

A Moment in Time with Bjorn Daehlie

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Well I think I have finally got it out of my system! The five days spent with Bjorn Daehlie and his father, Erling, at the Birkie were the culmination of months of planning that lead to as an intense, exciting and enjoyable period of time as I can ever remember. I first had the idea of inviting Bjorn to do the Birkie after discussions with Ned Zuelsdorff, Executive Director of the Birkie, and Colleen Kalt, President of the Wisconsin Chapter of the National MS Society. Colleen was involved because the invitation to Bjorn was to come as an “Ambassador for MS Research” and help us raise funds for the Birkie’s “Race for the Cure” charitable arm. Why Bjorn? Well, it’s a long story but the short version is that I met him in 2004 on my way to ski the Norwegian Birkebeiner then speak at an MS Research meeting in Bergen. I am a Professor of Neuroscience at UW-Madison and MS has been my long-time research specialty. Bjorn’s mother has had MS for 20 years and I met her while in Norway. Bjorn was keen to know about research progress as I skied with him two days before the race, although it was hard to think about anything else than trying to stay upright and ski at a decent pace.

So after much persuasion, as he has extensive business and travel commitments, my invitation was accepted. He realized finally that his participation in the Birkie would really boost our cause. So there I was at Minneapolis Airport on Wednesday morning meeting Bjorn and Dad to take them up to Hayward to meet Ned and staff of the Birkie office before heading to Lake Owen and our condo, identifiable by a large Norwegian flag I had hung the day before. Dinner was quickly prepared thanks to my wife Sally’s premier lasagna and then off to bed! I hardly slept for the next four nights, constantly thinking of the day to come and our packed itinerary.

Up early on Thursday. Beautiful morning. Lake Owen looking pristine, took great pictures of Bjorn with the lake background – good start.



Thursday morning was to be one of the highlights, with the top 25 fundraisers taking part in the “Ski-with-Bjorn” hour at the North End Cabin. It was high excitement at the cabin when Bjorn arrived; we were a little late so there were whispers of “There he is,” “Let’s get some pictures” etc. People clustered around him to receive a generous gift of a ski hat with the famous and ubiquitous Bjorn logo – he has his own cross country ski line. He had given me a very cool training jacket and I was trying to appear like a Bjorn-clone as we sported identical outfits (pity about my skiing however). Terry Tansey, my great friend, accomplished racer and local ski guru led us up the trail to the power lines where

Bjorn talked for a couple of minutes about his skiing philosophy and why he skis. It's not just about winning Olympic gold.



(M. Milford)

We skied back to the Classic Trail then south to the 7K Birkie intersection. It's hard to describe the pleasure everyone had. With blue skies and the groomer just ahead of us creating a perfect carpet of snow, it was like skiing in heaven with God! This was meant to be a no-skier-left-behind event, but occasionally he would pick up the pace and visions of Lillehammer appeared in front of us. All too soon it was over and with 25 beaming faces having a hard time getting over the fun, we went off to lunch at River's Eatery in Cable. Mick and Beth Endersbe, the owners, most generously hosted a lunch for us all. Bjorn raved about the pizza, so much so that he went back there twice over the next few days. A highlight of the lunch was a gift Terry made on behalf of us all, a hand-carved wooden clock topped by a Viking ship. Bjorn's father was given a book on Wisconsin, "Old Farm" a charming pictorial story of life and upbringing in rural Wisconsin.



Bjorn trying to keep up with Glenn Coenen

Bjorn chatting up the ladies!

(M. Milford)

Now the pace of events picked up and it was down to Hayward for the end of the Barnebirkie and the Elite Sprints. And this is where the request for pictures and autographs began. Over the next four days this was endless, yet he never refused, except when he had to move on, and did it with grace and good humor. He's a natural at this and his poses with children were especially great and he clearly had fun. OK, so this sounds like enough for the day but not quite. More skiing was needed so it was off to Terry's place and on to the Seeley Hills Trails with Terry and me for some striding. About half

way up the second or third climb it did cross my mind that this was not part of my usual pre-Birkie regime, but wait a minute, who cares! So around 8 K later, back to Terry's, home to condo, shower and off to the VIP dinner at Lakewoods. In my introduction to Bjorn I point out that, no it's not as one skier asked me two weeks previously, the Dalai Lama who's skiing the Birkie, but Bjorn Daehlie!. Joyce Nelson, President and CEO of the NMSS made some important points to the guests about MS Research and the need for fundraising, then it was Bjorn's turn. In all, he spoke at six different events and always to a captivated audience. He rarely said the same thing twice and was modest, humorous and interesting throughout.

Friday morning saw us back down to Hayward for the Worldloppet Breakfast. We learned some interesting things about his physiology which were not that of the stereotypic elite athlete. His resting heart rate was not low (heck mine's much lower!) but his max VO2 as we know was off the charts. Interestingly he could race at 190 bpm for long periods without becoming anaerobic! During question time he was asked by a curious woman if he was married; as his part-time manager I began to think I might be in charge of a dating service, but she was disappointed to learn of his wife and two sons. He answered well a possibly contentious question about the Lillehammer 4x10 relay. No sour grapes but yes, Silvio Fauner did draft a long way and while the Norwegian coaches recognized that Thomas Alsgard likely had a better sprint finish, he was potentially too young to take the pressure and so Bjorn was the anchor. When all of the Olympic stadium went quiet at the end of the race and Bjorn lay in the snow exhausted, he and apparently all present took minutes to believe that Norway had not won.

