



100K in a day? Hurray!

By Bjorn Bakken

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Last Saturday (March 13th), a small group of Duluth biathletes and I got together to see if we had the stuff legends are made out of. Skiing 100km wouldn't normally seem like such a huge achievement. Some people ski that in a week; others can do it in a couple of days. But no, we weren't interested in what most people can do, so we set out to see if we could do it in a single day at the Korkki Nordic Ski Center just north of Duluth. Yes sir, Bjorn Bakken, Gary Colliander, Brit Salmela, and Kai Salmela were going down in the history books, or at least the Korkki Nordic guest book.

Needless to say, something like this required an early start, so we decided to meet up just before 7am. I pulled into the parking lot around 6:45, and the first thing I noticed was that the parking lot was pure ice. I groaned. Although any skiing is good skiing, skiing with klister isn't exactly my favorite. We weren't about to be deterred, however, and so with the Salmela's ice klister and Gary's Crème Brulée torch, we got some klister on our skis and headed out the door. It was 7am at this point, and we had ten 10km loops ahead of us, so we needed to get going.

Kai and Brit got going first, and soon I was on the trail myself. The first few kilometers were rough. I couldn't find my balance, much less my rhythm, and I was starting to get frustrated. Some parts of the course were icy, and my skis were fine on these parts. The majority of the trail, however, was covered by a thin layer of snow that had been blown over the ice, and my skis were catching, throwing my momentum over my skis. My poles kept punching through the harder snow, and soon I couldn't keep count of the number of times I fell over. I struggled through the first loop, telling myself that if things didn't get better, I'd be done after 20km.

I started the second loop with a scowl on my face—never a good way to start another round. On one of the first big uphill, my skis slipped for the umpteenth time, and I felt like I only had two choices left. I could 1) throw my skis as far as I could into the woods or 2) break my skis over my knee. After giving each choice serious thought, I decided not to go with either. I settled for a happy medium, promptly removed my right ski, placed the upper end in my mouth, and proceeded to bite my ski as hard as I possibly could. Yes, I know—biting my skis wasn't going to help me ski 100km, and it might even have been a little immature, but it felt incredibly good. I put a couple of small dents in the base, though, so I wouldn't recommend this to anybody who values a flat ski base. I was so mad that I blew off “Iso Mäki” (the Big Hill) and just decided to finish the loop.

I stopped for a refill on my water bottle and a quick Cliff Bar, and headed out for the third loop, desperately hoping for better conditions. Gary was skiing with me this time, so we picked up the pace a little. My skis didn't seem to catch as much on the snow this time, but my glide still wasn't stellar. Gary's glide was a lot better, and he kept riding up on my skis in the downhill, so I let him by when we started going down the back side of

Iso Mäki. Gary cut off at the end (having to make up some kilometers that he had missed earlier), and so I finished the loop alone.

I stopped again after I got in, and decided to scrape off the klister. It wasn't doing anybody any good, so with a scraper and some wax remover, my sticky hell was gone. Toko Red would take over for now. It was warming up now, and the Red seemed to be holding up. I was learning the course a lot better by now, and starting picking up on some checkpoints for time. If I wasn't on the first big hill by 35min after the hour (assuming I had started the loop just after the hour), it was a sign that I needed to get into gear if I was to finish the loop before the hour was up.

As I came in from the fourth loop, I chatted a little with my mother, who was out on a ski of her own, and decided to put some Swix VR45 on over my Toko Red. Feeling slightly rambunctious, I even filled my water bottle with Pepsi. I felt I had earned this small luxury by now, but still couldn't help but feel that Piotr was watching over my shoulder, wagging his finger at me like I had committed one of the seven deadly sins. No matter, I was set to complete the first half of the journey. I was pressed for time, since I wanted to have 50km skied by noon.

The plan was to ski 50km, take a break, eat some food, and start on the last half of the expedition. In my mind I had pictured a Bjorn-fan club, possibly even a group of blonde cheerleaders, greeting me at the chalet with banners, noise-makers, and, most importantly, freshly prepared food. Although Andrew Tholke (Katie's dad) was certainly a welcome sight when I got in from the fifth loop, he wasn't exactly all that I had envisioned. He offered to put some food on the grill, but I was feeling relatively good, and decided to quick finish one more loop before I stopped to eat. Andrew headed out as I was filling up my water bottle again (it was Powerade this time, I swear!), and I didn't catch him until a couple of km's into the loop. He was setting a good pace, and we skied the rest of the loop together. There was a weird mixture of snow and hail coming down, and it felt like a whole swarm of bees were stinging my face every time I went down a downhill. Andrew and I agreed that this was a day for ski glasses, but since we had left ours behind, we squinted our eyes and held our hands over our faces as best we could on each downhill. I was considering skipping Iso Mäki again if the snow kept falling like it was doing, but when I got to the bottom of the hill, the snow let up, and I took it as a sign and started heading up. Of course I should have expected nothing different when the snow started falling as soon as I got to the top of the hill. All I could do was think of happier times as I flew down the backside of Iso Mäki, tears streaming down my face as I got pelted again and again by the snow pellets. I made it down in one piece, however, and worked my way towards the chalet. Even with the funky conditions, the sixth loop went by quickly because Andrew and I were pushing each other so well.

After 60km, I needed a break. There was no chance of me skiing another 40km if I didn't stop for some rest and food. The chalet looked relatively empty as I skied in, and I began to seriously doubt that a group of die-hard Bjorn-fans, much less my beautiful blondes, were ever going to show up. Kai was there, though, since he had just finished skiing 60km himself. I found him chowing down on a hotdog, and quickly left to go find a

hotdog of my own. The grill was a beautiful sight: brats, polish sausages, and hotdogs, all there for my eating pleasure. I converged on a brat, and soon, two more hotdogs were gone as well. As I was eating, I decided to switch out of my wet ski clothes and change into some dry ones. I was now set to finish the day.

