

Midwest Collegiate Nordic League: American Birkebeiner Intensifies Championship Chase

Twin Cities holds lead in Men's and Women's Divisions; record turnout drives standings shakeup

An unrelenting Birkebeiner course saw the largest Midwestern club collegiate field in over three decades dramatically intensify the chase for the MCNL Championship title. Sixty-five skiers across thirteen teams braved wind, unpredictable temperatures, and even blizzard-like snow February 24th through 28th on the storied trails 'east of Seeley town'.

While 45k of punishing climbing – including an atypical double-ascent of High Point – provided a sharp contrast to the previous weekend's opening races at the Mora Vasaloppet, the teams appeared eager to test their mettle and cure their near-debilitating Birkie Fever at this, the second MCNL competition of the 2020-21 season.

Although Twin Cities Nordic maintained its lead in both the Men's and Women's Divisions, strong showings from the Duluth Area Golden Retriever Men and Buckingham Badger Women kept each team within striking distance of a cumulative League victory. Meanwhile, the arrival of six new teams complicated League standings on and just below the podium – raising the stakes of the upcoming Great Bear Chase.



Above: Twin Cities Nordic skiers Lily Den Hartog and Gabriel Ehlers-Nelson tackle the climbs before their second High Point ascent on Saturday. Photo courtesy of Alex Gude.



Right: Buckingham Badger skier Doug Shield prepares to start Sunday's snowy 45k Classic. Photo courtesy of the ABSF.

American Birkebeiner Breakdown

While League administrators were greatly enthused by the Birkie’s unprecedented turnout, the near-doubled headcount has made a mess of our spreadsheets. We appreciate the diligence of our member teams in submitting their rosters, and note that any results or scoring errors are our own. Hot off a kitchen table in Minneapolis, here they are – your MCNL American Birkebeiner podiums!

Completing the **Women’s 45k Skate** in an impressive 2:27:59.3, **Laura Cattaneo** (Twin Cities Nordic) led the MCNL field. Cattaneo was followed by **Anna Engel** (Buckingham Badgers) in second, and Twin Cities Nordic teammate **Lily Den Hartog** in third.

Meanwhile, **Tony Mathie** (Twin Cities Nordic) cruised to the head of the MCNL pack in the **Men’s 45k Skate**. Mathie crossed the line in 2:09:45.2 – nearly ten minutes ahead of second-place finisher, **Ethan Anderson** (Duluth Area Golden Retrievers). **Nick Gordon** (Buckingham Badgers) finished third.

The **Women’s 45k Classic** featured only one contender: **Gabriella Brinkley** (Duluth Area Golden Retrievers), who finished in 3:50:14.0. Brinkley’s was the first podium finish for a DAGR Women’s team skier in an MCNL competition.

Douglas Shield (Buckingham Badgers) won the MCNL **Men’s 45k Classic** with a time of 3:21:14.9. Alongside Nick Gordon, Shield’s was the first podium finish for a Buckingham Badger Men’s skier in the 2020-21 season. Shield was followed by Twin Cities Nordic teammates **Alex Gude** and **Matthew Hempe**.

Looking to team results, the **Twin Cities Nordic** and **Buckingham Badgers** were in tight competition in the Women’s 45k Skate – with TCN ultimately topping the Women’s Division with 149 points to BB’s 106. They were followed by the **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers**, whose 50 points from Brinkley’s 45k Classic win put them in third place.

In the Men’s Division, a mere six points separated **Twin Cities Nordic** from the **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers**, with TCN leading DAGR 171 to 165. Close behind were the **Buckingham Badgers**, with 143 points.

Team Scores: Women (American Birkebeiner)							
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Composite Score:					
1	Twin Cities Nordic	149	Cattaneo (50)	Den Hartog (38)	Loppnow (28)	Delker (20)	Rieder (13)
2	Buckingham Badgers	106	Engel (43)	Straka (33)	Connell (23)	Oman (7)	
3	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	50	Brinkley (50)				
4	Michigan Tech	17	Stahl (17)				
5	UST	1	Carlson (1)				
Team Scores: Men (American Birkebeiner)							
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Composite Score:					
1	Twin Cities Nordic	171	Mathie (50)	Gude (35)	Rauzi (34)	Ryan (28)	Hempe (24)
2	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	165	Anderson (46)	Donohue (40)	Woods (37)	Miller (32)	Himes (10)
3	Buckingham Badgers	143	Shield (50)	Gordon (43)	Jaeger (20)	Brooks (15)	Smith (13)
4	UWEC	94	Brown (30)	Swenson (26)	Ernst (18)		
5	UST	27	Buchert (14)	Hohenshell (9)	Marien (2)	Schmidt (1)	Burkum (1)
6	Michigan Tech	24	Novitch (24)				
7	NDSU	12	Amundson (5)	Fier (4)	Schlosser (1)	Maier (1)	Wilson (1)
Total Teams: 12							
Total Skiers: 65							

American Birkebeiner Team Standings, 2/24/21 – 2/28/21. Calculated using the Mathie-Halvorson Scoring System.

