



Looking Back

by Nordic Ned

1985 High Plains Winter Crossing

Andrew Walker & Phil Rumpff

Editor: This is a follow up article to the short one that appeared in the *June 2016 Birkebeiner Bulletin* about the 1985 High Plains Winter Crossing (not 1987 as previously reported). Andrew Walker and Phil Rumpff share their experience of that crossing.

Andrew — Yes, it was Friday 6th September 1985, the day before the Charlie Derrick Memorial Race, which was after the Australian Birkebeiner. The latter had been brought forward in 1985 to tag onto the end of an International Race Week that included the Australian Championships and other events. Konrad Hallenbarter (SUI), Audun Endestad (USA), Christina Brugger (SUI), Anette Boe (NOR) Tuula Erkkila (FIN) and Pal Gunnar Mikkelplass (NOR) were the strong internationals participating that year.

Audun Endestad had been working on the High Plains Crossing all week, trying different routes from Timms Lookout to Mt Jim, taking advantage of fine weather and a quite good snow cover. Christina was also doing a lot of skiing. They were both staying at Howmans Gap Camp, being fed by Phil Rumpff, and with Keith Jeffcott and Andrew Walker as the Howmans instructors. **Note** — 1985 was the year skating began as the dominant cross-country technique, following developments from the previous northern winter.

I think I had a sick day in bed on the Thursday and the crossing talk got to a climax on Thursday night. Friday was to be the day, as clear skies and firm snow had again been forecast. Phil committed to the Crossing, and I could not pass up a big day out and committed as well, with extra pasta.

Four of us were focussed to do the crossing - Audun, Christina, Phil and myself. I think Keith drove us down to Mountain Creek Campground in his powder blue Valiant, or was it David Jones in his big FWD. Three (Christina, Phil and Andrew) set off in light at 7:00 am, walking and running, from the Mountain Creek Campground. Audun chose to delay for a while, I think, so we could guide him down to T Spur to the Big River crossing. Anyway the delay was inadequate, as Audun passed us up below Bivouac hut, running.

The snow surface was so firm and coarse to the summit ridge, just like a 14mm spray seal on road, secure for walking in runners. Skis on by 9:00 am, although we were skating, the skis actually were classic, no skate specific ski yet available (remember it was 1985 and skating had only started internationally the year before), and glide waxed full length. Terrifyingly fast run across the top and down past Cleve Cole, following Audun's tracks.

Phil — Just beyond Cleve Cole at around the old Maddisons Hut site Audun's ski track took a wrong turn and a detour down the Long Spur along the Alpine Walking Track. From memory this was a fairly substantial detour and from memory we hunted around a bit until we found his return tracks heading in the correct direction down T Spur. The snow must have been softening enough to see his tracks which were unmistakable. Skating tracks like Audun's had probably never been seen on Bogong. I recall following his tracks down the T Spur until I could no longer ski then following his tracks on foot until we reached the snowline. Surprisingly we were still following the markers on the trees and emerged at the Big River Crossing without problems. My recollection is of all crossing together (the river flowing at 1m) and starting up Duane Spur until we reached the snowline below Ropers Hut and started skiing again. However Andrew may be right and possibly it was just Christina and myself. I was close enough

to see Christina ahead most of the way to the back of Mount Bundarra but after Ropers it was essentially every woman/man for themselves.

Andrew — I took runners, now well wetted by Big River, so after changing shoes on Duane Spur as an excuse for resting, I never saw Christina and Phil again. Up Duane Spur, past Ropers Hut and on to Mt Nelse, to have another terrifyingly fast run down Mt Nelse and across to now the Paralyser (Watchbed Creek Track).

Phil — At Warby Corner I passed and had a brief conversation with Jenny Van Der Ploeg but otherwise saw no others except Rene Welsh and Peter Dingle until after Charlie Derrick Hut.

Andrew — At Watchbed Creek, Rene Walsh and Peter Dingle were waiting, providing much needed food for us and even more-needed encouragement to keep going - Phil and Christina were only ten minutes ahead, apparently.

