

# My Vasaloppet

By

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*“I knew instinctively that if I gave up now, no matter what the justification, it would become easier forever afterwards to justify compromise with any achievement.”*

- Arnold Eric Sevareid, Canoeing with the Cree

I'm standing in a large snow-covered field in west central Sweden a few kilometers south of the town of Sälen, this first Sunday in March 1999. An enormous digital clock off in the distance reads 7:15 a.m. Even though it is about a half kilometer away, the numbers are large and can easily be seen. Around me are about 13,000 other men and women from all across Sweden, Europe and around the world. We are here as competitors anticipating the start of the Vasaloppet, the most famous cross-country ski race in the world. This year is even more special because it celebrates the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this prominent event.

The sky is overcast and the temperature a cool  $-4^{\circ}$  C ( $+24^{\circ}$  F), but the mood of the crowd is festive and electric. A few centimeters of new snow have fallen overnight adding to the ample packed base. Most competitors mill about by themselves or converse with friends. Many partake in a calisthenics session lead by a team of energetic Swedish women dressed in red snowmobile suits. They are in clear view of all, standing atop wooden towers positioned near the middle of the crowd. On the far side of the field, racers queue in long lines leading to tiny wooden outhouses. Some forgo the wait and trod off into the nearby woods, wading through knee-deep snow.

It has been a long and arduous journey to the Vasaloppet for me, many months of hard training combined with personal difficulties that could have easily prevented me from being here; but adversity and perseverance are two important ingredients for making a truly memorable experience. And ahead of me, on the long racecourse beginning in this field and ending 90 kilometers away in the distant town of Mora, I knew that there would be even more challenges to overcome.

## Historical Background<sup>1</sup>

The Vasaloppet derives its origin from a significant event in Swedish history. In 1520, a young Swedish nobleman named Gustav Eriksson Vasa attempted to organize the farmers and peasants of central Sweden in a revolt against the ruling tyrants from Denmark. The people, however, did not desire war. Denmark was then the most powerful nation in northern Europe and the commoners rejected Vasa in favor of maintaining the conciliatory peace. Being closely pursued by Danish soldiers intent on stopping his campaign, Vasa made an effort to enlist the support of stoutly patriotic citizens of Dalecarlia, but not even they were willing to fight the Danish dictatorship.

Without the aid of an army and in danger of capture, Vasa fled westward on wooden skis across the snow-covered hills and valleys towards neighboring Norway. Shortly after his departure the people of

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<sup>1</sup> Historical reference was obtained from the official Vasaloppet website at <http://vasaloppet.se> and from the *Worldloppet Ski Race Yearbook '99*.

Dalecarlia reconsidered their position and dispatched two of their fastest skiers to find Vasa. They eventually caught up with him near the town of Sälen and escorted Vasa on the long journey back to Mora where he would build his forces. After a two-and-a-half year struggle, Sweden finally won its independence from Denmark and the people soon crowned Gustav Vasa as king of their newly sovereign nation.

The Vasaloppet commemorates this legendary 16<sup>th</sup> century journey of Gustav Vasa and the two Dalecarlia soldiers from Sälen to Mora. It is the oldest and largest organized cross-country ski race and is central to the modern-day Worldloppet, a series of fourteen marathon-length<sup>2</sup> cross-country ski races held annually in ten different European nations and also the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan. Its arduous 90-kilometer (56-mile) length makes it also the longest event in the Worldloppet and perhaps the farthest single-day, point-to-point cross-country ski race in existence.

The racecourse begins near Sälen and travels east and southeast through the rolling, wooded forests, frozen swamps and farm fields that characterize central Sweden, ultimately culminating in dramatic fashion before hundreds of spectators on the snow-covered streets of Mora. The race began in 1922 with only 136 entrants and over time has grown to its present day field of about 16,000 competitors per year. In keeping with tradition, the Vasaloppet is a classical-style race; participants are restricted to the diagonal-stride technique of cross-country skiing used by Gustav Vasa and his contemporaries.

The Vasaloppet is a principal Swedish tradition and generates a tremendous amount of civic pride. Those victorious are instantly elevated to celebrity status, while a Swede winning the race is honored as a national hero.



*Gustav Vasa*

### Starting Out

I began planning my trip to the Vasaloppet in the spring of 1998, soon after finishing my ninth American Birkebeiner. The “Birkie”, as it is called, is a 52-kilometer Worldloppet race held in northern Wisconsin that borrows its name and tradition from the more renowned Norwegian Birkebeiner Rennet. Next year would be my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and my 10<sup>th</sup> consecutive season of cross-country ski racing. A trip to Sweden to compete in the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary Vasaloppet seemed like a wonderful present to myself.

Without hesitation, my good friend Mike Brumbaugh agreed to join me. The “Brum”, as he is widely known, began cross-country ski racing only a few years earlier. Being a talented crossover athlete from downhill skiing and in-line skate competition, he soon reached a high level of skill in cross-country. His

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<sup>2</sup> A cross-country ski marathon is a race with a distance of approximately 42 kilometers or longer.

3-hour double-pole<sup>3</sup> roller-ski workouts in the summer were legendary among the local skiing community; training that would serve him well during the long, flat sections of the Vasaloppet.

My first indication of the difficulty that the Vasaloppet would award me came in May when I found that the maximum number of allowable entries had almost been reached. This would be the earliest date ever that the Vasaloppet would fill up, I was told, largely because of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration (the previous record was September, set just the year before). I rushed to send our registration form and entry fee to Sweden before admission to the race was closed. Several months later, long after the race had been filled, I still had not received any confirmation from the Vasaloppet office and contacted them to inquire about the matter. They told me that our entry forms had been processed but they had no record of any money being received. A very gracious and helpful woman at the Vasaloppet office, Eva Bach, came to our rescue by allowing us to resubmit our registration fee and maintain our entry to the race.

Then, in August, I was laid off from my job. Fortunately, I found a better position within a few weeks and my new manager agreed to allow me time off from work for my trip to Sweden. If that wasn't enough, the winter of 1998-99 was quite warm in the Minneapolis area where I live and work and without much snow, making it difficult to train for cross-country skiing. Several local races, including the North American Vasaloppet, a sister event to the Swedish Vasaloppet held in central Minnesota, were cancelled for lack of sufficient snow. Just a short drive away in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin, however, the skiing conditions remained quite good for much of the winter. During the week I would run or ski where I could near my home and then travel north on the weekends to race and train more extensively on snow.

The American Birkebeiner was held as scheduled on Saturday February 18, eight days before the Vasaloppet in Sweden. Despite the relatively mild Midwest winter, the race was a remarkable success. Performance-wise, it was one my best Birkies ever, although as is usually the case my overall position was a bit farther down the results list than I would have liked. I felt in good form, though, and had obtained an extra dose of confidence going into the Vasaloppet.

Just when I felt that I was on top of things, my luck began to change. The day after the Birkie I began feeling sick. I feared that I had contracted the awful flu virus that a friend who had stayed with me during the race had brought with him from New York State. Although he started the Birkie, he dropped out near the halfway point because of his illness. The next day my worst fears were realized. I woke up that morning with a 104-degree fever and a persistent, hacking cough. My body was in tremendous physical pain such that I could barely walk. I could not remember feeling more sick and miserable at any other time in my life.

