The origins of the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival: invented traditions, winter sportscapes, and heritage sport tourism in sustainability and the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere

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ABSTRACT

The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival emerged as the world's third Birkebeiner cross-country ski loppet in 1985, emulating the Norwegian Birkebeiner and the American Birkebeiner. This study examines the early years of the Canadian Birkebeiner as a heritage sport tourism event with routes near Edmonton, Alberta, that became an annual festival and attraction in western Canada. Invented tradition, sportscapes, and heritage sport tourism are a conceptual frame to analyse how the Festival represented the Birkebeiner legends, how skiers and skiing constituted landscapes, and how the event contributed to sustainability. The Canadian Birkebeiner resulted in a winter sport festival and sportscape that shaped cross-country skiing, trails, and public lands, and was indicative of fluid social relations and rural place making by means of skiing. Based on archival and oral history sources, the study argues the Canadian Birkebeiner was an invented tradition that originated with a ski loppet instrumental in the negotiation of terrain for cross-country skiing that contributed to winter sportscapes and heritage sport tourism in the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area, and, ultimately, within the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere. It contributes to studies of winter events with local and broader implications for sustainable heritage tourism.

Introduction

The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival was first staged in 1985, inspired by Birkebeiner loppets in Norway and the United States. Named after the legendary Birkebeiner skiers, it commemorates the rescue of infant Haakon Haakonson who later ruled Norway as King. The Canadian Birkebeiner currently takes place about 40 km east of Edmonton, Alberta, a city with a metro population over 1.4 million in western Canada. 'Canada's premier classic-style cross country ski festival' attracts over 1000 skiers with events including a marathon 55 km Birkebeiner with backpacks, a 55 km Birkie Lite, and a 31 km Tour, along with a 13 km Mini Birkie, 8 km Fun Ski, and Ole's Tour for children (Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival [CBSF], n.d.-a). It is held in the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area where 125 km of groomed trails and 60 km of ungroomed trails connect an extensive cross-country ski trail system on more than 9,700 hectares of hilly terrain (Alberta Parks [Blackfoot PRA], 2022; Alberta Parks, 2017). This study investigates the origins of the Canadian Birkebeiner in its early years to identify how the event reinvented tradition and created a sportscape of cross-country skiing and heritage sport tourism.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Nordic skiing attained mass popularity in Canada during the 1970s and had rapidly expanded by the early 1980s. The sport grew from 1.3 million participants in 1976 to 4.6 million in 1979 and estimates of 5 million in 1982-1983, rising from 8 percent to 18 percent of the population, with expectations a quarter of all Canadians would cross-country ski by the mid 1980s (Statistics Canada, cited in Alberta Olympic Secretariat, 1984). Its growth was also evident in tours and loppets – open mass participation ski events – in Quebec and Ontario, such as the Canadian Ski Marathon in 1967 and Gatineau Loppet in 1979, and in the publication of cross-country skiing and trail guides across the country (Macki, 1979; Nordiq Canada, 2019; Rees, 1975). In Alberta, cross-country skiing and ski trails emerged as popular sport trends by 1980, followed by the Birkebeiner as an addition to longstanding winter sport and tourism (Corbett & Rasporich, 1990; Rogers, 1977).

Cross-country skiing is less prominent than alpine skiing in related sport history and tourism literatures, but both sports connected to tourism. Writer Fry (2006) indicates cross-country skiing emerged with significant changes in the 1970s and 1980s era, such as the touristic development of cross-country ski centres in Haywood, Wisconsin, home of the American Birkebeiner started by Tony Wise, and at alpine ski resorts in Vail, Aspen, Mont Tremblant, and Whistler. Although Birkebeiner loppets in Norway and the United States, established in 1932 and 1973 respectively, have been documented, little study of the Canadian event exists (Allen, 2007; Kelly, 1982; Kjærnsli, 1981, 1984; Stevik, 2009). In small mountain communities in Alberta and British Columbia, skiing is enmeshed with implications for capitalist sport development, particularly as the economic shift from resource extraction towards tourism investments advanced in the 1980s (Whitson, 2001). Less understood are cross-country skiing and heritage sport tourism events for rural districts in central Alberta, outside major ski tourism regions. After almost 40 years of operations and land use, the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival warrants more attention. This study of the early Canadian Birkebeiner Festival engages three main theoretical concepts – invented tradition, sportscapes, and heritage sport tourism – to frame the origins of the event.

First, the Canadian Festival with its heroic legends of Norway's Birkebeiner warriors can be situated among the invented traditions of modern winter festivals and iconic northern figures. As historian Hobsbawm (2012) posits, the adoption and repetition of sports, festivals, and spectacles as novel practices 'characterized by reference to the past' can constitute an invented tradition and also collective social identities among specific classes (p. 4). Invented traditions, heroes, and places are topics addressed by extensive interdisciplinary research that 'demonstrates the powerful role sport plays in our understanding of heritage and heritage tourism' (Ramshaw, 2014, p. 192). Performing real and imagined Nordic heritage is part of negotiating cultural understandings of identities and places in historical and contemporary times (Aronsson & Gradèn, 2013).

Since the nineteenth century, winter carnivals and events have emerged in many modern cities according to historians. Abbott (1988) argues the first Quebec Winter Carnivals exoticized and exploited the romantic image of the old city and bon vivant French Canadians as tropes for tourism gain closely tied to the interests of local commerce and middle-class clubs of amateur sportsmen. The marriage 'between finance and folklore' at the inaugural carnival in 1894, modelled after the Montreal Winter Carnival established in 1883, featured a selective representation of cultural essence with exaggeration of appealing elements common in tourism (Abbott, 1988, p. 167). Poulter (2009) interprets Montreal's carnival in the late nineteenth century as a modern invention that functioned to acculturate a performance of winter sports, like snowshoeing and tobogganing, for new Canadian immigrants from Britain, yet also appropriates Indigenous cultural forms remade as modern colonial sporting practices for amateur sportsmen and the iconic rosy-cheeked fair 'Canadian girls' (p. 174). In the United States, Boston Gardens Arena and New York Madison Square Gardens showcased indoor winter sport spectacles of Norwegian, Swedish, and Austrian ski jumpers as well as ski instruction on artificial snow in the mid 1930s, and, in Europe, Vienna and Paris featured winter sport and spectacles that were often conveyed with an alpine ski theme invoking the Swiss Alps for city dwellers as Hofmann reveals (2012). Further, the performance of Norwegian heritage and winter sport in the opening ceremonies of the 1994 Lillehammer Olympic Games was part of an

essence of Norway in a spectacle featuring skiers and ski jumpers as folkloric icons set in faux mythology according to media scholar Puijik (1999).

Winter festivals of various kinds have produced and performed selective representations of the North and winter sport, particularly embodied as an exotic Other within invented traditions. The legendary Birkebeiner skier, so named for his birch bark leggings, was a Norwegian figure reprised as iconic in the twentieth-century heritage sport events of three countries. All three loppets venerate Birkebeiner warriors Torstein Skjevla and Skjervald Skrukka. Amidst civil war in 1206, they carried baby prince Haakon Haakonson to safety by skiing over the mountains and secured the future King who later united Norway in peace. Mythologized as the Birkebeiners' fastest and strongest skiers, their courage and determination was legendary and fed a national myth and performance of Nordic heritage skiing traverses for each loppet (Birken, n.d.; CBSF, n.d.-b; Gaup, 2016).