So moving on from there, it's back to the Condo before the autograph hour at Telemark. Fischer Skis had made a really cool poster in his honor and from 12-1 he sat and signed poster after poster, smiled for picture after picture without flagging. Eventually we had to stop and retreated past the MS booth, to take a look at his embossed message and signature in Mike Cichanowski's (Current Design's) kayak prize and off home. It was another beautiful day so it we went for a skate ski on Lake Owen before resting ahead of dinner.

Meanwhile and all day long on Friday, Erling was touring the countryside. Amazingly, the Daehlie family have numerous relatives in Philipps, Wisconsin and Jim Daehlie from New York took him to check out Philipps and all of the Daehlie memorabilia and meet many relatives. Erling, a retired school principal and avid family historian reveled in all of this and everyone apparently reveled in him!

As all skiers know, Friday night can be tense, so it was no different for us as we yet had to find the Fischer wax rep Chris Hall who had Bjorn's skis. The usual wax dilemmas existed, especially as he was striding and snow was in the forecast. While the pundits were calling for klister binder, klister of the day then hard wax, Bjorn was dubious. Saturday morning arrived and I made my oatmeal which in Scotland we would call porridge – you know the stuff that Scotsmen carry in their sporrans. He actually liked it and this was the base calories for the day. Time to go. Bjorn, my older son Rod and I, drive right to the start (boy, what a privilege). At 7:15 AM and after some searching, we find Chris with skis, phew, and off Bjorn goes to test skis and wax. I get on my skis and immediately realize I have a problem – not a klister day! We try to scrape my skis but the klister appears bonded on hard so I crayon on 8 layers of VR40 in the hopes of covering it up – no luck. Testing done, it's off to the start and my one privilege is to line up with

Bjorn at the start of the elite wave, dreaming of people saying, “ who’s the guy next to Ian.” I promise him not to worry that I will try to outpole him at the start, the gun fires and off we go, ‘It’s see you later back at the condo’ time and 2 or 3 hills later I realize that, 1) I’m very tired and 2) my wax is a problem, great climb, no glide etc. Attitude adjustment required, forget the time, clock up Birkie 26 and hope Bjorn has a great race and it all came true. We could not have stage-managed a better finish. What a gracious runner-up, there was never a hint of disappointment, rather vicarious pleasure for the young winner. His performance was admirable as his training was minimal and he had two periods of flu/colds this winter preventing any skiing consistency. Nonetheless he can still ski and lookout Gus if he decides to train and return – what was it the Terminator said?



‘I think you’re faster, you go first!’

(Al Subera)

So I eventually made it to Hayward, met my son Rod by chance, discovered I had forgotten my change of clothes (too much to think about), so its onto the bus and back to the start for my car, condo, shower, dress and back to Telemark for the Birkie Bash, CXC dinner and the Awards Ceremony. At the CXC gathering Bjorn could have spoken for hours and the audience would have remained. He talked about training for juniors, on the importance of waxing their own skis etc. All great stuff and hugely appreciated. At the Awards Ceremony he got a hero’s welcome and handed out the awards but not his own which Dennis Kruse presented to him.

Now it’s time to celebrate at the condo with the post-race party with all the MS Society staff, Birkie foundation guests and some of the people who generously donated time and money to the cause including Don Becker and Kay Lum, Dave Calhoun, Oyvind Solvang, Katie Brekke and many others. What a night! Fantastic race, great food, great company, what fun. After the guests left we cracked open a bottle of single malt whiskey and toasted the day and its successes. Off to bed.

Sunday and time to pack up but not yet. It’s off to the Birchlegger’s Breakfast in Hayward where people really know their Olympic icons. More pictures and autographs and a very nice gift to Bjorn of a miniature birch bark canoe, then we’re heading to New Moon to see Joel and Chris, sponsors of the event, and all the staff. Believe it or not there still were people who didn’t have his autograph, so more poster signing, tour of the store and final goodbyes and it’s time to return to the condo and pack and head home. But wait a minute, one final trip to River’s Eatery, more pizza and an emotional meeting with a young woman Korteloppet skier who has MS. This brought it home to him why he was here, to help us raise the money we need to develop new and successful therapies for this terrible disease.

We now faced the long drive back to Madison, hard for Erling who has a bad back. However the stress of the journey was relieved by the pleasure of a great home dinner cooked by my wife Sally. Bjorn asked for the recipes and photographed dessert! The final exercise of the day was a competitive ping-pong game with my son, Simon. Monday arrives and we are near the end. We are to visit my research labs at UW to hear about our MS research and to be interviewed by Leigh Mills, Channel 15 News. From there we get a tour of high tech imaging in the new Wisconsin Institute for Medical Research then it's off to lunch with my wife and then Dane County Airport and home.

Well that's the story. It was more successful than we ever dreamed of and Bjorn was the perfect guest. Gracious, generous and good fun, he made the perfect ambassador both to help us raise money and as a representative of Norway. You should all know that he enjoyed being here more than he ever imagined and thought the course and the race were fantastic. My thanks go to him and to my partners in planning, Ned, Mary Hartwig and Terry, and my wife Sally for her endless support. We raised over \$100,000 for the NMSS and research and I thank you for your generosity.