By mid-afternoon I summoned what strength I could and struggled to my doctor's office. Although doubtful that I would be able to make the trip overseas, he prescribed a powerful antibiotic called Zithromax, which he hoped would at least get me back on my feet. On Wednesday, the day before leaving for Sweden, my fever finally broke but the hacking cough endured. Although I was very weak and had gotten little continuous sleep for several days, I was able to finish packing my bags and board the plane to Europe.

During the summer, Mike and I set a goal to win the Vasaloppet "Sportsman's Medal", an award given to those who finish the race within one and one-half times the winner's time. Based on typical results from previous races, we estimated that we would need to complete the 90-kilometer Vasaloppet in about 6 to 6-1/2 hours. This is equivalent to average pace of about 4 to 4-1/3 minutes per kilometer for the entire length of course, including any stops for food or equipment repair. From our training, we were reasonably confident that we could achieve that pace, assuming of course that we were healthy. But given my current

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<sup>3</sup> "Double-poling" is a cross-country skiing technique involving only the arms and upper body .

miserable physical condition with only a few days before the start of the race, I felt it would be impossible for me to ski fast enough to obtain the Sportsman Medal. I instead opted for a strategy of “touring” the racecourse at a more leisurely pace in order to conserve energy for the long haul. If I could simply finish the race, I told friends, I would be the happiest person on the planet.

### The Journey to Scandinavia

We departed the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport on the Thursday evening prior to the race. Our flight would require a brief stop in Amsterdam where we would change planes for the short hop to Oslo, Norway. Because of the flying distance and 7-hour time difference, we would ultimately arrive in Norway on Friday afternoon. We had reserved a rental car at the Oslo airport and planned to drive the remaining few hundred kilometers across the Swedish/Norwegian border to Sälen. From there we would continue to our final destination of Lima only a short distance away and reside at a local home the nights before and after the race, arrangements made in conjunction with the Vasaloppet organizing agency.

The long (8-hour) plane flight across the Atlantic was for me “a little slice of hell.” The Boeing 747 “jumbo” jet we were flying could have been better described as a jumbo sardine can, packed literally to the bulkheads with hundreds of overseas travelers. The seats were extremely cramped and my knees butted up against the seat in front of me. My sinuses stung continuously from the dry air inside the plane and the cabin temperature was uncomfortably warm. After pacing the narrow isles of the airliner for what seemed like hours, I managed to curl up on a tiny 2- by 3-foot flight attendant’s jump seat for a few hours of uneasy rest. In stark contrast, Mike seemed quite content in his window seat and barely moved for the entire duration of the flight.

We arrived in Amsterdam at an airport crowded with Friday travelers. The air was stale and so thick with tobacco smoke that a visible bluish haze hung near the ceiling. While waiting to change planes we stood near groups of smokers happily puffing away on their tobacco habit of choice, adding to the already putrid airport stench.



*On-line at the Oslo airport*

Our flight from Amsterdam arrived in Oslo on schedule. Most of our luggage, however, did not. Our skis and poles, packed in a sturdy, hard-shell travel case, had successfully made the trip, but the rest of our baggage - two suitcases with clothes and other skiing gear - were at some other, currently unknown location. We informed an airline clerk about our situation and he assured us that the missing luggage would be delivered to our residence in Sweden, but not for at least 24 hours or perhaps longer, which would be after the race. Fortunately, Mike and I had anticipated this. We had packed all of our other essential gear for the race, such as ski boots, racing clothes and assorted grip waxes, in small backpacks that we took as carry-on luggage onboard the airplane. Despite the mishap I still felt fortunate, because even with the limited amount of gear we currently had in our possession we believed that we would still be able to ski the race.

A light snowfall greeted Mike and I as we walked from the airport terminal to our rental car, a wonderful welcome to our arrival in Scandinavia. Our vehicle, a new maroon-colored VW Golf hatchback, was a bit smaller than I had anticipated. We flattened the fold-down rear seat and slid in the ski case. It fit snugly between the back of the car and dashboard, resting in the slot between the two front seats making an impromptu armrest. After stowing our two small backpacks in rear, I examined the remaining space inside and wondered if we would be able to fit our lost suitcases when, or if, they ever caught up with us.

As we made our way out of the airport, the snowfall had become much heavier. Mike drove and we carefully negotiated our way through the unfamiliar tangle of overpasses and exit ramps until eventually finding our way north on highway E6. The windshield wipers, turned on to brush away the accumulating snow, were not working properly and generated a terrible high-pitched “eek”-ing noise as they moved back and forth across the window glass, a sound very similar to the cliché description of an iron nail being drawn across a classroom chalkboard.

We stopped at a gas station a few miles down the road and fixed the bastard wiper: the rubber blade had merely slipped out of its holder and was easily repaired. We then debated what to do next. Should we change our plans and stay the night near Oslo to see if our missing luggage would arrive on the next morning’s flight from Amsterdam? Would the road ahead be safe to continue in the storm? Sickness, sleep deprivation, travel stress and the lack of a decent meal in over fourteen hours had adversely affected my mood; I was getting cranky.

Being the father of a three-year-old boy, Mike seemed well accustomed to my disposition. We agreed to forge ahead and under Mike’s guidance eventually wound up at the Sloven Hotel in the Olympic town of Hamar, about 150 km (93 miles) north of Oslo and almost halfway to Sälen. The restaurant at the hotel provided us with a fine hot meal. Although our room was small by US standards, it was very comfortable and efficiently designed (I especially liked the heated bathroom floor). We both got a sound night’s sleep - except for a few of my coughing fits in the middle of the night - and feasted on a hearty Norwegian buffet breakfast the next morning featuring plenty of muesli and fresh fruit. We were doing well. It was Saturday morning, the sky was clear, and we had plenty of time to reach our destination in Lima and prepare for the race the next day.

The trip from Hamar to Sälen was a scenic pleasure. We drove through wide Norwegian fields and valleys and over the mountain range that Norway shares with Sweden. A mantle of fresh snow blanketed the entire region, about a meter in depth in the lowlands and much more in mountains, a perfect Scandinavian vision. We were told that warm temperatures earlier in the winter had stripped the entire region of most of its snow cover and that the snow we were now seeing had fallen only in the past few weeks.

After a few hours of this wonderful automobile ride, we passed through Sälen and stopped at the Vasaloppet headquarters located just a few kilometers down the road in the tiny hamlet of Berga. The headquarters building was a big, two-story wooden structure that housed some offices, a small cafeteria and a collection of Vasaloppet memorabilia. Nearby was a huge circus-style tent that had been set up for the event. Inside, hundreds of people were crammed elbow to elbow along with dozens of vendors selling everything from skis to ski wax and various types of ski clothing. At the back of the tent Mike and I waited in line to pick up our race packets; large manila envelopes containing items and information needed for tomorrow’s race. Without problem, Mike and I obtained our packages and then made our way out of the tent, stopping occasionally on route to examine the products and displays.

Immediately outside the tent we could easily see where the race would start. About 500 meters away and down a small embankment was an enormous open field nearly 100 meters wide and several hundred meters long. Pennants flew from tall flagpoles bordering the far perimeter of the field that served as the posts for a large fence displaying the advertising banners of the various race sponsors: Volvo, IBM and Ericsson Communications were just a few of the posted company logos. I envisioned the scene tomorrow morning when the field would be filled with thousands of skiers ready to undertake their great adventure.