Second, the Canadian Birkebeiner can also be conceived as a sporting landscape according to sociologist Bale's (1994) concept of sportscapes. He suggests the close affinity of sport practitioners and spectators for stadia, parks, and forests makes spaces into meaningful places as landscapes of sport – sportscapes. Sportscapes are constituted as environments by the dialectical social engagement of humans and the land as a physical geography. Further, they mutually constitute activities of physical culture such as skiers gliding downhill with gravity. Topophilia derives from appreciation of sportscapes, often through an aesthetic and embodied sense of movement such as cross-country skiing in the woods, or visual art, literature, and other media representations. Affinity for such sportscapes can produce a sense of home for athletes and sports aficionados in places such as stadia or race courses (Bale, 1994). The sportscapes of Nordic skiing can be trails, forests, and amenities, also extended by design and engineering on the land such as a trail system. Annual loppets and cross-country ski trails arising from the Birkebeiner took shape as sportscapes in rural areas near Edmonton.

They also took place in specific areas of central Alberta – districts that played a particular role in cross-country skiing and nature-based tourism – near contemporary Edmonton. The North Saskatchewan River has steep banks and runs near the sand hills of the Devon Dune Field, and the Beaver Hills are a distinct knob-and-kettle glacial moraine. Both were reshaped as cultural landscapes for recreation on settlement lands that were long occupied by Indigenous Peoples, including the Nakota (Blackfoot), Nehiyaw (Cree), Métis, and others, dwelling in the region for subsistence and traversing historic trails on migration. From early colonial settlement in the 1880s, followed by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway and later roads, locals and tourists came to swim and boat, fish and hunt, visit small resorts and dance halls, and recreate west and east of Edmonton by the early 1900s (Bell, 2021; MacDonald, 2009).

Third, the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival can be theoretically framed as a heritage sport event and tourism. The idea of heritage sport is a useful concept that goes beyond nostalgia, the simple desire for an imagined past, by framing the remaking of the past for the present moment and here, it also differs from history. Sport tourism scholars Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) differentiate between heritage and history, underscoring that heritage celebrates, rather than studies or investigates the past: 'Like other forms of heritage, sport heritage seeks not to critique but to celebrate; it seeks not to deliberate but to venerate' (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005, p. 233). In this way, heritage can be allied with tourism, for example in celebratory sporting events and festivals, and mobilize cultural lore and mythologies as a mutable and imagined past. Heritage sport events attractive to tourism include the Arctic Winter Games and the Canadian Football League, as tourism scholars Hinch and Ramshaw (2014) conceptualize. Drawing on historian David Lowenthal, they emphasize heritage is a use of the past for present day purposes (Hinch & Ramshaw, 2014). In the case of collective sport events, sport can offer a heritage identity co-created by participants and organizers: 'Rules, traditions and records are important aspects in the formation of a sport's culture, and mythologies about particular sports highlight past events and athletes' (Hinch & Ramshaw, 2014, p. 238). Heritage sport is also produced in the interactions of participants and place so that 'Sport can provide a window into the essential character of a place' (Hinch & Ramshaw, 2014,

p. 238). Ramshaw (2014) also identifies 'The fact that sport heritage often does not fossilize, that it must continue to be made and remade through play and performance, is perhaps what gives it a distinctive place in the heritage and heritage tourism landscape' (p. 194).

This inquiry assesses the origins of the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival, modelled after the Norwegian Birkebeiner and the American Birkebeiner, and how it invented traditions of heritage sport that produced winter sportscapes and heritage sport tourism. Oral history and archival sources are combined to document and examine the Festival in its early years from 1985 to the mid 1990s. The festival founder shared his memories, stories, and records, and together with records of the Canadian Birkebeiner Society (CBS), government, and media, these primary sources are the basis of a narrative and analysis framed by the three main concepts. By the 1990s, the Canadian Birkebeiner was Canada's largest classic style cross-country ski loppet. How did it emerge as a cultural practice that promoted popular loppet skiing and tourism in Alberta? Understanding its place and early success integrating heritage sport tourism can reveal the past and inform current insights.

The study argues the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival was an invented tradition that originated with a loppet instrumental in the negotiation of terrain for cross-country skiing and the event contributed to winter sportscapes and heritage sport tourism in the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area, ultimately encompassed within the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere. The Festival was characterized by complexity as a performance of heritage sport and had staying power as a community-driven heritage tourism event and nature-based land use. It offers evidence of sporting landscapes and heritage sport tourism that reimagined and celebrated cross-country skiing as cultural identity through a winter festival. The Canadian Birkebeiner had outcomes for skiing in parklands made evident in community development and winter heritage tourism as investments in benefits and sustainability for locals and tourists. In this regard, its impacts were both local and regional, with broader implications for Nordic skiing and heritage sport tourism.

Origins of the Birkebeiner and reinvention of tradition

The heritage component of the Norwegian loppet and Birkebeiner legend was foundational to the origins of the new event in Alberta. Nordic skiing heritage was made and remade in performance of sport and legend. Inventing the early Canadian Birkebeiner was an all-consuming passion for Brian Peters, the festival's founder and first president of the Canadian Birkebeiner Society, supported by volunteers and local communities.[1]

Peters was a ski instructor, and executive director of the provincial sport organization Cross-Country Alberta from 1985 to 1995. Born in 1951 at Red Deer, he grew up in a fourth-generation Alberta family of Scottish and German ancestry at the Peters Ranch east of Delburne. His father raced chuckwagons in Alberta rodeos including the famous Calgary Stampede, and Brian was an athlete in high school sports and an avid runner – sometimes running to round up cattle on the ranch rather than riding a horse. After a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Alberta, Peters worked in various roles and freelanced as a writer and columnist for *The Edmonton Sun* and *The Edmonton Journal* newspapers – often featuring stories on skiing, sport, and tourism in Alberta (personal communication, January 16, 2011).

The Edmonton Journal was the city's largest daily newspaper and a major sponsor of the Learn-to-Ski Program operated by the City of Edmonton at Riverside Park in the early 1980s. This public program was held in the North Saskatchewan River Valley and believed to be the largest cross-country ski school in Canada at the time, according to Brian Peters who was hired as a ski instructor by Ole Hovind, the manager. In his seventies, Hovind was esteemed as an early member of the Edmonton Ski Club founded in 1911 and a founder of the Edmonton Nordic Ski Club established in 1978; he had immigrated from Rjukan, Norway, and his Italian grandfather Guiseppe Carpanini had been a stone sculptor at Vigeland Park in Oslo. Hovind and his staff were certified by the Canadian Association of Nordic Ski Instructors (CANSI). Peters taught on evenings and weekends, and

he also married Karen Hovind, Ole's granddaughter. As skiers, they joined Ole's longstanding annual Easter ski trips to Skoki Lodge located in the Rocky Mountains of Banff National Park.

Peters skied both the American Birkebeiner and the Norwegian Birkebeiner in the 1980s. He first learned of the American Birkebeiner in Hayward, Wisconsin, watching a Warren Miller ski adventure movie screened at Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium. Amazed by seeing thousands of skiers in the mass event, he went to the United States to ski the loppet in 1982, and again in 1986. His cousin Rod Peters worked in the Wisconsin outdoor tourism industry for entrepreneur Tony Wise who founded the American Birkebeiner in 1973. In 1983, after racing the Swiss Engadine Ski Marathon, Peters competed in the Norwegian Birkebeiner. His Edmonton ski friends – Kristian Nyhus, Bill and Ken Burgess, Les Finch, and Ole Hovind – joined the trip to Norway and the first three skied the Birkebeiner with him. Hovind also went with friends to visit the Holmenkollen Ski Festival in Oslo (B. Peters, pers. comm, January 16, 2011).

