

## Hög Loppet a tradition for Nordic Skiers

A beautiful journey in the Cascade back-country.

By John Erik Stacy, first printed in the Norwegian American Weekly on March 6, 2009.

In late February, the Leavenworth Winter Sports Club (LWSC) organizes an event that draws hundreds of Nordic skiers up above the tree line in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State. The name of the event is "The Hög Loppet" and it is a mass wandering that joins cross country skiers from the region and beyond to enjoy stunning views, crisp snow and the fellowship of shared spirit. This year, Saturday the 28th of February, nearly 500 participants - including myself - did "The Hog." The fun started with an early morning ascent via chairlift to the top of the Mission Ridge. The lift brought us to an altitude of about 7000 feet. From this vantage point we could see an awe inspiring panorama including the peaks of Mt. Stuart, omnipresent Rainier, the more distant Adams in the South as well as Baker near the Canadian border. This "big-country" view was the starting point of our 20 mile trek West to our end point on Blewett Pass.

The Hög Loppet course follows the line between Chelan and Kittitas Counties along forest service roads. The trails are groomed for cross-country skiing just prior to the event. This year Nordic skiers of all sorts participated, from those on ultra-light gear through to back-country metal-edge mavens. The beginning of the course is characterized by some steep descents, so the skate and performance crew were well advised to get out ahead of the pack to make use of fresh grooming. The rest of us had to deal with a somewhat less pristine surface which helped foster some entertaining face-plants into the soft powder. Although some skiers managed the descents with impressive élan, for the bulk of us, this was the most challenging segment. The course becomes a lot more like "standard" groomed trails after this point.



Chair- lift up (photo John Stacy)



Start of the trail (photo Mike Mahanay)



View point (photo Mike Mahanay)

Hög Loppet trails are normally used by snowmobilers, and volunteers from the motorized community support the event by hauling snacks to aid stations and being on hand for emergencies. The coordination of volunteers and aid stations is an important aspect of the service provided by the LWSC in arranging this event. In addition to "civilian" volunteers - about 60 in all - there are also US Forest Service and local law enforcement on the scene. By keeping people on the trail and providing emergency care if needed, the support crew helps to make this event accessible to a very wide range of participants.

This year the youngest "Hog Lopper" was 10 years and the oldest 75. To me, the Loppet has much of the feel of a weekend ski trip in "Oslo Marka." In Norway, the trails are full of people of all ages and abilities. Also, the aid stations set up with hot chocolate and goodies - although admittedly not quite a Norwegian "stue" like Ullevålseter - is reminiscent of the "hut to hut" skiing that is the norm for Scandinavia. The promise of waffles, hot-chocolate and the chance meeting of friends is part of what gets skiers out into the winter wonderlands in Norway and Sweden. Some of that same magic is at work in the Cascade Hög Loppet as well. The second aid station follows a rather long climb, and arrival brings a sense of accomplishment shared with the other participants. The third aid station at Haney Meadow has a party atmosphere as people tend to linger, eat lunch and visit. And here participants know that most of the rest of the trip is an easy downhill over several miles to the end point in the parking lot off of Hwy 97.

This year was my third Hög Loppet in the same number of years, but the event has been going on for over 20 years. The name of the event is a strong indicator that it was conceived by Scandinavians since the literal translation from Swedish is "The High Run". Originally the direction of the course was the opposite. That would have made the course a much greater aerobic challenge, gaining 3000 feet in altitude, and would presumably have ended by skiing down one of the Mission Ridge Alpine runs - also a challenging task on free-heel skis and tired legs! I do not know when they transitioned to starting at the high point, but I am sure it corresponded to an immediate jump in the popularity of the event.



Snow-plow on a steep bit (photo Chuck Caley)



Family (photo Derek Brown)



US Forest Service at Haney Meadow (photo Derek Brown)

The LWSC became responsible for arranging the event in 2005, making this years the fifth Hög Loppet under their leadership. Their contributions to the event (beside the aforementioned logistic coordination, registration, etc.) include the hiring of shuttle busses that ferry participants from either Leavenworth or Wenatchee in the early morning and then return them from Blewett pass in afternoon. The first to finish this year arrived at the end point at 9:30 AM - meaning a time for the 20 mile course of less than 2.5 hours since the earliest available chair lift is 7:00 AM. The last to finish came in at 4:25 pm. Busses destined for the towns arrived roughly every half hour after noon. Note: the event is not meant to be a race - besides whatever personal satisfaction you may derive, the only reward for coming in first is to wait several hours for a bus.

There are many medium and long distance Nordic skiing events around the USA and Canada. The American Birkebeiner in Wisconsin - named after the Norwegian parent event which again derives from the epic ski rescue of the infant King Håkon Håkonsson in 1206 - is probably the best known. The Hög Loppet is another example of how Scandinavian traditions continue to resonate in America.

To learn more about the Hög Loppet (and other events arranged by the LWSC) visit the club website at <http://www.skileavenworth.com/> and click the "events" link on the navigation bar at the top of the page. Thanks to Hög Loppet organizer Rebecca Darley for providing facts and figures!



The descent toward Blewett (photo Mike Mahanay)



At the end of the course (photo Mike Mahanay)