From our viewpoint, we could also see the early part of the racecourse. Exiting the start area the trail remained on flat terrain for about three-quarters of a kilometer. It then curved right and lifted slightly

before crossing the road we had just driven on, which would be covered with snow at race time. Across the road we could see the course as it split around an old farmhouse and up a short but steep incline. Here, a great bottleneck of people would occur, as I had witnessed on a videotape of the 1996 race. The hill slows the huge mass of skiers to a near halt as they negotiate their way up the incline and around the old farmhouse. "Stay to the right", we had been advised by friends who had skied the race before, meaning that the right hand course around the farmhouse would likely be the less arduous route. A map I had seen of the course showed that the divided trail then ran in parallel for about the next three kilometers up a long, gradual hill then merging at the top before continuing along more moderate terrain.

### The Evening Before the Race

Lima, the village where we would be staying for the race, was just a few minutes drive from the Vasaloppet headquarters. Without much effort we were able to find our pre-arranged lodging in the town, a private home owned by Örgan and Mona Ekberg. The Ekberg's were a young couple in their early 30's with a darling infant daughter who loved to be the center of attention. Their warmth and hospitality symbolized the friendliness that the Swedish people are famous for. As did most Scandinavians we encountered on our trip, Örgan (pronounced Or'-en) and Mona spoke excellent English, often making it difficult for me to comprehend that I was in a different country several thousand miles from home.

The Ekbergs had graciously relinquished their primary home for the race weekend and relocated into an older, smaller house they also owned on their property, land that has been in Örgan's family for several generations. "The people of Lima must do such things if the race is to happen," Örgan told us when I remarked how generous it was for him to allow strangers to stay in his home. Later that afternoon Örgan spent over an hour talking with airline officials in Oslo to help us retrieve our luggage. And after noticing my insistent cough, he unselfishly volunteered to drive to a drug store in a nearby town for cough syrup that he purchased with his own money, then refused to let me reimburse him for the cost.

Örgan, who made his living programming computers, had lived in Lima most of his life but never competed in the Vasaloppet. His wife Mona, a former Swedish national-caliber skier, had finished the Vasaloppet four times before she and Örgan had their child. Mona told us that the first 40 kilometers of the race were the most difficult, culminating in a long uphill section leading to the food station in Risberg. After that, she said, it was much easier; the terrain being flatter and one could double pole most of the next 50 or so kilometers. Strangely, I never thought of double poling 50 kilometers as being "easy". I began to wonder what the first 40 kilometers of the race were really like in comparison to a supposedly "easier" 50 kilometers of double poling.

We shared the Ekberg's modest 3-bedroom home with 13 other Swedish men from various parts of the country. Although spacious, the house was not overly large. Every bed in the house was occupied for sleeping with many camping on the living room and bedroom floors. Mike and I shared our room with Lief Johnsson, a Swedish food-products salesman who had previously completed twelve Vasaloppets. He told us about some of his most memorable ski races, including the 1997 Vasaloppet where abnormally warm weather created huge puddles of standing water on the trail. Racers were forced to ski through many kilometers of open water, some places being over a foot deep. It was the most difficult, he said, of the dozen Vasaloppets he had skied. Lief assured us, though, that conditions on the racecourse were usually very good, the trail well maintained with ski track set four to six lanes wide. This confirmed what I had often heard about the excellent manner in which the course was cared for. With the ample amount of snow and cool temperatures, I couldn't imagine anything but an immaculately groomed trail and almost perfect skiing conditions.

A short walk from the Ekberg house was the Ungard Skola, a modern public school where many other racers were spending the night. In the school's cafeteria, meals were being prepared and served by some

local women and their daughters. Mike and I feasted on a wonderful home-cooked meat-and-potatoes dinner, pre-race food that I personally prefer over the spaghetti “carbo-load” commonly favored in the US.

### Final Preparations

After dinner, everyone at the house engaged in the usual pre-race ritual of ski waxing. A special formulation of wax, referred to as “grip” or “kick” wax, is applied to the approximate middle-third of the classical ski base generally opposite the skier’s foot. Having a consistency similar to that of soft candle wax, kick wax has the ability to grip the otherwise slippery snow when the skier presses down on the ski during the repetitive “kick” phase of the classical skiing motion. This allows the skier to obtain traction against snow, propelling him or her forward along the track. There are a variety of kick-wax formulations each designed to work best within a predefined range of air (or snow) temperature and humidity. The correct choice of kick wax can be very important. At the elite level it can often be a decisive factor in winning or losing a race.

The weather report had predicted an overnight low of about  $-5^{\circ}$  C ( $22^{\circ}$  F) with some light snow possible. Under these conditions, selecting the proper kick wax is usually simple. A basic “blue” wax – the definitive color most manufacturers use for wax formulations best suited for moderate conditions of this type - should suffice. I use Toko kick waxes, a brand from Switzerland that has worked very well for me on numerous occasions.

The best kick wax selection, however, could change very rapidly during the day if temperatures rose to near or above freezing. Here it can become quite tricky to find the kick wax that will allow the skis to grip the snow and not slip or ice up, especially in the presence of newly fallen snow. If the air temperature rises above the freezing mark, then klister might be called for - the sticky, gooey form of kick wax used when the snow becomes icy, very wet or has undergone several freeze-thaw cycles. I had brought a variety of klister to cover a wide range of snow conditions; unfortunately, they were packed in the suitcase that had been misplaced by our airline.

The weather forecast also called for winds from the east at about 15 kilometers per hour (9 mph) that could create significant head and cross winds during the race. The easterly winds could also signal more precipitation, either rain or snow, further complicating waxing conditions, not to mention the increased risk of hypothermia to skiers.

The evening gave me the opportunity to talk with some of the Swedes also staying at the Ekberg house. Each spoke excellent English, as did most of the Scandinavians we encountered on our trip. The conversations were light, talking mostly about tomorrow’s race and what wax we intended to use. The casual exchanges allowed us to become more familiar with each other and to touch on some of the differences and similarities between our two cultures. I sensed that the Swedes had a bit of a fascination with America and enjoyed the chance to test their English-speaking skills with a couple of US natives.

After we finished with our skis, Mike and I sat down to relax and examine the contents of the race packets we had picked up at the Vasaloppet headquarters earlier in the day. The first item that I pulled out was the cloth bib with the identification number that I would wear during the race: 14748, boldly printed on the front and back in big, black characters. On the front of the bib was also a small replica of the US flag. All foreign racers would have a similar copy of their country’s flag identifying them to other skiers, spectators and race volunteers.

I next came across a large, neatly folded green plastic bag meant for extra clothes or other things that I would need after the race. Just before the start, skiers would stuff their warm-up clothes and whatever else

they elected to include in the bag, secure the open end with the hefty twist-tie also provided, and toss the bag into a lorry for transportation to the finish area at the end of the race. The bags were color-coded for delivery to predetermined locations where racers could get a hot shower, change into their dry clothes and get something to eat. Green identified our delivery point as the FM Mattsson factory, a manufacturer of wholesale faucets and plumbing supplies located in Östnor, a few kilometers from the finish where we would be transported to by bus.

Also included was a map of the Vasaloppet trail, indicating the seven small towns along the course, each approximately 9 to 14 kilometers apart, serving as rest stops where racers could get food, drink and help with equipment. Medical assistance was available there as well, but no one hoped they would need it.