Impressed by the Birkebeiner loppets in Norway and the United States, Peters promoted the idea of holding a similar event in Alberta. He saw potential for a point-to-point ski marathon from the town of Devon to the city of Edmonton. Presenting slideshow talks of his international loppet trips, he promoted the concept among friends, skiers, runners, outdoor enthusiasts, cultural clubs, and business groups in the local Edmonton community but found it 'wasn't an easy sell' (B. Peters, pers. comm, January 9, 2011). His marathon proposal was discouraged by the City of Edmonton's River Valley Parks manager and the Edmonton Nordic Ski Club board members; they supported an existing multi-loop loppet held at a city park and co-sponsored by *The Edmonton Journal*. Mentor Ole Hovind insisted that a Birkebeiner must be in Norway and go over two mountains. Initially one member of the Sons of Norway club said he would sue Peters if the name Birkebeiner was appropriated for use by a local event, although the ethnic social club later supported the loppet. Peters recalled 'I was a total outsider to the cross-country ski community and there was this unwritten rule that track skiing was the domain of the local Scandinavian community' (pers. comm, January 9, 2011).

The tide turned with support from Les Finch, a fellow Riverside ski instructor and Canadian war veteran of the D-Day landings, who told Peters, 'we *damn* well need a Birkebeiner like Norway so I'll help you,' and Kaare Askildt, a marathon runner, training pal, and stalwart volunteer who was an immigrant from Bø, Norway (B. Peters, pers. comm, January 9, 2011). Jeanette Kary, Doug Kelker, Doug Russell, Neil Warner, and Peter Fisher offered to help, along with various Riverside ski instructors, and skiers in the Edmonton Nordic and Parkland Nordic clubs. The Canadian Birkebeiner Society was established by a core group that formed a volunteer board meeting at Peters' home in fall 1984, later formalized under the *Alberta Societies Act*, and patented under copyright law. Peters served as its president five times between 1985 and 1995, and organized the first loppet in 1985. A dozen early board members included men and women in about equal numbers: Mary Marie Christensen, Faye Douglas-Phillips, Kathleen McFarland, Elaine Meighen, Bev Pakan, Hugh Phillips, David Shields, Gaynor Steadsman, John Toonen, Joan Walker, Larry Wall, and John Western (B. Peters, pers. comm, March 19, 2011).

The purpose of the Society was 'to organize and stage a 55 kilometer citizen's ski race in the greater Edmonton area, on an annual basis, to take place in the first week of February each year' (Canadian Birkebeiner Association [CBA], n.d., p. 2). Its aims also included objectives to promote cooperation between various 'local and regional ski clubs' as well as to emphasize 'cooperation with other groups such as snowmobilers, dogsledders, etc., in order to share trails and minimize conflicts' (CBA, n.d., p. 2). It saw increased public awareness of cross country skiing and more winter recreation alternatives as desired outcomes of holding the annual Birkebeiner event.

The international Birkebeiner loppets and the ski legend were models for staging the new event. The CBS introduced and reinvented these traditions in its prospectus for the first event near Edmonton in 1985:

> The original Birkebeiner is a Norwegian ski race (or loppet) which runs from the City of Lillehammer over two mountains, to the sister City of Rena, near the Swedish border. It commemorates a ski trek made in the year 1215 A.D., when Viking soldiers rescued an infant king and carried him over today's same route. The term 'Birkebeiner' refers to the birch coverings the soldiers wore on their legs. Our Canadian Birkebeiner will cover the same distance, and albeit not traversing two mountains, will feature a vigorous undulating course in and out of the North Saskatchewan River valley. Several of the organizers of the Canadian Birkebeiner have participated or attended the Norwegian event, as well as the American Birkebeiner, both of which have over 8,000 entrants (CBA, n.d., p. 2).

It further emphasized the event 'shall draw on the tradition and experiences of both the Norwegian and American Birkebeiners, increasing the likelihood of success' (CBA, n.d., p. 6). Other 'special features' described a potential winter festival proposed by City of Edmonton to be held in conjunction with the Birkebeiner at Fort Edmonton Historical Park, and 'multicultural aspects' of the event to include 'flags of all Nordic and European alpine countries' as well as 'ethnic food booths' and 'winter sport displays' to be invited from local groups. The Society also aimed high as a new tourism attraction: 'Due to the unique challenge aspect of the Birkebeiner, its support by various winter sports organizations and the increasing popularity of cross country skiing, the Canadian Birkebeiner appears distined (sic) to become a celebration of regional and national importance' (CBA, n.d., p. 6).

The Norwegian Birkebeiner set the tradition for a point-to-point 55 km loppet with a pack representing the rescue of Haakon Haakonson, and the American one was taken as a logistical model for the new loppet. The Canadian Birkebeiner was intentionally named after the Norwegian event. Peters wrote to Norwegian Birkebeiner executives to request permission before naming the Canadian Birkebeiner. In a handwritten letter, Karl Snilsberg responded from Lillehammer to grant permission on behalf of the Norwegian Birkebeiner Race. 'It is a great pleasure to inform you that you have our full support and permission to use the name 'Birkebeiner' in your race. We all hope you will have a big success and we wish you all the best' (Snilsberg, 1984). Securing the name branded the new loppet in conjunction with the Norwegian legend and the two international loppets. Sun Life Assurance agreed to sponsor the event for the first five years as part of its support for cross-country ski races and instruction across Canada. According to Peters, corporate sponsorship made it viable to proceed and expand the new Canadian Birkebeiner in subsequent years. 'There was nothing else like it in western Canada,' commented Brian Peters (pers. comm, January 14, 2011).

Stories and images of the Birkebeiners were mobilized with dramatization, costume, and song – as well as drinking parties for Birkie 'spirit' – to represent and celebrate the Norwegian heritage of the new Canadian loppet. The early Birkebeiner logos were drawings of Vikings; later festival logos reproduced images of Norwegian artist Knud Bergslien's iconic *Skiing Birchlegs Crossing the Mountain with the Royal Child*, painted in 1868, from The Ski Museum at Holmenkollen (Bergslien, 1868; Canadian Birkebeiner Society [CBS], 1995). Connections to the royal baby were further underscored by the Haakon Haakonson Award, conceived by Brian Peters and introduced by the CBS in 1991 for skiers completing all three of the world's Birkebeiner loppets (CBSF, n.d.-c). Not only did it reference Norway's royalty and the Birkebeiner legend, the award was a new tradition and means to connect the heritage sport events. Norwegian Consul Roar Tungland offered greetings that elided traditions at the tenth anniversary of the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival: 'This cross country ski race started in Norway in 1932 as an annual event and it is with pride we see this tradition adopted as a successful event in Edmonton' (Tungland, 1995).

Cross-country skiing was an elliptical performance of Norwegian cultural practices and legend recast in the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival. The legend of the Birkebeiner was told and retold over time to celebrate the Norwegian heritage event simulated by the Canadian loppet, both invented traditions in the realm of heritage sport. The annual festival became an invented tradition with its own rites, rules, and lore passed forward through cultural reproduction premised on skiing and heritage commemoration.