From the Athletes

Men's Skate field leader Tony Mathie seemed to speak for many collegiate racers in expressing his satisfaction with the week's events. "I was excited to race up there," he said. "There was a lot of uncertainty all season, so I was just happy to be racing and enjoying the trails." Women's Skate field leader and TCN teammate Laura Cattaneo also took note of the factors that set this year's Birkie apart from the rest – saying that "Covid and the fluoro ban made things interesting." While having her skis randomly tested for fluorinated waxes kept her "waiting in line" for most of her pre-race instead of warming up, Cattaneo was still able to push the pace of her racing group after OO, and "ski smart and hydrate well, unlike last weekend at the Vasaloppet."

Jane Straka, second scorer for the Buckingham Badger Women, was clearly thrilled to complete her first American Birkebeiner on Saturday. "I never thought my first Birkie would be during a pandemic," she wrote, "but I still caught Birkie Fever! The trails were amazing, and everyone out there was so encouraging." Even though "the hills hurt," Straka "had a lot of fun and cannot wait for the next one!"

Doug Shield, Men's Classic field winner and top scorer for the Buckingham Badger Men, agreed that "the course this year was extremely challenging" – especially given Sunday's heavy snow. More than being a deterrent, however, Shield saw this year's hills as an advantage. "I favor hilly terrain, so I was excited to climb High Point twice. I felt great during the race and had fast skis which are always fun." Shield also noted that "it was great to represent [the Buckingham Badgers] one last time before graduating this upcoming summer," and credited the team with giving him the opportunity to train "with an amazing group of motivated skiers."

Representation was also on Hans Ernst's mind. Along with Benjamin Brown and Douglas Swenson, Ernst's race marked the first appearance of a UW Eau Claire team on the Midwestern collegiate scene. Ernst reported that "UWEC Nordic looks forward to assisting with the development of the [League]," and that the team was enthusiastic about "providing an opportunity for our skiers to race and make friends with other collegiate ski clubs in the Midwest!"



Above: Laura Cattaneo finishes Saturday's 45k Skate. Photo courtesy of the ABSF.

Left: Doug Shield finishes Sunday's 45k Classic in heavy snow. Photo courtesy of the ABSF.

MCNL Championship Standings

Another week of balanced showings across both the 45k Skate and Classic races saw **Twin Cities Nordic** maintain its lead in the Men's Division, with its cumulative score growing to 341 points. The **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers**, however, remain well within striking distance of the Championship title, with strong performances in the 45k Skate moving their cumulative score to 302 points. Meanwhile, the **Buckingham Badgers** had a memorable 2020-21 debut in the Men's Division, rocketing into third place with their 143 American Birkebeiner points. The Buckingham Badgers displaced **North Dakota State University**, which now sits in fifth place (with 36 points), behind **UW Eau Claire** (94 points). The **University of St. Thomas** moved to sixth place, with 29 points, followed by **Michigan Technological University**, with 24 points.

In the Women's Division, robust 45k Skate races saw **Twin Cities Nordic** and the **Buckingham Badgers** retain their holds on first and second place, with their cumulative points growing to 212 and 156, respectively. Meanwhile, Gabriella Brinkley in the 45k Classic created another podium shakeup, moving the **Duluth Area Golden Retrievers** into third place. **North Dakota State University**, which did not field a Women's team at the American Birkebeiner, fell to fourth place (with 20 total points). NDSU is now followed closely by **Michigan Technological University** (17 points) and the **University of St. Thomas** (1 point), whose Women's teams both made their first appearances on the 2020-21 circuit during this race.

Cumulative Team Scores: Women				
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Cumulative Score:	Vasa-Dala	American Birkebeiner
1	Twin Cities Nordic	212	63	149
2	Buckingham Badgers	156	50	106
3	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	50	0	50
4	NDSU	20	20	0
5	Michigan Tech	17	0	17
6	UST	1	0	1
Cumulative Team Scores: Men				
MCNL Rank:	Team:	Cumulative Score:	Vasa-Dala	American Birkebeiner
1	Twin Cities Nordic	341	170	171
2	Duluth Area Golden Retrievers	302	137	165
3	Buckingham Badgers	143	0	143
4	UWEC	94	0	94
5	NDSU	36	24	12
6	UST	29	2	27
7	Michigan Tech	24	0	24
Total Teams: 13				

MCNL Cumulative Standings, 3/2/2021. Calculated using the Mathie-Halvorson Scoring System.

Looking Ahead

After a weekend of rest and what looks to be plenty of sunshine, the Midwest Collegiate Nordic League will tackle its third and final event – Calumet, MI’s Great Bear Chase. The 50k Classic and Skate races will be scored. The results of the Great Bear Chase will determine the MCNL Champions, so keep your eyes trained on the winding trails and deep snows of Swedetown Trails on Saturday, March 13th.