The last item I removed from the package was a small cylinder-shaped piece of black plastic that contained an electronic device used for timing purposes, or the “timing chip” as it was referred to in the accompanying instructions. A red Velcro strap came with the device to secure it to the racer’s lower leg or ankle.

The timing chip would enable sensors placed at each food station along the course and at the finish line to record a racer’s identity and time that they passed the sensor. This information would be immediately transferred to computers and uploaded to the World Wide Web so that friends, family or race officials could track a skier’s progress via the Internet by simply inputting their bib number on a Web form linked to the Vasaloppet home page. A stern warning was also included saying that an official race completion time could not be given to anyone who wasn’t wearing the timing chip when crossing the finish line.

Before turning in for the night, I set out the items I would need for the next day including my race clothes, ski boots and dry set of street clothes for after the race. I packed extra kick waxes, energy bars and a disposable camera inside a small fanny pack that I would wear during the race. I crawled into bed and set my alarm clock for 4:30 a.m., plenty of time for breakfast and to get to the start area well before the at 8:00 a.m. gun. Usually I expect a restless sleep before such a big event, but I snoozed uncharacteristically well that night.

### Berga, The Start

Predictably, I incorrectly set my alarm clock, configuring it for p.m. rather than a.m., and thus didn’t get wakened when I expected to. Our roommate Lief, the Vasaloppet veteran, properly set his and roused out of bed at about 4:45 a.m. We threw on some clothes and dashed over to the school for breakfast. The thermometer outside the house read  $-4^{\circ}$  C ( $25^{\circ}$  F). A light snow was falling and about five centimeters (2 inches) had accumulated overnight.

After breakfast, Mike and I quickly dressed for the race and drove the short distance to the starting area in Berga. We arrived at about 6:30 a.m., ninety minutes before the race was set to begin. There were no traffic hassles or parking difficulties, demonstrating the race’s reputation for outstanding organization and attention to detail. Thousands of skiers had already arrived and thousands more were due to show up in the next hour or so. Competitors reserved a place at the start by placing their skis and poles in one of the several long parallel rows of ski tracks that extended back from the starting line. Mike and I set our equipment in one of the next available spots and then wandered off in separate directions to enjoy the morning and the unique show that was unfolding.

...So here I am, back to where my story began, standing in this crowded snow-covered field near Sälen, Sweden, anxiously anticipating the start of the 75<sup>th</sup> Vasaloppet cross-country ski race. The spectacle around me on this gray, blustery morning is very surreal, almost dreamlike. Thousands of people, mostly men but many women too, of all shapes, sizes and ages coming together for this singular purpose. I lazily

walked around the start area in a meditative state, soaking in the collective energy that I sensed building to a crescendo as time ticked closer and closer to the start of the race. Even a 20-minute wait in line for one of only dozen or so wooden outhouses seemed like a unique experience to be treasured.

Gathering my thoughts, I decided to fulfill the last bits of preparation and test my ski wax. I put on my skis and poles and joined a small parade of others skiing back and forth in a short line across the start area. My wax seemed to be working well for the conditions – good grip and also good glide.

For a classical cross-country ski race, the snow on the trail is usually mechanically groomed with one or more sets of parallel tracks to help guide the skis. At the beginning of a large mass-start race like the Vasaloppet, many sets of tracks are commonly made in the start area to help keep the skiers organized as they dash for position when the starting gun goes off. Curiously, I noticed that there were no noticeable tracks aside of the short lengths near the start line where we had placed our skis earlier. The tracks, I reasoned, must have been obliterated by the new snow and myriad of people trudging about the start area. Certainly there would be excellent track just up the trail given the Vasaloppet's reputation for providing the best possible course conditions.

The snow had stopped falling now but the sky was still overcast. Flags were blowing straight out in a stiff easterly wind of about 20 to 25 kilometers per hour (12 to 15 mph). I mentally prepared myself for the headwinds that would inevitably greet me on the trail. And with the overcast sky, the distinct possibility of also encountering more snow, or even rain, along the way.

Mike was already waiting when I returned to where we set our skis and poles. Calm and jovial as usual before a big race, Mike had been enjoying the moment to the max. He said he had met Jan Guenther, a friend of ours from Minnesota who was skiing her fourth Vasaloppet. In addition to being a wife, devoted mother of two small children and successful business owner, Jan is also one of the top female masters athletes in the U.S. Each of Jan's four trips to the Swedish Vasaloppet had been awarded as the prize for her victories in the 58 kilometer (36-mile) North American Vasaloppet, the second largest cross-country ski race in North America after the American Birkebeiner.

Even though the race would begin as a mass start where all the competitors commence at the same time, individual skiers were assigned to starting groups based on their best finishing time from a previous Vasaloppet or other qualifying Worldloppet race (compared in terms of average pace such as min/km). Generally, earlier start groups are preferred since there are fewer people on the course to contend with.

Mike and I were originally seeded way back in the 14<sup>th</sup> group but were able to use our best finishing time from the 52 km American Birkebeiner to petition us into Start Group #2, the second "wave" of skiers after the premier "elite" group containing some of the best international-level competitors. I felt very fortunate to have been awarded such an excellent starting position even though we probably weren't as deserving as many of the outstanding athletes immediately around us.



*The author (#14748) somewhere on the Vasaloppet course.*

The elite group of this race would feature World Cup<sup>4</sup> skiers Vladimir Smirnov and Johann Mühlegg. Smirnov, an Olympic and World Cup champion, had recently retired from professional competition. A native of Kazakhstan, a republic of the former Soviet Union, Smirnov had immigrated to Sweden a few years prior and was now a citizen there. “Smiree”, as he is commonly known, has become wildly popular in Scandinavia, promoting his own brand of coffee and holding a seat on the Olympic Organizing Committee (Mike and I had the opportunity to meet Smirnov in person a few months after the race at a training clinic in Duluth, Minnesota, sponsored by Nikoli Anikin, a past coach of Smirnov’s in the former Soviet Union).

Mühlegg was originally from Germany but had recently changed his national alliance to Spain. Seeming to follow Smirnov’s example, several successful World Cup skiers such as Mühlegg had changed nationalities in recent years for the promise of better financial support and training opportunities. In accordance with World Cup rules regarding skiers who alter their citizenship, Mühlegg was restricted from World Cup competition for the 1998 – 1999 season. He opted instead to compete in the Worldloppet and was leading by a large margin in overall series points. Just seven days before the Vasaloppet, Mühlegg convincingly triumphed in the 52-kilometer American Birkebeiner that Mike and I also competed in.

Time slowly moved closer to race start. At about 7:45 a.m. other skiers began removing their warm up suits in final preparation before the starting gun. I stuffed my extra gear into the large green plastic bag that came with my race packet, secured the open end with the accompanying twist-tie, and tossed it onto the nearby lorry for transportation to our post-race staging area near the finish line in Mora. I was confident that the Vasaloppet volunteers transporting my gear would be more responsible with my gear than the airline baggage handlers had been.