Sportscapes of the Canadian Birkebeiner

The Canadian Birkebeiner can be conceptualized according to Bale's idea of a sportscape as a place where sport gives meaning and sensation to space. The event did not go over two mountains as did the Norwegian Birkebeinerrennet, a 54 km traverse from Rena to Lillehammer, nonetheless it is often forgotten that the new loppet was staged in two distinct places. The first was west of Edmonton near the Devon Dune Fields and along the North Saskatchewan River, and the second was east of the city in the boreal forest and bogs of the Beaver Hills. Each sportscape involved complex logistics of social relations and support for the loppet as well as its topography and weather characteristics. Together these characteristics shaped the Canadian Birkebeiner geography in its first decade.

Canada's first Birkebeiner started on Saturday, February 9, 1985, with a 55 km loppet. Chief of Start Les Finch – who had watched the Norwegian Birkebeiner – used his thumb to warm the official mercury thermometer to −25C, although it was at least −33 to −34C (B. Peters, pers. comm, January 14, 2011). 'If he hadn't done that we probably would have given the money back to Sun Life and there wouldn't have been more Birkebeiners', Peters commented. 'In terms of the event that day, it was singularly the most important thing to continuing the event' (B. Peters, pers. comm, January 14, 2011). The race doctor judged it was safe to proceed as there was no wind. Canadian Ski Association (CSA) Cross-Country rules stipulated a cut off at −24C, but the first Birkebeiner was skied at 10 degrees below the acceptable standard. Skiers were advised that they would be taken off the course if organizers judged them to be endangered by the cold.

A 55 km course was shortened to 42 km due to the cold and a mass start at 9:00 am was delayed until 10:00 am. It included 128 men and women registered in three age categories as 'citizen racers,' and in two age categories as 'elite racers' – defined by holding a racing card. The entry fee was $20 (Peters, 1985). Birkebeiner loppetters included a diverse group of skiers, recreationists, racers, and part of the local running community, as well as a citizen skier who had given birth only six weeks earlier. Although Walter Scott – father of latter-day Olympian Becky Scott – was one of the few out-of-town racers who registered, the Alberta cross-country ski racing community was not quick to turn out to an unknown event in its first year.

The Chasquis Running Club ran the Birkebeiner timing in exchange for reciprocal help at its Banff-Jasper summer marathon. The first skiers across the Birkebeiner finish line were Peter Piercy and Pam Bryan who placed top male and female respectively. As the Chief of Race, Brian Peters was up at 4:00 am and skied the entire course as the Sweep 'leading from behind' as the final skier passed the finish line with 127 registrants finishing out of 128, and one withdrawal. As Peters recalled, 'I knew everybody. I knew just about every single person' (pers. comm, January 14, 2011).

The success of the first Festival was attributed in part to the skills and experience of volunteers, particularly medical staff, recruited from the Shell Cup Canadian Cross-Country Ski Championships held in Edmonton in 1982. Peters had served as a volunteer and controller on that course, and later recruited from these volunteers. Many organized recreation and sports clubs, along with informal groups of friends, operated feeding stations along the course.

Volunteers performing the role of legendary Birkebeiners dramatized the Norseman as an epic masculine hero and an exotic Other. Clad in helmets and furs, Bob Townsend, owner of High Country ski shop in Edmonton, and Verner Steinbru of the Torskeklubben, dressed as sword-bearing bearded Birkebeiner warriors on skis. Steinbru reprised it as a lifelong role that further venerated the image and ritualized play acting. Serious Birkebeiners skied 55 km with 12-pound packs representing baby Haakon while other skiers invented playful traditions of backpacking a doll or teddy bear. Reinventing the personification of the Birkebeiner legend, the first skier to carry a real baby on the 55 km Canadian Birkebeiner was outdoor educator Glenda Hanna with her 22-month-old son Pearce, on February 8, 1997. Members of the Edmonton Nordic Ski Club, she placed first in her age category every year and later became the Festival director; he later did Birkebeiner events as a teenager and skied biathlon on the Alberta provincial development team (Bryant, 2013; CBS, 1985a; CBSF, n.d.-d; Smith, 2013). 'This whole winter tradition of having fun … that was how

we did it,' Peters recalled, connecting Ole Hovind's ski touring trips and parties at Skoki Lodge with friends, some of whom assisted the early Canadian Birkebeiner (pers. comm, January 14, 2011).

After the loppet, skiers and volunteers attended a 'Viking Feast' banquet with an awards ceremony in Edmonton at the Yellowhead Inn in 1985. The fastest, slowest, and oldest skiers, and various others, were recognized for participation in keeping with the loppet's philosophy. A trophy was donated by the Sons of Norway and presented by University of Alberta professor Ken Dormier, a backer of Scandinavian studies. The Ole Hovind Award was instituted to recognize the Birkebeiner 'spirit' (pers. comm, January 14, 2011). Feasting and awards celebrated the Birkebeiners, past and present, and subsequently became loppet rituals.

Local newspaper coverage catapulted the first Canadian Birkebeiner into the spotlight. 'We were 128 skiers – pretty marginal – until we were on front page of *The Edmonton Journal* the next day,' Brian Peters recalled (pers. comm, January 14, 2011). News stories describing the extreme cold of the first Canadian Birkebeiner endowed its legendary status with a narrative of heroic skiers battling winter to survive to the finish line (Lees, 1985).[2] Legends of the heroic Norwegian Birkebeiner warriors were summoned by reporters, alongside national myths of Canada's frozen north and the Chilkoot Trail to the Yukon Klondike gold rush, in the public telling and retelling of a story about winter sport in Edmonton; meanwhile, Peters delighted in the safe transit of the skiers supported by a dedicated team of caring volunteers. An epic winter survival tale was a journalistic narrative that selectively represented, with exaggeration and masculinist bravado, the challenge and adventure of a freezing endurance race against the elements.

By contrast, organizers emphasized it was a loppet not a race, as sport for all encompassed skiers at various levels of performance from citizen skier to competitive racer. Citizen skiers including men, women, and children formed the mass numbers to support the loppet. Since 1985, teacher Phil Dunn of Onoway skied every Canadian Birkebeiner; he later wore the official 'red bib' created to recognize these veterans and ever after ritualized as Birkebeiner tradition. Dunn began to bring his students from Onoway Elementary School to the event and they went on to win a group participation award for the most kilometers skied by a school group. One of them, Amanda Ammar, was granted special permission to race 55 km when she was nine years old; she later joined the Canadian national ski team at the Winter Olympic Games at Torino in 2006 and Sochi in 2014. Becky Scott also competed as a child in shorter Birkebeiner events with her father, and was later the first-ever Canadian and first female North American Olympic gold medalist in cross-country skiing. A Sons of Norway club member Gary Johnson introduced Ski for Light, a Norwegian program for visually-impaired skiers, to the Canadian Birkebeiner about 1990. Later, Calgary's Brian McKeever won the Birkebeiner on more than one occasion while racing with his brother, and, in 2010, became the first-ever legally blind winter sport athlete selected for the Olympics and Paralympics (Canadian Olympic Committee, n.d.-a; COC, n.d.-b; Dunn, 2018; CBS, 1995c; B. Peters, pers. comms, January 14, 2011).

