

A Winter's Tale

by Mikael Hanson

Following the addition of swimming to my repertoire last summer, I felt it only necessary to complete my sporting renaissance this winter by returning to my native Wisconsin roots and good old cross-country ski racing. Why not, as skiing is the perfect activity to occupy one's time while waiting for spring to return to the east coast.

After a near ten-year hiatus, I made my first foray into XC ski racing in early February. My venue was a local (that is central Conn. local) 10k event where I took a surprising 4th place (okay, maybe only 15 of the 40 or so starters were seriously racing!). Regardless of the placing, I was quickly reminded of two things from this strenuous effort. First, unlike biking or running, XC skiing is a TOTAL body sport, requiring maximum effort from all muscle groups. I was rudely reminded of this fact the very next morning, when I awoke in total agony. From the neck to the forearms, from the lower back to the ankles, no muscle group was overlooked. The second thing I recalled from my skiing youth, was just how much technique is involved in making those skinny skis dance across of the snow, especially if you are competing in the freestyle events (where one skis with a skating like motion). XC skiing is perhaps not as technique driven as say swimming, but it does require a great deal of time to become efficient on those skinny boards (racing skis are about 4.5cm wide). Balance and the proper transfer of power is essential in getting the most out of every glide. If you show fear or are not comfortable descending at 20mph plus, you will quickly lose touch with the pack, as those possessing superior balance and control will be able to navigate corners at full speed.

With a total of five XC ski outings under my belt this winter (compares rather poorly to the 3 to 4 times a week we would ski in college), I was perhaps a bit foolish in thinking I could hang with the big boys and grab a high placing in my last event, the final race of the Notchview Cup in pristine Windsor, Mass at the end of February. The weather was an almost balmy 30 degrees at start time and the snow was soft, yet fast given the cold freeze it got during the previous night. The 10k course was in great shape, with something to offer for everyone, from a wide open, slightly downhill opening 1k, to gut wrenching up-hills, and crazy spiraling descents. My skis felt fast, as they should with my special waxing concoction consisting of a hydro and fluoro-carbon mix (sounds technical, but in reality just good guess work as I used an old sauce pan to mix the two waxes I was torn between - don't tell Liz!).

As for the participants, call it a who's who of New England, including many of the top high school skiers from the state. The opening leg of the race was extremely fast with the course narrowing after about 400 meters, which made for some interesting maneuvering. The whistle blew and a host of local legends were quick to go to the front. As in most freestyle events, we were forced to just use our poles for the first 100 meters - so as to not kill anyone in the tight quarters. After that, all bets were off and the legs and arms were allowed to flail about madly! Like the start of an open water swim, the first few minutes are nerve racking, as you attempt to not only dodge flying ski poles (which resemble African spears when coming directly at you), but also try to avoid skiing up on someone from behind (at nearly \$400/pair, no one likes have their racing skies ripped up by an over eager neophyte). After the initial mass dash, I was comfortably in the top 20, but was a nervous wreck as skiers keep colliding around me and falling. I successfully navigated the third of many 'S' curves, and was building up speed, when it happened.

Now, before I describe what transpired on the snow, let me digress by saying I can still remember my first crash in a bike race. A bike crash has a very distinctive sound and for that matter, smell. It begins with the piercing squeal of brake pads, followed by the pungent smell of burning rubber. Next comes the hair-raising sound of clashing metal, which triggers the domino effect. Landing on concrete at over 30mph nearly always means leaving a small deposit of skin on the pavement, along with a good portion of your lycra shorts. However, in XC skiing, the speeds are not as high, and when you fall there is the glorious soft, billowy white snow to cushion the impact. Makes you almost wish you could do it again just for fun! The crash on Saturday was the result of someone's ski pole not being in the right place, tripping one skier, who knocked over his neighbor, and so on, and so on, until it reached me. I could only laugh out loud as I went

head over heels into the snow. The others were not as amused!

I spent the remaining 8k chasing those who had passed me while I was in the process of making snow angels on the white ground. The chase was made even more daunting as the course narrowed significantly once we entered the woods and hills. I gradually pulled back 8 to 10 skiers, and ultimately finished with a time of 34:42, a full 1:40 faster than my first 10k outing, yet still enough to grab 20th place. And yes the rumors are true. There was a 16-year old high school girl two places ahead of me (what of it?). As the temperatures around the city climb into the mid-50s, it looks as if my ski season is over, but I will be back next winter, armed with a few lessons from this Winter's Tale.