I put on my skis and poles once again and waited at my place for the start. Just about all I could see in any direction were other skiers. Those around me were clad in colorful Lycra racing suits, a style that has become the norm in cross-country ski racing. They were outfitted with the latest high-tech equipment designed for minimum weight, maximum strength and optimum speed – skis built of fiberglass and plastic, carbon-fiber poles and advanced binding systems that efficiently coupled the skis to lightweight, supportive boots. Although I possessed similar equipment, I was alternatively dressed in my heavier, blander training clothes reflecting the more leisurely pace that I intended to pursue the race.

I knew that it was very near the time for the race to begin but not sure exactly how close. I had switched my digital wristwatch to chronometer mode to record my race time and consequently wasn’t able to view the time of day. I looked to the large clock by the road but it had for some reason been turned off, adding to the apprehension. I saw the skiers around me tensing their bodies, leaning on their poles in a position of readiness. I did the same. Then, a few moments later, without a bang or boom or noticeable sound of any kind, people just started moving forward. The race had started, I judged, and I began to ski.

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<sup>4</sup> The World Cup is a series of cross-country ski races where professional and semi-professional athletes compete as members of national teams. Except for a few 50-kilometer men’s events, World Cup races are shorter and staged in more challenging terrain than the citizen-oriented Worldloppet competitions. Except for the team relay, World Cup races are mostly individual-start events whereas Worldloppet races are either wave-start or mass-start. Olympic cross-country skiers are almost exclusively chosen from the World Cup ranks. Every two years, before and after the Olympics, the World Cup Championships are held in a format similar to that of the Olympic cross-country ski races. Gold, silver and bronze medals are awarded and race winners are heralded as the World Cup champions in that particular event until the next Championship competition two years later.

## The Climb

As we progressed toward the road crossing near the Vasaloppet headquarters, I quickly began to realize just what I had gotten myself into. My vision of a leisurely tour through the Swedish countryside had evaporated into an acute sense of alarm as I was swept along with the moving mass of lycra-clad flesh, fiberglass and carbon fiber. I was amazed at the daring of some young men, dashing across the flow of traffic with seemingly senseless abandon in an attempt to advance just a few extra positions within the herd. Remembering my strategy to ski conservatively, I resisted my instinct to enter the fray. Nevertheless, I still managed to get tripped up and fall twice within the first few hundred meters.



*On the big climb early in the race  
(photo: Vasaloppet)*

Still unable to see more than a few meters past the thick contingent of skiers immediately around me, I could sense the road crossing as the consistency of the snow beneath my skis changed, becoming mushy and less supportive than it had been. That short, steep little hill and inevitable bottleneck I knew were not far ahead. I remembered the advice that my friends had shared: “Stay to the right,” and migrated over as far as I could to that side of the trail. Even though, I found myself caught elbow to elbow with dozens of other skiers, forced to

slowly double pole up the hill as best I could. I looked feverishly for room to widen my stance so that I could at least try to use my legs to help get up the steep grade. (Later, Mike informed me that staying to the “extreme” right, as he had done, was the ultimate course to take. He described how he had joined a line of other skiers and ascended the hill in full stride, without delay.)

A fellow next to me was talking and smiling through all this, seeming to enjoy himself. Then, for no apparent reason, one of the aluminum ski poles he was using suddenly bent in half and he went down like a sack of potatoes. Although I don’t consider myself a religious person in the traditional sense, I prayed relentlessly for help to make it through this mess without breaking any of my equipment, or limbs.

I somehow survived the incline and now found myself in a slow but consistent march up the 3-kilometer hill that transitioned the start area with main part of the course. Occasionally a brave warrior would come speeding by, without noticeable concern for his own safety or that of others. I passed one of the early large blue and white kilometer markers that would become a familiar sight throughout the day. On it was printed the number “87”, indicating the distance in kilometers to the finish. Shortly after the marker, I observed my right ski pole as it swung past the front of my legs, distinctly shorter in length than it had originally been. Nearly twenty-five centimeters (about 10 inches) of ski pole were missing, cleanly snapped off the bottom of the shaft. “Shit!” I yelled, exclaiming my frustration with the demise of a piece of critical equipment that I had been so careful to protect. A skier not far in front of me, seeming to comprehend the full extent of my situation based on that one definitive explicative, turned towards me and pointed back down the trail. “Pole?” I inquired. The fellow replied with a simple nod indicating, I presumed, that not too far in back I could somehow obtain a substitute pole.

Cautiously, I made my way to the right side of the trail and out of the flow of human traffic. I took off my skis, stuck them vertically in the snow bank, and ran back down the course with both poles still strapped to my wrists. Only a couple of meters away a volunteer stood with a collection of replacement poles. He eyed the size of my unbroken stick and presented me with the best substitute that he had to offer, an Excel

brand that was only slightly longer and heavier than the Swix pole that had been damaged. An adequate substitute, I gauged. After thanking the volunteer as I traded him my broken equipment for the spare, I sprinted back up the trail to retrieve my skis and continue the race.

### Smågan

I crested the big hill, fortunately, without any further incident. The crowd of skiers dispersed significantly as the course widened and entered the first flat section. Mike was nowhere in sight and I assumed that he was now a fair distance ahead of me. The well-groomed course that I anticipated had not materialized as yet. Despite the meter-deep covering of snow that blanketed the woods on either side of the trail, the ski tracks on the course were ugly, irregular, icy slots a few centimeters deep in packed, frozen snow. The kick wax I had applied to the bottom my skis, although good for the snow in the start area, did nothing for gripping the ice that I now had to deal with. My legs were of little use for propulsion and otherwise relied on double poling to keep moving forward. The stiff easterly headwinds worked to counter my effort, blowing unhindered in this open section of the course.



*Taking a break at a food station*

Even the slightest downhill became treacherous because of the poor ski tracks. On one such segment, the legs of the skier directly in front of me jittered uncontrollably as he careened down a small hill, his skis rattling in the icy ski tracks. My legs convulsed in a similar fashion as gravity also pulled me towards the bottom of the incline.

After 11 kilometers of this ordeal, I entered the first food station at the town of Smågan. Here the racecourse divided around a small, single-story, wooden house-like structure probably used to store supplies and equipment for the race. Four long rows of rectangular tables, one set on each side of the divided trail, contained a variety of food and drink arranged in a similar ordered fashion. First were slices of raisin bread stacked high on plates. Next were paper cups filled with Blåbär, the renowned "blueberry soup" - a warm mixture of sugar, water, something purple, and probably a few other unidentified ingredients. After that was a yellow-colored sports drink called Energy. Finally there was water, heated to lukewarm temperature to keep from freezing and for easier swallowing in the cold weather. Volunteers staffed the tables to ensure that food and drink were in good supply and readily available to competitors. Skiers moved slowly but methodically along the line of tables, consuming food and fluids as they passed.

Hundreds of discarded paper cups littered the trail at the food station even as volunteers diligently swept up piles of the debris with large leaf rakes. The snow by the tables was stained various shades of purple and yellow, proportionate to the amount Blåbär or Energy sports drink had been spilled. I quickly downed whatever food and drink I could get and continued on.

When first entering the rest stop at Smågan, I noticed many skiers gathered around a small wooden shelter just off to the side of the trail. I soon realized that this was one of the waxing booths that I had been told about where skiers could get a fresh coat of kick wax applied by skilled technicians. Toko was sponsoring the waxing service, its yellow and black logo displayed on a large banner hung outside the booth.

