

2014 Birkie Race Report

The short version

We all had fun on a beautiful day, and I had a pretty good race.

The video versions

- [Yahoo! video report](#)
- [Birkie 2014 video](#)

The long version, with photos!

On Wednesday night, my flight from Chicago to Minneapolis on Thursday morning was canceled. I was automatically rebooked on a much later flight, but Cici managed to call in and get me on an earlier one (I was supposed to arrive at the same time as Luke and Lisa so that we could share a rental car for the 2.5 hour drive to Hayward). So, I got on my flight out of State College at 6:20am Thursday morning. In Chicago, 15 min before my newly booked flight was set to start boarding at 1pm, it was also canceled. The big snowstorm had moved into the Minneapolis area, preventing the smaller planes from flying. This time they rebooked me for 7am Friday morning, which was a full day late. However, by practically running to the customer service desk and getting in the line there, I was able to relatively quickly get put on the standby list for a 5pm flight as #13. I had been in the stupid airport for 11 hours when I extremely excitedly heard them call my name as they made their way through the huge standby list that was generated due to all the canceled flights. After a further delayed departure due to air traffic congestion, I finally got off the ground, hoping that my SporTube full of skis and a waxing bench, as well as my suitcase had also made it onto the flight. After one final delay in getting off the plane due to a stuck/frozen jet way, I was finally in Minneapolis, and my luggage came through! However, the TSA did manage to lose the pin that holds the two halves of the SporTube together, so it's a miracle that my skis weren't damaged when the tube undoubtedly fell open at least once along the way. By this time, Luke, Lisa, and Luke's mom were long gone in their rental car. This was by design, however, as the other Birkie participant I had met in the tiny State College airport ended up on the same flights that I took. We hit it off and



Landing in the blizzard in Minneapolis.



My luggage made it!

wound up hanging out in the airport together, and when we arrived, we split a cab fare to get to the house of a friend of his who is on his Cat 1 (one level below pro) cycling team. I got to use one of their guest rooms, and I was well fed! How good it is to make friends, especially ones who are fellow endurance athletes and skiers! The next morning another friend of his arrived in a rental car,



Slow roads.



The new waxing iron.

and I rode with them over snowy, slow roads to Hayward, where I finally met up with my crew at bib pickup. What a crazy journey!

After going for a short ski with Luke, we went to the enormous cabin we were staying in. I got to use my new digital waxing iron to apply my recently acquired very cold fluoro powder at the base-melting temperature of 180 °C before rubbing on some cold fluoro block and corking it in with a crazy dense, high-friction cork I bought from Zach that works amazingly well.

That night snow continued to fall, and the 17" of new snow plus high winds caused three huge tents (the white kind that are held up with big poles and ratcheting turnbuckles) to collapse! A horde of volunteers went out in high winds and sub-zero temperatures to try and get the tents back up, but they were unsuccessful.

The next morning we left the cabin at 6:15 and parked in the lot closest to the start. After a short bus trip we arrived even nearer to the start, where we got in one of the 30 or so lines for about 100 port-a-potties. It was really cold (right around zero), but there was not a cloud in the sky, and the winds were very mild. Beautiful!

On my way to the

start, I ran into Pavel. We intended to start together, but after I packed up my plastic Birkie bag (just like they have at the Derby except far stronger and well-labeled) and handed it off to one of the volunteers, I managed to forget about the side entrance that leads to the front of the start corral. So instead of jumping in with my own wave (#1) and getting a decent starting position, I instead ran around to the very back of the starting corral, where I had to fight my way through the second skate wave and one of the classic waves only to arrive at the very back of my skate wave, which had several hundred people in it.

This starting position was especially bad under the circumstances because, despite the groomers' best efforts to compact all that new, cold, powdery snow, it still rapidly turned into mashed

potatoes, especially on the uphill. I tried to ski smoothly as I gradually made my way around a couple hundred people whenever I could find an opening. My wonderfully fast skis didn't do me much good when the hills had two columns of people ascending with their skis in a V-shape; there was no option but to settle in and walk up the hill behind them in the mush (there was firmer



The men's elite wave. I was in the following wave.



