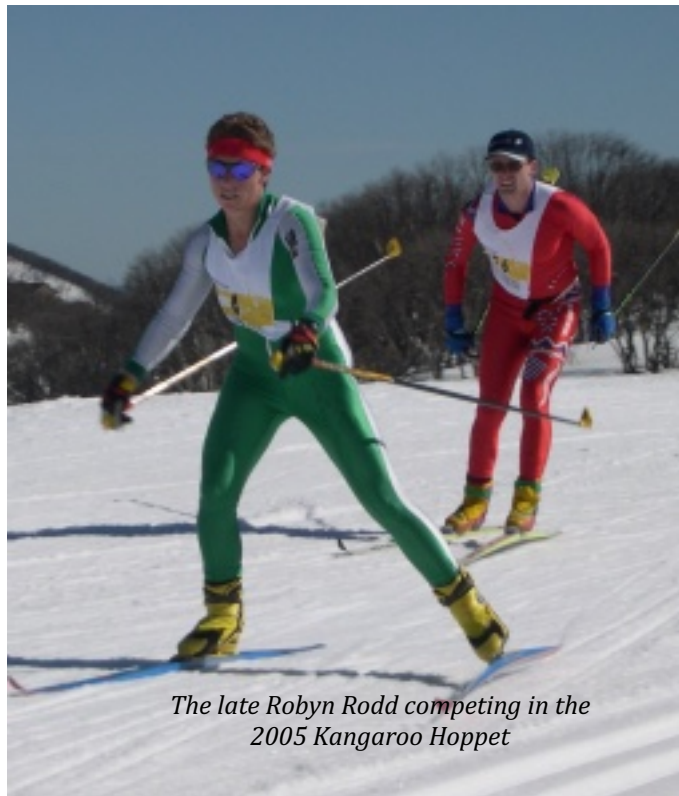
*Robyn Rodd*

With the leaders battling out the places, the minor skirmishes are shaping up back in the field. The men are trying to beat the women. The wax skis out-glide the non-wax, but slip uphill. Packs make their presence felt, and straps break, testing ingenuity with the question of repair – in a hurry. Hasty repairs don't last distance, however, and some stop four times with "pack distress" – a new dimension in tour racing. For others, enjoyment is the object of the trip, and all is well at *Edmondson's Hut*. But then, the climb up *Heathy*

*Spur* begins. By this time, the weather is quite warm and the snow has that porridgy consistency.

At the top of the climb, it's a straight run home, or it usually is. Alas, the track-setters, in order to give everyone their full quota of enjoyment, have snaked the course back to the Dam so that the usual three or four kilometres are lengthened to six or seven. But the weather has improved, making the views towards Feathertop, Fainter etc., superb. The descent to the dam lacks the excitement of an icy day, and most get down without a slip. A cruel finale though, is the climb out of the creek below the dam wall up to the observation point – a steep herring-bone followed by a steep uphill ski, or walk in most cases.

Through the finish line, then a pack weigh-in, and who would have thought anyone would voluntarily carry 6.5kg? Yet there are more



*The late Robyn Rodd competing in the 2005 Kangaroo Hoppet*

than a few over the mark. Much discussion concerns the contents of the pack. Beside the compulsory parka and windproofs, "I've got rocks", "a packet of nuts and bolts, "sand", "a large bottle of water", "dirt". At no other time in the history of the High Plains has so much junk been carried for 25km on skis by so many people.

Victorious is **Lauri Jortikka** (Vic) who virtually led from the gun. 17 places behind is **Robyn Rodd** (Vic), the first woman. A total of 83 skiers finish the course.

The race was a huge success, but not without a considerable number of people unselfishly giving up their time at the various check-points and drink stations. They all skied out to their positions before the race, carrying much more than a 5kg pack in some cases, then skied the remainder of the course, checking to see that no skier came to grief.

The thanks of all competitors go to these people.

***Note:** The 1991 International Kangaroo Hoppet Worldloppet Ski Race originated from this first Australian Birkebeiner.*

Click this link for more history on the race  
<<https://www.birkebeiner.org.au/about/history/>>

*(Article published in the 1980 Australian Ski Year Book)*

— Compiled by Paul L'Huillier —