Along with sport, a festival spirit prevailed at the early Canadian Birkebeiners. Bon vivant media personalities Nick Lees and J. Yardley Jones, on *The Edmonton Journal* staff, played up a comedic party atmosphere, which Lees wrote about as a newspaper columnist and Jones caricatured in cartoons. 'We had exceptional media – with coverage in *The Edmonton Journal* at the same time that Wayne Gretzky was winning with the Oilers, and we often outgunned the NHL hockey team in terms of media coverage – and that was a contributing factor to the whole culture of the Canadian Birkebeiner,' recounted Peters (pers. comms, January 14, 2011). All participants were encouraged to try the loppet, further promoted in reporting and front-page cartoons of skiers in hilarious scenes. Jones was later commissioned by the Birkebeiner Society to produce limited-edition water-colour paintings as an annual race memento; many were landscapes depicting loppetters skiing in winter light and nature scenes of the Beaver Hills. The Birkebeiner was intended and later expanded as a festival of sport, culture, and social events in Edmonton and nearby Sherwood Park, running several days with a Saturday loppet (B. Peters, pers. comms January 14, 2011). In 1996, a Birkebeiner 'Adventure Series,' featuring a talk by polar skier Richard Weber, was staged at the Provincial

Museum of Alberta. The Society also registered its trademark name the same year (CBS, 1996a). A Sunday race was ruled out to respect Sabbatarians among some local Scandinavians according to Peters (pers. comms, January 14, 2011). In space, time, and various media, the Birkebeiner landscape took form.

Before track-set ski trails were common near Edmonton, a point-to-point trail was fundamental to conceptualizing the Canadian Birkebeiner. Trackset public trails for skiing near Edmonton were still nascent, aside from the Devon Ski Club and the lower Riverside-Gold Bar-Rundle Park area in Edmonton. The original route of the loppet traversed through rural districts from Westridge Lodge near the town of Devon to Fort Edmonton Park within the city of Edmonton. It passed through or near Rabbit Hill Ski Club, the Alberta Solicitor General Staff Training College, and several golf courses that all cooperated. Access through private land was negotiated with about 53 land owners by Peters, often assisted and accompanied by Karen Hovind, whom he credits as a great support behind the loppet: 'We had whiskey with some of them, tea and cookies, soup. We would sit down with them as strangers. No one said 'no.'' Some land holders had three quarters, others acreages, and the course even went through some front yards where owners took down gates to permit track setters and skiers to pass. 'You have to understand we got permission from [elite businessmen] Dr. Allard, Peter Pocklington, Tim Melton, Ed and Jerry Prodor, and the Ghermezians, all kinds of land owners, and the use of Fort Edmonton for something nobody knew. That's how lucky we were … it was trustier times then.' (Peters, pers. comms, January 14, 2011). Included were owners of a TV station, the Edmonton Oilers, development companies, and West Edmonton Mall.

Threading a trail of land use permissions on trust and goodwill was critical to the success of the venture, especially when few Edmontonians outside the Norwegian ethnic community had heard of Birkebeiner loppets. It was an exceptional achievement. Early routes of the Birkebeiner loppet were landscapes of sport indicative of fluid social relations as well as the making of invented tradition and heritage sport (Bale, 1994).

The original course was a route along the North Saskatchewan River with several parts trackset on river ice or crossing the frozen river. In 1985, the course crossed from Big Island to the Windermere Golf Course and 'we went from Terwillegar across the river to the Edmonton Golf and Country Club. Yes, past open stretches of water,' Peters recounted (pers. comms, January 14, 2011). When asked to remember the river crossings, he stopped talking to visualize the course and recalled many details, including a spot where the groomers had gone off track over a drainage cover near the river where the course went along the river's edge and back up again. Although it was not unusual for local Nordic skiers to ski on the river ice, travel on the ice and crossing the river later became a contentious issue with Cross-Country Alberta Technical Delegates present from Calgary who objected to this aspect of the loppet course. Peters reflected 'We had more understanding of the risk than people coming from another place,' and explained the ice was safety-tested with core samples augered from the river. He had produced the technical package for Canadian Ski Association-Cross Country, and the risk management and insurance for the CSA Cross-Country division. 'The Stairway to Hell' was another memorable section of the course where a steep hill climbed through aspen woods to a vista looking back to the North Saskatchewan River; volunteers posted a handwritten sign to name the hill and played 'Stairway to Heaven' to amuse skiers. Peters believed part of the course he had laid out was an old pioneer coal miners' trail (pers. comms January 14, 2011).

On February 8, 1986, 170 skiers registered for the second Birkebeiner loppet held from Devon to Fort Edmonton Park on a fine sunny winter day with good snow conditions. 'Each year there were always improvements,' indicated Peters. The racing crowd turned out to register for the second loppet because the event had established a reputation for being fun and challenging. A contingent of Calgary skiers travelled to the event. Ski skating was permitted on a trial basis, although it was not yet common, and was later discontinued when the loppet required a parallel classic stride. Registration and timing were handled by volunteer Ron Nichols, a Fort Edmonton manager. Sun Life

Assurance continued as the major sponsor and sent a team of staff as volunteers to run a loppet feeding station. Better signage, snow fencing, and a bus to transport skiers to a new start line in Devon were introduced (B. Peters, pers. comms, January 14, 2011).

The 1986 Birkebeiner had a difficult beginning, as the starting line had to be moved on the Tuesday before the loppet for the event on Saturday, February 8 (CBS, ca. 1985–1986a). The original start of the course was to be Westridge Park Lodge but poor snow coverage required a move to the Devon Golf Course days before the race (CBS, ca. 1985–1986b). This move in the second year of the event was a portend of future weather impacts.

A volunteer support chain was essential to the loppet and a key logistical aspect of the sportscape. Many groups and sport clubs were engaged to support the event, including the Edmonton Snowmobile Club that transported equipment to a few trail sites along the river that could not be reached by road. Other clubs supporting feed stations included the Edmonton Rowing Club, Edmonton Bicycle Touring Club, Junior Forest Rangers, Waskehegan Trail Association, and Devon Nordic Ski Club. First aid and ski patrols were also engaged to volunteer along the way. Staffing the 55 km course was an enormous coordinated volunteer effort supported by diverse sport and outdoor communities, alternated to keep up enthusiasm. Such collaboration followed through on the event's initial intent to work together. Volunteer hours were also invested in trail work throughout the off season to improve the route between Devon and Edmonton for skiing, led by new board members Cathy Schreiner and John Rintoul (B. Peters, pers. comms, January 14, 2011; CBA, ca., 1985–1986c). Clubs were typically made up of urban middle-class professionals with a sizeable cohort of university professors, public servants, educators, business, and media personalities in leadership roles.

'The slush year' led to cancellation of the Birkebeiner in 1987, and unseasonably mild weather was problematic again in 1988. The Birkebeiner was affected by above zero temperatures and melting snow in February near Edmonton, much as the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary were in southern Alberta a week later. 'We got hit by global warming,' observed Peters who recalled that 'prior to 1980, there was no such thing as a non-snow year.' Melting snow conditions and river ice breaking up west of Edmonton prompted Birkebeiner board members to make a significant change only one week prior to the event: the entire loppet course was relocated east of Edmonton to a slightly higher elevation with better snow conditions at the Blackfoot PRA. A new course was routed through hummocky aspen forest and knob-and-kettle ponds, starting and ending on public lands. Volunteers worked fast to prepare trails and track set grooming; Peters prepared some sections with an axe during the dark early morning hours as he chopped straggling vegetation from the tracks. After howling winds overnight, race day dawned with a sudden change of weather as temperatures plummeted to −25 or −30C. It was a game changer. A new course combined with severe wind chill and open winds while crossing Islet Lake, led to the medical evacuation of many skiers (B. Peters, pers. comms, January 14, 2011). The new location proved a valuable test run.

