

Full Circle

Cable, Wisconsin's World Cup Trail celebrates history and looks to the future

by Allison Slavick

Think of World Cup cross country ski racing and Wisconsin does not come to mind. But in 1978, the first-ever World Cup cross country race was held at Telemark Lodge in the northwest corner of the state, on a trail laid out by former U.S. Ski Team coach Marty Hall. Today, Ben Popp, executive director of the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation (ABSF), has set his sights on bringing the World Cup back to Cable, Wisconsin, in 2024, which will also be the 50th anniversary of the American Birkebeiner.

Skiers of the Birkie—the 55-kilometer mega-race held each February—will be familiar with Telemark Lodge, affiliated with the race since its inaugural year of 1973. The Lodge went through four bankruptcies beginning in 1984 and ultimately closed for good in spring 2013. When Popp took on the leadership of the ABSF that year, he made it a priority to get the race out from under the rise and fall of Telemark. With financial support from skiers around the country, Popp established a permanent Birkebeiner trailhead not far from the traditional start line, on property the ABSF bought from Telemark's owners in 2015. Now, the ABSF has entered into a purchase agreement for the entire 713 acres of rolling terrain. The condemned Lodge will be removed, and plans call for an outdoor recreation and sports campus. And that World Cup Trail, which has languished under blackberry brambles and ferns for nearly two decades, is receiving a facelift.

The history of the World Cup Trail is indeed storied. Telemark Lodge and Birkebeiner founder Tony Wise, eager to get in on the growing sport of cross country skiing and the international ski scene, summoned Marty Hall away from a Minneapolis training camp in fall 1975 to share Telemark's recreational trails with the legendary coach. Wise had a driver meet Hall at his hotel, and a private plane brought him to the Lodge. To Hall, it was evident that the trails were summer groomed to the nth degree, skiable without much snow. But he thought the landscape seemed limited. "I told my coaches, 'It'll be a cold day in hell before we train there,'" he remembers. "I ate my words."

That season, training camps in Québec City were rained out. The Olympic tryouts were canceled in Lake Placid, New York, due to lack of snow. So Hall's U.S. Ski Team did, in fact, come to Telemark Lodge in December 1975, where they remained for 20 days.

Gliding on that success, Wise made a successful bid to bring those first cross country World Cup races to northern Wisconsin in December 1978. He hired Hall to lay out a 15-kilometer trail that looped through the hardwood and pine forest on the backside of Telemark's 340-foot alpine hill, where the biggest climbs and downhills were found. The trail was tough, asking the maximum of skiers, and it earned fitting names. There was a spot called "Twyla Falls," where someone named Twyla fell. There was a 40-percent-grade downhill called the "Elevator Shaft," which compressed at the bottom and was famous for bloody and broken noses. Hall is still proud of the trail. "The downhills were fast, but not crazy fast," he says. "They were forgiving in that they let you get around corners, but there were no stupid corners in stupid places." »



Five years after the inaugural American Birkebeiner, racers ascend Mt. Telemark during the 1978 edition of the race. Courtesy American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation





[Right] Alison Owen-Spencer won the first World Cup race, which was held at Mt. Telemark in Cable, Wisconsin, in December 1978. **Courtesy Alison Bradley**

[Below, Left] Ben Popp, at the bottom of the Elevator Shaft, has plans to bring the World Cup back to Cable in 2024. **Jeanine Evenson**

[Below, Middle] 1978 World Cup athletes at Telemark Lodge, wearing hats that were a gift from Birkie founder Tony Wise. **Courtesy Doug Peterson**

[Below, Right] The new pedestrian tunnel under the redesigned World Cup course will lead spectators into the stadium. **Allison Slavick**



American standout Alison Owen-Spencer won that first World Cup race at Telemark. She recalls with passion the “skiability” of the trails and how the changing terrain called for the ability to carry speed. “I remember feeling a piece of gratitude for everything it took to pull our sport to that level,” she says. “The trail design, the people, the sponsors—I felt awed that so many people liked our sport enough to do that.”

Doug Peterson, Owen-Spencer’s teammate, agrees. “In those years, the U.S. Team struggled to find adequate snow and challenging trails,” he says. “The Telemark trails were good from the get-go. And that World Cup was more enjoyable than any Olympic experience I had. We all felt special—it was a testament to what Tony did. The Europeans were blown away.”

State-of-the-art World Cup trails now call for equal parts uphill, downhill and rolling terrain. Allan Serrano, a trail consultant from East Montpelier, Vermont, has laid out 2.5, 3.3, 3.75 and 5.0-kilometer loops near the Birkie trailhead and behind the old Lodge—standard

distances for international competition—incorporating as much of the original trail as possible. Existing sections have been widened to 15 feet on the uphill—the International Ski Federation’s homologation standard to handle classic and skate techniques. Sprint courses of 1.3 and 1.5 kilometers are in place. The venue has the potential to add a second course system to allow for skiathlon and longer races with an 8.75- or 10-kilometer loop.

Most of the original World Cup Trail has been mowed, the compression has been removed from the Elevator Shaft, and a snow-making system is already installed on three kilometers, with more to come—insurance for warmer winters. The shorter loops will be better for spectators, bringing skiers through a recently completed stadium and over a pedestrian tunnel.

“We envision the Telemark property as a centerpiece for Cable, the Midwest and Nordic skiing in North America,” Popp says. “It might be fate that the site of historic cross country ski races will help the sport soar into the future.” *