Dozens of skiers waited their turn in line for waxing, a large number it seemed considering that we were only 11 kilometers into the race. The icy tracks and warming temperatures were undoubtedly making it

difficult to select a kick wax that worked properly. Service stations like this one would be located at each of the rest stops along the course. Departing Smågan, I would soon realize how fortunate this would be for me.

### Mångsbodarna

Even though the terrain was mostly flat or downhill, traversing the 13-kilometers to the next food station at Mångsbodarna seemed to take an eternity. A wet snow had begun to fall and the headwinds increased. My coughing became more pronounced and skiing in the crooked, frozen tracks had greatly fatigued my legs. I was seriously considering dropping out of the race at Mångsbodarna, unable to imagine how I could possibly finish the remaining 66 kilometers of the course. I had competed in dozens of cross-country ski races, many of them very difficult, and never dropped out of a single one. So, the thought of giving up on this race, unimaginable just few weeks before, gnawed at me like a festering sore. But after a little rest at Mångsbodarna and a good helping of raisin bread and fluids, I believed that I could at least make it to the next food station 11 kilometers away at Risberg. I hoped that in that distance I could somehow muster the strength and will to continue on to Mora.

Leaving Mångsbodarna in my beleaguered state, I remembered an article that I had recently read in a runner's magazine. The author suggested that the toil of completing a traditional running marathon, equivalent to 26.2 miles or 42.2 kilometers, could be more manageable if the athlete would think of the race as a series of four 10-kilometer segments - plus a little bit more. The food stations along the Vasaloppet course were coincidentally about 10 kilometers apart. Rather than focusing on the finish line in Mora, which at this moment seemed unimaginably far away, I decided to partition my race into the intervals between food stations, concentrating on completing just the distance to the next rest stop. There I could gather my strength, consume more fuel and fluids and then attempt the subsequent interval to the next station. "10 kilometers, I can do that!" became my personal mantra for the remainder of the day.

### Risberg

The moderate climb to Risberg was just as Mona Ekberg described – long, which became an even greater challenge without good kick in the icy track. It was apparent whenever the racecourse approached a significant uphill because scores of skiers would be off to the sides feverishly applying kick wax to help improve the grip of their skis.



*The waxing booth at Risberg*

At Risberg I spent several minutes eating and drinking as much as I could comfortably stomach. From the rest station at Mångsbodarna I learned that the copious consumption of any and all available nourishment noticeably helped sustain my energy levels. I was feeling better now, stronger even than at Smågan, 24 kilometers ago. I added a few coats of Toko yellow kick wax to my skis, snapped a few photos with the disposable camera I carried with me, and resumed my quest for the finish line in Mora, now only 55 kilometers away.

A noticeable amount of people were being attended to at the medical station in Risberg, many more it seemed than at the two previous rest stops.

Information published in the next morning's local newspaper, the *Mora Tidning*, stated that 721 competitors had dropped out of the race at Risberg and that 1270 more gave up at the next station in

Evertsberg. All tolled, 2,753 people who started the race dropped out before the finish - a 20% attrition rate<sup>5</sup> - most probably overcome by fatigue or frustration resulting from the difficult course conditions. Lief Johnsson, our roommate at the Ekberg house in Lima, told us after the race that this was about 10-times greater than would be expected in a “normal” year.

### Evertsberg

For much of the race, perhaps even before the second food station at Mångsbodarna, I noticed that my skis were considerably slower on the down hills compared to other people around me. I rationalized that I had probably applied too much kick wax such that it was dragging on the snow and slowing me down. But when I stopped about midway between Risberg and Evertsberg to attempt to correct the problem, I immediately saw that it was much worse than a simple overabundance of wax.

One of my skis had broken, the core cracked all the way across about 25 centimeters (nearly 10 inches) from the tip. The plastic top and base of the ski were still intact and were all that prevented the ski from falling apart. Snow had managed to infiltrate the crack and became packed between the top and base and created a large bulge with a cross-section similar to that of a billiard ball. Rather than ride on top of the snow as a ski is designed to do, the bulge caused the ski to plow, greatly reducing the speed at which I could travel. Realizing that I had little choice but to keep moving forward, I gathered my wits and continued onto the next food station at Evertsberg, where I hoped that some miracle would allow me to fix my ski and complete the race.

As I plodded along into the persistent easterly headwinds, the light snow that had been falling changed to rain as the air temperature breeched the freezing mark. The trail conditions were deteriorating and the icy ski tracks were now becoming icy and wet ski tracks. The kick wax on my skis was largely useless in these conditions. All of my clothes were soaking wet from perspiration and precipitation, but I was able to stay warm as long as I kept moving.

Entering Evertsberg, the traditional halfway point of the race, I was greeted by an announcer’s jubilant voice as it boomed over a set of loudspeakers. In English he said “Number 14748, Steven Crum from Minneapolis, U.S.A. Welcome Steve, and good luck to you. We hope you enjoy the race and your visit.” Well, I thought I was hearing the voice of God. Spectators cheered as I skied by and I waved my arms and ski poles high in recognition. The attention gave me a much-needed emotional charge.

At the rest stop my first priority was to get plenty of food and drink. Afterwards, I sought out a knowledgeable-looking volunteer and showed him my broken ski asking if there was something that could be done. He directed me over to the resident Toko waxing booth. There I waited patiently with several other skiers queued in line for waxing. Inside the booth, which wasn’t more than a wooden roof supported in front by a set of wooden posts and in back by a snow wall, six wax technicians worked side by side, without expression or conversation, methodically waxing one pair of ski after the other. Existing kick wax was quickly scraped off with a metal scraper heated from the flame of a lit Benzene torch. The workers were now applying Toko Silver kick wax, the “warmest” of the Toko series of hard waxes, probably a better choice for the current trail conditions than the Yellow kick wax that I had been using. If the Silver formulation didn’t provide sufficient kick, then klister would be the only resolve. But I wasn’t carrying any klister with me and wasn’t sure where I would be able to find some.

A skier in line before me was a rather interesting case. About three centimeters of ice and snow were fused to the base of both his skis, likely the result of an improper choice of kick wax for the warm air and

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<sup>5</sup> Source: The 1999 Vasalöparen results listing.

wet snow conditions. It seemed unimaginable to me that he could have achieved any type of glide with skis in that state, and probably had to actually walk part of the way. A wax technician, grinning at the humorous site, chipped the ice off with his scraper and quickly applied a fresh coat of kick wax.

When my turn came, I showed the technician my damaged ski. Although he didn't say a word the expression on his face was a definite sign of encouragement. He pointed to the far end of the shelter, indicating for me to go there, where I again patiently waited in another line. Leaning against the nearby wall was a ski that was broken almost completely in half. Pondering how the person with that ski could



*Racers on the trail*

have possibly made it here before me, I didn't at first see what was to be my salvation. To my right was a small metal shed, its doors wide open revealing several pairs of skis and poles stored inside, obviously intended as replacements for unlucky skiers like me with damaged equipment.

I surveyed the selection of skis and counted about eight pair, but only one set with the type of bindings that were compatible with my boots. A pretty Swedish girl, dressed in the same type of yellow and gray Toko overalls that the burly male technicians wore, came over to assist me. After describing to her the problem with my ski, she explained in perfect English that I could borrow one of the skis with the compatible binding system. Amazingly, the replacement ski was almost the same length as my crippled one. She asked me to sign a release form for the ski and also to return it to the Vasaloppet office in Mora after the race. "No problem", I replied ecstatically, wholeheartedly agreeing with her terms.