After 1988, the event grew in numbers and weather continued to be an ongoing logistical factor. Snow loss on the Devon route only two weeks before the 1989 Canadian Birkebeiner led the loppet to return to the Blackfoot PRA, routed from Blackfoot Staging Area to Waskahegan Staging Area. These provincial public lands became the 'permanent home' for the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival in 1990. The same year 500 skiers began the course at Blackfoot Staging Area road and ended in the Washkahegan 'stadium' on February 10, 1990, moreover a Learn to Loppet program and lessons were incorporated to encourage instruction and greater participation. In 1991, the course was a return loop from Waskahegan to Islet Lake on an extremely icy February 1 (CBSF, n.d.-d).

In 1992, the Birkebeiner loppet began on February 8 with more than a thousand skiers on a new starting line at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, an Alberta provincial historic site, and went south to the Blackfoot PRA. The Mini Birkie 14 km and Journal Tour 33 km were introduced as new events with shorter distances to include more skiers, and the Norwegian Torskeklubben emerged as a major event sponsor. Due to melting snow in 1993, the mass start on Goose Lake was moved from

the Village site and began from Blackfoot Staging Area. The next loppet drew 1,484 skiers and started from the Village to Waskahegan on February 12, 1994. A decade of Birkebeiner loppets was celebrated as the 'Ski the Legend 10th Anniversary' on a −22 Celsius day in 1995. The loppet drew 1,919 skiers and started from the Village to Waskahegan; it also hosted the National 'Ski for Light' event for visually impaired skiers. Registrations surpassed 2,000 skiers for the first time in February 1996, however, a specialized Pisten Bully grooming machine seized up two days before the event, which led to track setting with an Excel machine on loan from the City of Edmonton and affected the loppet route (CBSF, n.d.-d). Cross-country ski traverses came with nature's agency as weather and terrain combined with human performance and landscapes in the Canadian Birkebeiner. Route variations were indicative of weather and emergent systems for trail grooming and event staging in a changing sportscape.

Collaboration was evident in Canadian Birkebeiner Society volunteer efforts to build trail system facilities and promote conservation on public land once Blackfoot PRA became the event's official home. In the off season, CBS volunteers devoted 14 weekends of labour to build the Meadow Shelter and storage shed, as grant-funded facilities completed in October 1991, and a grant was received the following year to run power to the Waskahegan Staging Area for the Birkebeiner stadium. Two Alpine II snowmobiles were purchased by the Society for grooming in 1994 and CBS volunteers constructed the Elk Push shelter in 1995. The Society later obtained an Alberta provincial grant to help purchase a new SkiDoo Scandic snowmobile in 2012 and continued to contribute to trail work (CBSF, n.d.-d; CBS, 1996a). These initiatives contributed directly to building an extensive sportscape of trails, warming huts, and snow grooming as well as a finish line stadium – a temporary installation with large tents and trailers at Waskahegan – in the Blackfoot PRA. Making the most of resources, they built capacity and fostered sustainability in community partnership and collaboration with the Province and Alberta Park staff.

Various conservation stewardship initiatives were implemented by the Canadian Birkebeiner as part of its larger geography. For example, in 1991–1994, the Birkebeiner event partnered with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) in a charity pledge drive to support conservation of wild lands. The Birkebeiner featured a 'Wild' campaign bumper sticker and cross-marketed with CPAWS, which led work to market the event and find sponsors. The two organizations and event participants shared conservation values for land and wildlife as they raised money for the World Wildlife Fund and Endangered Spaces Campaign that aimed to complete Alberta's protected areas system. 'Help Canada's Environment as You Ski the Birkebeiner!' headlined the Birkebeiner program in 1991 (CBS, 1991a, p. 1; CBS, 1991b). More collaboration saw the Alberta Environmental Protection staff enter and win an award in the loppet's public service entry category with a 14 member ski team in 1993, also involving 'many additional staff' and their families as race organizers, safety patrols, and spectators (Abbott, 1993).

Collaborative alignment between skiers, non-government organizations, and the Government of Alberta towards shared objectives merged in public access to a sportscape and winter sport tourism event. Together these efforts augmented sustainability for the event, recreation, and the environment. Higher elevation and greater snow retention were assets in the region east of Edmonton that benefitted the Canadian Birkebeiner loppet. Participation rose to thousands of skiers and hundreds of volunteers each year. The rolling landscape was modified with trails and huts for cross-country skiing and other uses, constructing a trail system and winter sportscape within multi-use provincial lands in the Beaver Hills. The Birkebeiner skiers made the Blackfoot PRA their sportscape, while the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival brand imprinted the Area's identity as the home of the Birkebeiners, a symbolic alignment of outdoor winter sport, enjoyment, and challenge with the area's natural attributes. Duty of stewardship was integral to land use for the event among skiers and the Canadian Birkebeiner Society partnered with Alberta Parks and other collaborators, developments that also strengthened potential for tourism and sustainability.

Winter heritage sport tourism and sustainability

The Canadian Birkebeiner Festival was a coming together of middle-class sport clubs, community non-profit groups, government, and the private sector in the 1980s and 1990s. Hinch and Ramshaw (2014) observe that heritage sport and tourism efforts are not always aligned: 'In times of economic retraction, planning resources are logically focused on the core of each area, even in the presence of rhetoric to pursue synergies with partners. Somewhat paradoxically, in good economic times, there is little pressure to be innovative so collaborative activities remain the exception rather than the rule' (p. 240). The Canadian Birkebeiner Festival suggests that an opportune combination of collaboration and resources saw gains for winter heritage sport tourism and sustainability.

Winter tourism was a significant element for the CBS and its collaborators from the outset. The first Canadian Birkebeiner event received a government seed grant from Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation, and Culture, which was an event gold sponsor in 1985 (CBS, 1985b). The Province was favourably disposed to support festivals as a form of cultural heritage, tourism development, and recreation; the Birkebeiner met many of its criteria and also worked towards expanding winter attractions near Edmonton leading up to the Calgary 1988 Olympic Winter Games. Olympic spin offs in Edmonton were few, but a community-driven heritage sport festival teamed with synergistic winter tourism policy and development was a winning combination.

The City of Edmonton was keen to support a new winter carnival planned as Winterfest for February 1986 and the Mayor's office saw potential to incorporate the Birkebeiner Society's proposal. After the fanfare of the first Birkebeiner, the Mayor's chief of staff Alex Macdonald opened doors for Brian Peters to meet the local Convention and Tourism Authority's General Manager David James. In March 1985, Macdonald wrote to encourage Peters to meet James 'so that you can more fully inform him of the great scope that exists in the Birkebeiner for tourism development.' Macdonald was 'quite aware' of Ottawa's successful Gatineau 50 ski loppet in 1984, observing 'It seemed that no one in the hotel spoke English, since so many hundreds seemingly had come from Europe simply to take part in the race.' Looking to the Birkebeiner, he wrote to Peters, 'As the event grows in Edmonton, there is great potential for tourism development, and perhaps for concurrent cultural or other recreational activities in order to maximize the drawing power of the event' (Macdonald, 1985). New wintertime events with the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival (1985) and Silverskate Festival (1990), celebrating Norwegian and Dutch heritage ancestry and winter sports respectively, augmented Edmonton's profile as a summer festival city featuring major community-driven events such as the Heritage Days Festival (1976), Edmonton Folk Music Festival (1980), and Fringe Theatre Festival (1982).