Phil — At Langfords, I noticed Audun's and Christina's tracks had gone over the top of Basalt Hill but for me the strain was beginning to be felt and I took the line of least resistance along the road to Cope Hut. Then back on the pole line to Cope Saddle and around the Cope West aqueduct, crossing at the head of the gully to rejoin the pole line just before Fletchers yards. By this time I was in a bit of trouble with cramping in the quads and was resorting to stuffing snow down the legs of my race suit in a desperate attempt to alleviate the cramps and keep moving. Although I could still see Christina at times until the descent into the Cobungra I was getting slower and slower and beginning to wonder if I was ever going to make it. As Andrew says it probably was beautiful skating on still reasonable snow but I was not feeling much love.



Audun Enderstad (USA Olympian)



Andrew — Still sunny and no wind, with beautiful, but tedious single skating following three sets of skate marks on firm white snow, which I assumed to be made by Audun, Christina and Phil. Across to Mt Jim, crossing an aqueduct on High Plains Creek, and down to Dibbins Hut, the lower bits in runners, more time lost in changing.

Phil — For me it was a big struggle up Swindlers with cramp persisting and a very tired body wanting to stop. I was beginning to get a bit desperate by Charlie Derrick Hut and tried to attract the attention of a couple of hot shot junior skiers (the Evans Bros) as they passed nearby going down the Spur. Unfortunately they could not hear me and I plugged on eventually making it to the Loch carpark.

Andrew — The long haul up Swindlers Spur up to beside Mt Loch was by counting 100 skates to one side and change. I don't recall how bad I felt, but I had to keep going as daylight was starting to fade. Eventually the terrifying Loch Spur downhill before passing by the Charles Derrick Memorial Cairn to the top of Brockhoff tow and at last to the Loch carpark. I was bundled into someone's (Sini Roos – a leader on that week's Howmans Ski Camp) car and whisked away to the General Store where the other three were recovering, although Audun might have been out skiing?

Phil – Of course in 1985 it was pre the widespread use of sports drinks and although we were possibly aware of the need to hydrate it wasn't ingrained like it is today and we certainly weren't carrying accessible water or drinking enough. Thus we were almost certainly skiing dehydrated and underfed for a 55km walk / ski with 3000m of climb and 2000m of descent. With 30 years of hindsight it's reasonable to say that if our bodies were still capable of doing this today we would go about a little differently.

Recorded times:

- Audun — 5hrs 53min
- Christina — 8hrs 17min
- Phil — 8hr 45min
- Andrew — 9hrs 53min

Andrew — After a night in APEA Ski Club, and moving only slowly, the next day I could only watch in awe as Audun and Christina cleaned up in the Charlie Derrick race.

Phil — I went back to Howmans that night and was back at work at 6.30am, also in awe when I heard of Audun and Christina efforts in the 'Charlie. My diary records "no skiing" Saturday or Sunday. "Legs very stiff and sore".

In retrospect, the Crossing was a great day out with people we all enjoyed skiing with, a wonderful venture in perfect conditions with terrific support people. As a sixteen year old living on the Murray, I have only the vaguest recollection from the radio news of Charlie's passing in 1967 on the same venture, hopefully we keep his memory living on in 1985.

Andrew Paul reflects — As a Mt Hotham skier my job was to be the designated 'witness' to meet the skiers at the estimated time at the Loch Car Park. I arrived in the car park just as *Audun* skied up the last hill to post an incredible new record!

Supplying him with food and drink and a seat in my car, I skier off to find *Christina* and offer her a drink & assistance with directions up the last big climb from Swindlers Spur to Hotham as she had not skied that before. She finished in fine style also in a new record (broke Danny Flynn's 1975 record) and establishing the first women's record for the crossing. *Phil* and *Andrew* bravely fought cramps and depletion in the later stages to complete the epic.

All skiers **skated on classic skis** as specific skate skis were not produced before that period of transition to full skating.

Amazingly Audun and Christina raced and won the **Charlie Derrick Memorial Race** the next day.

Note — Interesting to see that the fastest runner record is held by Mount Beauty XC skier Andrew Kromer at 6 hours 41 min.

Editors note: The winter crossing was from the Mountain Creek Campground, up Mt Bogong (1,986m), across the Bogong High Plains to the Mt Hotham Loch Carpark. Skiers had to climb ~2,620m and descend ~1,420m over the ~55km distance.

The previous record was established by *Danny Flynn* (Wangaratta Ski Club member) in 1975 using the classical style at 10hrs 15min. I believe it was the first time a record was created.

Like all records there created to be broken. I hear that some others are keen to 'have a go'.



Christina Brugger (SUI) and Audun Enderstadt (USA)