My replacement ski didn't have any kick wax and thought it best if the Toko technicians apply some of their Silver wax - which I wasn't carrying - and resumed my place in waxing queue. As I stood in line, I felt the cold, humid air overtaking my damp body. The woman who just assisted me noticed my shivering. Without a word she picked up a heavy leather jacket lying across a nearby chair and gently placed it around my shoulders. The weight of the coat was substantial and with such insulating power that the chill almost instantly flushed from my body. I thanked her once again for her kindness. I knew that when my skis were ready and I relinquished the jacket, that I would need to quickly start moving again to avoid regaining the icy chill.

By my watch I was now 5 hours and 17 minutes into the race. At this rate, I estimated it would take me over 9 hours to reach Mora, much longer than the 6 hours Mike and I were originally aiming for. But with my new ski and fresh coat of kick wax, I felt rejuvenated. A banner hung over the racecourse at the exit of the Evertsberg food station indicating 14 kilometers to the next rest stop at Oxberg. "14 kilometers," I thought to myself, "I can do that."

## Oxberg

The long downhill section just after Evertsberg would have normally been a welcome relief if not for the icy, rutted tracks that made just staying upright an extreme challenge. Although the trail to Oxberg was characterized by gently rolling terrain, skiers could still be seen stopped at bottom of even moderate uphill sections applying additional kick wax for better grip. Perhaps the icy tracks were stripping ski bottoms clean of kick wax or the snow conditions were changing too rapidly with the warmer

temperatures. For whatever reason my kick was also very weak, every uphill requiring a concentrated setting of the ski to avoid slippage.

At Oxberg, my first stop was once again the food line. In addition to the usual selection, coffee was also available. Normally not a coffee drinker, I rationalized that the caffeine would give me a needed boost. I grabbed a cup sitting on the table and began to chug-a-lug, realizing too late that I was pouring scalding hot liquid down my throat. Recognizing the sensation but ignoring the pain, I sipped more gently, determined to get the caffeine into my stomach. An attentive volunteer came to my rescue, and with a sympathetic look on her face gently took the cup from my hands, poured about half of the remaining cup onto the snow and then filled it again with cool water so that I could consume it safely. I tried to thank the woman for her help, but before I could she was off assisting another skier.

Since my kick wax hadn't been working well I looked around for the waxing booth, but once finding it saw that it had no lines or occupants. A few skiers were instead gathered in a short line before a small, green-painted machine, which, after a little examination, became apparent was a device for applying klister.

An attendant examined ski bases for debris, clearing off any foreign matter with a plastic scraper. Two workers on either side of the machine each took a ski and ran the base across a small rotating drum coated with gooey klister. The result was a ribbon of klister applied perfectly in just a few seconds – no muss, no fuss. Beautiful!

The klister was perfect for the current snow conditions. Once back on the trail I immediately noticed my skis performing better than at any other point in the race – good kick and glide. I again felt rejuvenated and ready to tackle the rest of the course. Just outside of the Oxberg food station was one of the familiar blue and white kilometer markers – this one indicating 28 kilometers to the finish. “This is now a 28 kilometer race,” I muttered, and began the final push to Mora - still over 3 hours away.

### Hökberg

With klister on my set of mismatched skis to coincide with my odd pair of ski poles, I finally began to pass skiers in sufficient number for the first time in the race, although many were several age groups older than me. One fellow looked about 60 years old and had a big round potbelly that even Buddha might have admired. Everyone skied in very good form, young and older, women and men. There were all kinds of people in the Vasaloppet, and it was a joy to be among them.

The trail conditions improved significantly on the way to the next rest station at Hökberg. The ski tracks were now set parallel and uniform in regular snow as they should be, instead of the cruddy tracks that had been the norm up until now. Skiing was once again a pleasure and I began to truly enjoy the beautiful wooded scenery around me. A short way up the trail I caught up with a small, treaded vehicle pulling a simple track-setting device. Apparently, some of the local ski clubs were grooming parts of the trail to accommodate skiers even this late in the race.

As I approached Hökberg, hundreds of spectators lined the racecourse, many associated with ski clubs identified by their banner: IFK Mora, IFK Lima, Sälen IF, were some of those displayed. There were supplemental refreshments for fellow club members and encouragement for all. “Go America”, “Go USA” were chants I heard from the crowd, identifying me by the small American flag replica fixed to the front of my race bib.

At the food station I was very careful not to step on any of the discarded paper cups scattered about, since they would surely become fixed to sticky klister on the bottom of my skis. Even so, a couple of them did

get stuck, but I skillfully poked them off with the pointed metal tip of my ski pole. Although I was sure that I would be able to reach the finish line in Mora, now just 19 kilometers away, I again ate and drank as much as I could, probably more out of habit than from actual necessity.

### Eldris

The terrain between Hökberg and Eldris, the last food station before Mora, was quite moderate with little topographic relief. The trail passed through thick pine forests and tree limbs coated with fresh snow. I settled into a nice skiing rhythm, enjoying the scenery and the excitement as I headed toward the finish. One skier was stopped on the side of the trail having a conversation with someone on his cellular phone, perhaps telling his family that he was getting close to the finish line. At Eldris I downed a little more food and drank another cup of coffee, safely lukewarm this time, and then prepared to consume the final 9 kilometers of the race.

### Mora – Mäl

Nearing Mora, the racecourse merged with the local trail system. With every passing kilometer marker I mentally counted down the distance to the finish – “4 kilometers...”, “3 kilometers...”, “2 kilometers, I can do that,” I quipped. The trail passed underneath a highway bridge and then opened into a large park. I began a duel with a couple of other skiers, pushing ourselves hard as we made a sharp left hand turn onto a snow-covered street in town, “sprinting” as it were, the last few hundred meters. As I crossed the finish line, I heard a series of high-pitched “beeps” emitted from the timing machine triggered by the device I wore around my ankle. I knew then that I had won my race.



*A young race volunteer*

I had not walked more than a few meters after taking off my skis when I saw Mike Brumbaugh’s smiling face as he leaned over a snow fence to greet me. Although he finished the race several hours ago, he was able to track my progress on the course via the timing technology used for the race. With computers at the Vasaloppet office in Mora connected to the Internet, Mike was able to obtain the time I entered the food stations on the racecourse. With this information and the approximate distance between rest stops, he estimated the time that I would reach the finish line and was able to meet me there when I arrived.

Having already been through the post-race drill, Mike escorted me to a large fenced-in area where I’d be able to store my skis and poles while in Mora. Next, he ushered me onto a modern tour bus (nicely warm inside, I might add) for the short ride to Östnor. There I’d be able to retrieve the plastic bag with my gear and get a shower and hot meal at the FM Mattsson factory. Mike wanted to visit the Vasaloppet museum in Mora and said that he would meet me there in about half an hour.

As the bus came to a stop at Östnor I could see the collection of green clothes bags, several hundred by my estimate, waiting to be claimed by skiers yet to arrive. The bags were arranged according to the racer’s bib number that was printed on front. Another helpful race volunteer assisted me in quickly locating my bag and directing me towards the FW Mattsson factory just a few hundred meters away. As I walked over to the building, a large digital thermometer attached to a wall indicated an air temperature of +4° C (about +39° F), rather warm for a cross-country ski race. Those still out on the course were definitely not having the easiest time of it.