By the 1980s, Canada's provincial governments were building ski trail systems and Nordic centres (Government of Alberta, 1980; Ontario Ski Council, n.d.). Alberta Parks provided for cross-country skiing across the province as the sport expanded. The Government of Alberta built the Canmore Nordic Centre and Nakiska Alpine site as 1988 Olympic venues situated in the multi-use Kananaskis Provincial Recreation Area. As provincial dollars flowed heavily towards Kananaskis for Olympic ski venues in the Rockies, smaller allocations went to other regions of Alberta to establish provincial recreation areas with cross-country ski trails (Government of Alberta, 1997, pp. 15–16). This was the case for the rural Beaver Hills, east of Edmonton, where ancient glacial retreat left poor soil and bogs in an area with more timber and scrub land than farming and affluence, yet modern tourism was a draw. The knob-and-kettle topography attracted lakeside tourism by the 1890s (MacDonald, 2009) and cross-country skiing on hilly terrain by the 1980s.

When the Canadian Birkebeiner was first held in the Beaver Hills in 1988, its relocation coincided with new public provisions for recreation. These provincial crown lands east of Edmonton were designated as a Provincial Recreation Area under the new *Provincial Parks Act* (1988). The designation provided a regulatory framework to manage and control multiple land uses and activities in Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area from cattle grazing to natural gas and oil extraction as well as multiple recreational uses and trails. Section 4 of the Act stated 'Recreation

Areas shall be developed and maintained to facilitate their use and enjoyment for outdoor recreation' (Government of Alberta, 1997).

The Blackfoot PRA saw a steady increase of recreational use, partly because of the Canadian Birkebeiner. Visitation rates grew to an estimated 71,400 in 1994-1995. The highest visitation, about 70 percent of the total visitors, was recorded at the Waskehegan Staging Area, a popular hub and also the Birkebeiner's main finish stadium (Government of Alberta, 1997). In 1997, the Management Plan for the Area observed most recreational visitors were from Edmonton, with others commonly from nearby communities of Sherwood Park, Ardrossan, and Tofield. The most popular summer activities reported were 'hiking/walking, equestrian riding, picnicking and cycling.' The Management Plan was explicit that 'Winter activities focus on cross-country skiing. The Blackfoot is the site of the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival that attracts thousands of skiers to the area each year' (Government of Alberta, 1997).

The Festival reported a visitor survey and analysis were conducted on its tenth anniversary in 1995 (CBS, 1996b). The economic impacts and health benefits of active living related to the event were assessed. Most respondents were participants in skiing and/or volunteers. About 58 percent of attendees surveyed were from Edmonton, 22 percent from metro Edmonton, and 20 percent were categorized as tourists:

> The survey shows that the Festival has implications for the regional economy and regional tourism. While three quarters of attendees are from Edmonton or from within and (sic) 80 km radius of the city, there is also a noteworthy draw of 20% of attendees who can be classified as tourists and who travel to the event from various points in Alberta, and from outside of the Province (HarGroup Management Consultants, 1995, p. 30).

The definition of tourist was based on the Alberta Economic Development and Tourism standard of a visitor 'who travels more than 80 km from their primary residence.' By this measure, tourists included 17.7 percent from Alberta, 2.2 percent from other parts of Canada, and 0.5 percent from other countries (HarGroup Management Consultants, 1995, pp. 6–7). Overnight commercial accommodation was purchased by 16 percent of the survey respondents, but local residents spent more on 'ski equipment, entertainment, and meals' than attendees from other areas. The survey revealed attendees spent an average total of approximately $35,503 for Edmonton, $12,155 for metro Edmonton, $22,276 for other Alberta, and $6,933 for out of province, with a total reported expenditure by attendees of $79,189. The skiers were more typical of middle and high income categories, which also influenced spending patterns (HarGroup Management Consultants, 1995, pp. 14–16). Attracting tourists and participants from the metro region and beyond was an indicator of the draw of the event for day trips and overnight visits.

The front pages of the Travel and Recreation sections of the *Edmonton Journal* featured stories about the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival in the 1980s and 1990s. The Birkebeiner event was inscribed with artistic renderings of the iconic traverse of Vikings, skiers, and routes from the Ukrainian Village, past bison in Elk Island National Park, and through the woods of the Blackfoot PRA – depicting a picturesque landscape that merged heritage sport and tourism in the public imagination and the tourist gaze. Birkebeiner skiers were reported to 'need everything' and the front page of the Business section emphasized sales at local sports stores to furnish gear, clothing, and waxes, as well as positive economic impact for hotels and entertainment (Lees, 1994; MacDonald, 1995). As a major sponsor, the newspaper gave the event high exposure promoting heritage sport tourism with impetus to visit the greater Edmonton region as a winter destination, particularly a loop of natural and cultural heritage tourism attractions in the Beaver Hills. The legendary Birkebeiners and contemporary skiers were powerful icons to animate and brand tourism.

Less visible were local Indigenous and settler stories of living on the land evidenced by historic trails as well as ongoing hunting and grazing in the region. Also veiled by the picturesque was oil and gas extraction within the PRA, however, the petro-chemical industry was visible in its corporate

sponsorships for the Birkebeiner and its many employees on ski teams. For example, Dow Chemical Canada won the Large Corporate Participation Award in 1992 through 1995, and sponsored the 'Dow 5 km Snow Shuffle' in 1996 (CBS, 1996a, p. 21).

The CBS was a signatory among winter trail use groups in a twenty-month Alberta Parks public consultation process that produced the 1997 Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Management Plan. The process also engaged cattle ranchers, trappers, hunters, environmentalists, equestrians, hikers, and snowmobilers as well as the energy sector, outdoor/environmental education sector, historical sector, local communities, and governments at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 5). Engaging local participation was an asset to sustainable community development but also indicates the wide range of uses within the Recreation Area multi-use land management system (Pierce & Dale, (1999). In 1997, Alberta Parks articulated a vision statement in its new management plan that defined 'Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area is a multi-use area that balances existing human activities with the natural area's well-being (sic)' (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 16).

Broad management objectives focused on heritage appreciation, outdoor recreation, preservation, tourism, and economic development as per the mandate of the provincial park system. Specific objectives guiding local management directions for the Blackfoot PRA aimed to enhance outdoor recreation in various ways, including trail systems and cross-country skiing as a day use (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 16). Major issues arising included trail use conflicts between various kinds of users. The intent of managers was to encourage compatible trail uses and 'focus on the natural attributes of the landscape,' thus management plans for the trail system emphasized safety and etiquette for 170 km of trail as well as seasonal use. Equestrian trails were designated to give way to winter trails groomed for cross-country skiing from November 1 to March 31, demarcated in zones east of the Blackfoot Staging Area, specifically, 'Ski trails will be prepared on portions of the equestrian trails (Round-up, Wapiti, and North Winter) for the Birkebeiner Ski Festival' (Government of Alberta, 1997, pp. 19–20). At the same time, a trial was introduced to share skier and horse rider use on the routes for the Festival loppet, except for the four weeks prior to the event when ski trail grooming would take place, and provisions were also made for hunters to use horses to 'extract game' based on special permission during the closed season (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 20). Overall, the Plan highlighted the Canadian Birkebeiner Festival framed as a special event appropriate within the bounds of the provincial recreation area (Government of Alberta, 1997, pp. 20–22, 35, 38). Tourism and economic development objectives further aimed to 'promote the area as an ecotourism and recreation destination, as part of the surrounding region' (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 18). Together these objectives provided for cross-country skiing within the Blackfoot PRA.