One of several rows in one of several parking lots.

snow in the middle of the track and off to the sides, but since we were skating, one had to get in one of the well-traveled columns in order to be have room to move one's skis).

After 8 km, the crowds finally cleared out enough that I could start skiing normally at my own pace. Now I realized that my skis really were much faster than those of the people around me as I flew by them on downhill with no effort at all. I kept a steady, measured pace, with my heart rate hovering around threshold, and tried to ski efficiently through the mush. My triceps started to tire already around 20 km, but as long as I kept shaking them out, they kept working. From about 30 to 38 km I skied almost completely alone. I didn't see any other skaters,

just a couple of classic skiers that I passed. Once we reached the next set of uphill I picked off a few more skaters, and then I was alone again for another few kilometers.

Finally, I reached the dreaded lake, which is always 3 km of flat skiing into a big headwind, leading right to Main St and the big finish. I was fortunate to be caught by a guy from wave 2 just as I started across the lake, and I was able to latch on to him. I skied my brains out to keep up with him and passed some more people. I was wearing a balaclava, but my cheeks got cold and my lower lip went numb. It felt all floppy, so I tried putting it in my mouth to warm it up, but then I couldn't suck in enough air. I figured it still had a little feeling, and I was only going to be skiing for a few more minutes, so I spit it back out and kept going!



The bag situation.



We did it!

working quite right, because they had a big tub of Nilla wafers, and as soon as I got to it I scooped up a pile in both hands and shoved my face into said pile! I must have looked like I was trying to wash my face with cookies! They definitely tasted better than soap. After downing three servings of soup in an attempt to refuel and get warm, I headed for the big hospitality tent that I heard was much warmer. I found a spot right in front of one of the big heaters and sat down. For a long time I couldn't work up the courage to go back out into the cold and look for my bag again, and eventually another finisher I'd been talking to took pity on me and went and retrieved my bag for me! Apparently somebody had done the same for him earlier. This is the camaraderie of the Birkie!

By the time I reached Main Street I realized I had used up just about everything I had left trying to hang on while traversing the lake. As such, I had some pretty serious tunnel vision coming in to the finish line, and I had just barely enough kick left to pass one last person before the finish line. I crossed the line, came to a complete stop, and just stood there for a minute or two while I waited for my glycogen-starved brain to start working again.

Once I got my brain operating well enough to stumble around, I collected my finishers pin with a 4 on it and went looking for my bag of warm, dry clothes. Unfortunately, they were still unloading some of the bags by the time I got there, and mine was not there. I had been quite warm after finishing the race, but after standing there waiting for my bag for about 10 minutes I was getting pretty cold. So, I headed for the soup tent. I think my brain still wasn't



Our very spacious cabin.

I was able to get a printout of my results in the same tent, and I found that I'd done decently well: 344th overall. I think I could have placed substantially higher if I hadn't gotten stuck at the back of wave 1, but I skied well and had fun, anyway!

Later that evening we had a lovely salmon dinner in our cabin and started packing everything for the trip back home. On Sunday morning, what had started as a joke on my part turned into the realization of an amazing breakfast, replete with eggs Benedict and sausage! After 3 hours of driving over very icy/hard-packed roads we made it to the airport, where we were greeted by Seyamack and Becky, who unfortunately weren't able to join us for the race this year. We shared some lunch and stories before heading for our respective flights. Luckily, there were no delays, canceled flights, or other problems this time around, and my SporTube and suitcase even made it to State College! Cici picked me up and drove me home, at which point I fell asleep.

And thus another successful Birkie experience was concluded.



The trees were beautiful on the drive back to Minneapolis.



Hanging out with Seyamack and Becky at MSP.