Inside the factory I followed signs to the men's locker room. The walkways were lined hundreds of large boxes containing thousands upon thousands of small plumbing fixtures. I noticed a hand-written sign attached to a nearby door that advertised therapeutic massages. The locker room itself was large and not too crowded. Many there were already celebrating their race with cans of beer they probably smuggled in their clothes bags. My shower was tepid, but it felt good to be clean and into dry clothes.

Afterwards, I decided to see about that massage. My sore, tired muscles, I convinced myself, would benefit from a little tenderizing. Only one masseuse was working this late in the day - an attractive, slender woman in her early 40's with long brown hair and a pleasant smile. We had a nice conversation where I told her of how much I enjoyed Sweden and meeting the Swedish people. There was no one else waiting and our conversation must have been pleasant enough, because what was supposed to be only a 15-minute massage lasted almost a half an hour. Shortly after paying my bill, I came across Mike who said he had been looking for me for over 20 minutes. Time flies... at the end of a race. I didn't have the nerve to tell him where I'd been.

The meal being served at the factory cafeteria included a meaty hot dish, boiled potato, fresh fruit, chocolate and locally brewed bottles of beer. We ate our dinner - Mike's second helping - and shared stories of the race while having a couple of well-deserved brew-"skis". With an overwhelming sense of guilt, I confessed to Mike about the massage. "Jeeze, if I'd have know that," he said rather disappointingly, "I'd have gotten one too."

Another bus from Östnor took us back to Mora. The town was buzzing with activity in a carnival atmosphere similar to what we experienced just the day before when first arriving at the Vasaloppet headquarters in Berga. I obtained my official race "diploma" that depicted my final completion time and signified that I had "graduated" from the 1999 Vasaloppet. Also available was a personalized certificate that showed the course profile with the relative location of each food station, the time I arrived at each food station and the average pace I that achieved between successive stations.

Ready to leave, we retrieved our equipment from the storage pen. I returned the ski and pole that I had borrowed on the racecourse to the Vasaloppet office where, surprisingly, I was reunited with my old broken ski. Although I was glad to salvage the binding, I was even more so at the opportunity to retain such a unique memento of the day.

At about 8:30 p.m. we boarded our last bus for the 90-minute ride back to the start area in Berga where our car was parked. The bus traveled a route between Mora and Mångsbodarna that paralleled much of the Vasaloppet trail. Although it was too dark to see the racecourse, the din of the bus headlights illuminated large mounds of fresh snow piled on the side of the road.

Arriving back at the Ekberg house in Lima, Örgan and Lief Johnsson greeted us with big smiles and warm handshakes. Lief had successfully completed his 13<sup>th</sup> Vasaloppet, the second toughest he said next to that warm 1997 race where skiers had to wade through the knee-deep puddles of water. Örgan was delighted to tell us that our luggage had finally arrived, transported by taxicab from a small airport somewhere in Sweden. The cab driver told Örgan that the cost of the cab transportation alone was almost 2000 Kroner (about \$250 US), paid for entirely by the airline. Lief, Mike and I were the only remaining guests at the house that evening. We conveyed our stories of the race with Örgan and each other until we were all too tired to stay awake any longer. Amazingly, my flu and cough were not nearly as noticeable as before, and I slept very well again that night.

## Postscript

Staffan Larsson, a Swedish National Team member skiing for the local IFK Mora ski club, won the 1999 Vasaloppet in 4 hours, 31 minutes and 37 seconds. Larsson achieved folk-hero status four years earlier in 1995 when he double poled the entire race and almost won. In the fall, about five months before, Larsson received a serious knee injury while on a training run and had to undergo reconstructive surgery to repair the damage. Without being able to use his legs for skiing, Larsson focused on building strength in his arms and upper body by training on snow with a sitski<sup>6</sup> that was loaned to him by the Swedish National Disabled Ski team.



*Staffan Larsson in 1995  
(photo: Vasaloppet)*

Wearing a heavy brace on his damaged knee that allowed only very limited movement of the joint, Larsson proudly and confidently stood at the start of the 1995 Vasaloppet. After falling behind the leaders on the long uphill segment immediately after the start, Larsson quickly regained the pack and managed a sizable lead. He held the first position for most of the race until being caught by the chase group near H kberg at the 71-kilometer mark. Larsson finished an amazing 5<sup>th</sup> that year behind the eventual victor Jon Ottoson of Sweden, an Olympic medallist who had won three previous Vasaloppet races. Then in 1998, it appeared that Larsson would surely come out the winner until fellow Swede, Peter G ransson, snatched the victory away from him in dramatic fashion as he caught and passed Larsson in the last few meters of the race (G ransson's time of 3 hours, 39 minutes was a new Vasaloppet record). But now, Larsson finally achieved his dream in by being the first to cross the Vasaloppet finish line, beating World Cup medallist Alois Stadlober of Austria and Olympic Champion Sture Sivertson of Norway by a margin of just over one minute.

Johann M hlegg, the year's eventual Worldloppet champion on points, was 12<sup>th</sup> in the race at 4:39:42. M hlegg broke away in the first few kilometers and took an early lead only to be reeled in by the chasing pack a short while later. Former Olympic and World Cup champion Vladimir Smirnov finished in 67<sup>th</sup> position with a time of 4:48:41.

Mike Brumbaugh completed his 90-kilometer Vasaloppet in 6 hours and 37 minutes, fast enough to earn him the "Sportsman's Medal" for finishing within 1-1/2 times the winner's time, the goal he initially set out to achieve. Jan Guenther, our friend from Minnesota and multiple women's champion of the North American Vasaloppet, was just ahead of Mike at 6:36:14, coming in as the 37<sup>th</sup> woman overall.

My final time was 9 hours and 24 minutes. To put my performance in perspective, Staffan Larsson crossed the finish line in Mora when I was at the approximate halfway point near Evertsberg. I was just entering Oxberg with 28 kilometers to go when Mike and Jan Guenther completed their races. I can't say I enjoyed every minute of the 1999 Vasaloppet, but I did enjoy many of them, and each seemed to have created a lasting memory. And although Mike may have won the Sportsman's Medal, I was the one who got the Swedish massage.

This is the story of my Vasaloppet, a tale of personal triumph and of people helping people. Although I thought about giving up many times during the race and even before it had started, fate seemed to provide

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<sup>6</sup> A sitski is a small, sled-like device normally used by disabled skiers who have lost use of their legs. Sitting upright on the sled, skiers use only their arms and upper body for propulsion.

me with just enough to keep going. So many people had helped me with their kindness and belief in me that I felt it would have been impossible to give up and disappoint them, even if most would never know.

My experience with the Swedish Vasaloppet may best be summed up with the words from a classic Rolling Stones song, lyrics often sung as an anthem of sorts by people from my generation: *“You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes you just might find, you get what you need.”*

On Monday, the day after the race, Mike and I said our farewells to Lief and the Ekbergs and began our drive back to Norway. There we would spend much of the next four days before returning home, skiing the Olympic trails near Lillehammer and the historic Hollmenkollen outside of Oslo – but that is a story for another time. Oh, and by the way, the plane ride back to Minneapolis was much more pleasant than the flight over.

The End