The Society and its annual event were ongoing stakeholders of heritage sport tourism in a winter sportscape within the Beaver Hills region and the Alberta Provincial Parks system. As an organized entity among many diverse land users, the CBS and its partners contributed to make the annual Canadian Birkebeiner Festival and cross-country skiing into a viable recreational land use supported by public land management and infrastructure. The long contemporary presence of Nordic skiers on the land also generated a legacy of ongoing attachments between people and place through sport, recreation, trail work, and infrastructure; topophilia for the Birkebeiner sportscape reinforced conservation and parks stewardship for the Blackfoot PRA.

The Canadian Birkebeiner also carried symbolic currency to brand and market the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area as the home of the Birkebeiners. The Festival was prominently positioned as an appropriate special event framed within the management plan as early as 1997. Today, Alberta Parks features banner images of the Birkebeiner event on its website and signage (Alberta Parks, 2022). The Blackfoot PRA has been reinscribed as the Birkebeiner heritage sport event and a cross-country skiing sportscape for winter tourism.

Initiatives to promote Edmonton as a northern city with lively winter festivals as part of its destination brand also looked to incorporate the Birkebeiner. For example, the CBS participated in the Edmonton Winter City strategy in 2012, also contributing towards sustaining municipal initiatives

for a winter festival culture of heritage, sport, and tourism. The location of the Festival outside of the city limits, however, can also pose a challenge as the rural sphere of tourism in east-central Alberta is not always supported well as a regional market or seen as part of greater Edmonton. More recently, Canadian Tourism Commission has measured tourism within a 40 km radius, which merits closer examination of the Birkebeiner's role as a local and regional heritage tourism draw because, by this radius, most Birkebeiner participants are tourists and enjoying attractions near home.

Erratic winter weather extremes – too cold, too warm, poor snow – are challenges that have led to more frequent event cancellations since 2000 with impacts on revenue and registration; these combine environmental and economic sustainability challenges for the current Birkebeiner event. Lower registrations of about a 1,000 have been more common in recent years since earlier highs of almost 2,500 in 1999. It is also evident that about 500–650 volunteers are needed to support approximately 1,000–2,400 skiers for the event (CBS, ca. 1984-1999). Numbers alone are not the size of success, but renewal of the volunteer-driven Canadian Birkebeiner and the Society is ongoing for generational succession, moreover lessons learned with flexible event logistics and marketing during a pandemic also have potential to inform climate adaptations.

The Canadian Birkebeiner trails were part of the backbone of the Beaver Hills Biosphere designated by UNESCO in 2016. Biosphere objectives focus on encouraging cultural and rural tourism as well as ecological sustainability. The CBS sits on the Biosphere Association board. The annual Festival and its sportscape are an integral component of cultural heritage and nature-based recreation amid the larger Biosphere. As heritage sport tourism, the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival is a strong intersection of community and sustainability (Beaver Hills Biosphere, n.d.; Pierce, 1999).

Conclusion

The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival began four decades ago and endures today. Its origins as a loppet in 1985 sprang from ski instructors and skiers as grassroots promoters and grew into Canada's largest classic-style loppet by the mid 1990s. The participatory philosophy of local ski instructors shaped an inclusive ski loppet as a celebratory festival. Norwegian and American models influenced the Canadian Birkebeiner as a selective re-imagining of Birkebeiner legends and ski heritage merged as a winter festival in central Alberta. The venerated story of Birkebeiner warriors rescuing a baby prince was compelling lore for the invention of tradition inspiring a sustainable heritage sport and heritage tourism event.

The original point-to-point course was a landscape of sport and moving bodies built on trust with private landholders southwest of Edmonton, and was later elaborated east of the city on provincial recreation lands as a multi-use public commons. It is largely forgotten that the original route of the loppet did not run east of Edmonton but from the west. As the event grew in popularity, its original route was a sportscape obscured by time and selective memory. Acreage and suburban growth subsequently absorbed parts of the original Birkebeiner course in areas that were previously farm land, aspen forest, and riparian terrain; the early loppet trails routed near the North Saskatchewan River resonate with current efforts to connect trails and park systems along the same corridor (Government of Canada, 2022; River Valley Alliance, n.d.).

The Canadian Birkebeiner stands out as significant among sustainable land uses in Alberta's Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area. As a non-motorized sport, the loppet and cross-country skiing were compatible with public land use management aims for recreations aligned with conservation and heritage. Development of groomed cross-country ski trails in the Area and their ongoing maintenance were an outgrowth of volunteer hours, fund raising, and public spending on recreation infrastructure, and directly assisted in no small part by the community-driven success of the annual festival and stewardship of the Canadian Birkebeiner Society, aligned in collaboration with government and partners. The Birkebeiner events resulted in a winter heritage sport festival that shaped cross-country skiing, trails, and public lands.

Birkebeiner skiers were active making and remaking winter sports and heritage tourism in Canada, also connected to conservation and sustainability initiatives in the region and beyond. A ribbon of skiers moving through the Beaver Hills embodied a living sport heritage and topophilic winter sportscape. Factors such as volunteers, loppet routes, weather, funding, and land use management underscored the interplay of human and environmental agency in the Festival. Heritage sport tourism and land use in the form of the Canadian Birkebeiner were compatible with goals of Alberta Parks and the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere. Nordic skiing made a home in the Beaver Hills and contributes to current initiatives to sustain a distinctive geography attractive to heritage tourism, and strategically positioned for sustainable rural development. The Birkebeiner's ongoing integration of invented traditions, sportscapes, and heritage tourism enhanced capacity for the event and broader outcomes.

The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival was indicative of fluid social relations and rural place making in the production of Nordic skiing as an invented tradition and winter sport festival near a modern Alberta city. The event was inhabited by lived experiences and made meaningful through time, place, and social relations in its narratives, memories, and landscapes (Opp & Walsh, 2010). A reimagined Norwegian heritage was transformed as a celebratory festival event with outcomes that animated a cross-country skiing sportscape integral to heritage sport tourism. Transnational concerns for the viability of snow sports and travel in a current time of climate change and biodiversity challenges also mean the event has a significant position to lead sustainable sport, recreation, and heritage tourism in the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere. Its future may spring from a past record of imagination and initiative, but the beginnings of the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival call to mind the need to work together to achieve success in community development and local sustainability through heritage sport tourism.

Notes

1. Brian Peters, interview by author, Edmonton, AB, January 14, 2011, REB ID Pro00019013, University of Alberta; references to Peters draw on interview unless otherwise indicated.
2. For press coverage see, Ship ahoy!, Edmonton Journal, 10 February 1985, p. A1; Yardley Jones, First Annual Canadian Birkebeiner [cartoon], Edmonton Journal, p. C1; Nick Lees, Nick flunks ski test, Edmonton Journal, 10 February 1985, p. C3; Cross County: Birkebeiner, Edmonton Journal, 10 February 1985, p. C6.

Acknowledgments:

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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