As I started the seventh loop, I realized for the first time that I was really tired. Sure, my arms had been a little sore earlier that day, but this was something else. It was like my body was starting to feel empty, even though I had just eaten. The fact that the hotdogs kept popping up to say hello as a sort of “second lunch” wasn’t helping either. No matter, I would just hammer this loop out, and go right into the eighth loop to get it over with. I was equipped with Pepsi again, but this time around, the novelty idea of bringing pop out on the course had completely lost its charm. I could feel my body instinctively heave every time I took a sip from my water bottle, and I soon dumped the rest of the Pepsi on the side of the trail. Somehow I think I might have foreseen this at the chalet, since I had brought a bottle of Powerade with me as well.

Nothing really eventful happened as I skied immediately into the eighth loop. But as I came to the 5km mark or so, things suddenly began to feel very different. Now, being the angel that I am, I wouldn’t know what it’s like to be drunk, but I imagine that it feels something like what I was feeling then. The trail was going in and out of focus, and I got kind of stupid grin on my face. The strangest part was that I could honestly hear my feet talking to each other. It got so bad, in fact, that they started conversing via my mouth, and I was just content to listen.

“Hey left foot, you think you hurt bad? You don’t even know what it’s like on the right side of things!”

“Oh yeah? I’d like to see you last two minutes over here on the left! Besides, you’re the one who’s always trying to get ahead of me!”

“What? Me always trying to get ahead of you? Every time you slide ahead of me, I just slide forward so that we’re even; you’re the one causing all the trouble!”

“Here I go, sliding ahead of you again!”

“Well allow me to retort as I slide ahead of you!”

As ridiculous as it was, I really was getting a kick out of each foot’s argument with the other, and it kind of kept me going. Even with the entertainment of listening to my feet argue, I was really slowing down, and the thought of having to do 20km after this loop was killing me. Gary caught me on the last part of the trail, and laughed as he saw the condition I was in.

Gary skied into the chalet to get more water, but being the idiot I am, I decided to go right into the ninth loop. This was a mistake, since I hadn’t eaten any food since lunch, and I had hit the wall over a half hour ago. Different parts of my body starting chatting now, and I think it may have been my groin muscles, ironically, that started singing “I’m all out of love” by Air Supply. Gary caught me again, and he skied behind me for a ways until we got to the bottom of the big hill. This is where he took off, and I was content to ski the rest of the loop alone. I got to the top of the hill and started bombing down the

backside, as per usual. I didn't think anything of the fact that I wasn't exactly on top of my game as I started down the steeper section, and soon I found myself struggling for balance. I hit a weird patch of snow, and was about to fall over, but I was able to catch myself a little.

I thought, "good thing I caught myself there, otherwise I would have fa...WOAH!!!!"

As I flew through the air Hermann Maier-style, my thoughts casually drifted to my long time biathlon friend and partner Adam Van Straten. "It's shame Adam isn't here with me to experience the concussion I will soon be receiving," I thought, "I was there for his, and I think he would want to be here for an occasion such as this."

In addition to thinking of Adam, I decided mid-air not to risk breaking any bones or equipment, and therefore landed with a THUD directly on my face—my left eye, to be specific. I just lay there for a couple of minutes, groaning and thinking about skiing another 10km. Eventually, and painfully, I got up, and limp-skied back to the chalet.

This was it. It was threatening to get dark now, and I needed to get going if I was going to make it out alive. I ate as much banana bread and as many Cliff bars as I could, filled up my water bottle one last time, and headed out for my very last loop. It was amazing. It was like the pain wasn't in my body anymore, and I was just determined to finish the day strong. I got through the first part of the course without a problem, and soon I was at the bottom of Iso Mäki yet again. As I started going up, I began swearing at the hill, inviting it to through everything it had at me. There was no way it was going to beat me. I skied the downhill a little more conservatively this time, however, and soon I was at the bottom. I stopped. There was no way I could finish this loop and the day with a clear conscience. I had skipped Iso Mäki on my second loop, and if I skied in now, there was no way I could ever forgive myself. Reluctantly, I skied a short-cut back to the bottom of Iso Mäki, and began the long climb for the tenth time that day. Somehow I made it up. I felt like I was unstoppable and invincible. Nothing could break Bjorn Bakken now; I feared absolutely nothing. OK, so I still snowplowed down the big hill, but that had nothing to do with anything.

At some point in the last 2km, I think one of my hip flexor muscles completely ripped off of the hip itself, rendering my right leg completely useless. I wasn't going to let this stop me, though, so I kept going, and soon I saw the chalet. Still no fan club. It didn't matter, though. I had done it, and I collapsed in a heap as I got inside the door of the chalet.

Kai and Gary had finished by this point as well, and we all sat in our respective places, not moving a muscle. We were too tired to do anything, so we gladly waited for Brit to finish her day. It wasn't long before we saw Brit heading down the final stretch around 6:45pm.

"Whose stupid idea was this, anyway?" she uttered as she came in. Gary made the mistake of giving her a hug she was about to take her skis off. "Ow, don't touch" was all she needed to say, and Gary understood the pain she was in.

With tired legs and smiles on our faces, we each got into our cars. It had been a long day, but we had done it. It was too bad Piotr wasn't there. Maybe with the tired state that Brit and I were in he would have had a chance at beating us in a wrestling match. But who am I kidding? Piotr wouldn't have lasted 30 seconds against us, even considering the fact that our legs no longer worked. Don't worry Piotr, one day I'll let you win.

~Bjorn Bakken