

Kangaroo Hoppet



We have got it! *Worldloppet Meeting in Munich Germany in November 1990. From left: Allan Marsland (BNSC), Tourism Vic lady & interpreter, Arne Anderson SWE (Worldloppet Secretary-General), Rolf Kjaernsli NOR (spokesman for the inspection team), Bob Lawton (Aust Ski Federation) & Peter Keage (Alpine Resorts Commission)*

The Beginnings of the Kangaroo Hoppet

The last Saturday in August, when the XC Ski World comes to Falls Ck.

In 1977, a passionate group of cross-country skiers in Mount Beauty, a charming small mountain valley town in northeast Victoria, came together with an exciting idea- they decided to start their own cross-country ski club. Some of these enthusiastic skiers had experience in Norway, participating in the renowned Norwegian Birkebeiner Ski Race, and they loved the idea of naming their club after this inspiring event. Two years later, in 1979, the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club took a wonderful step forward by organising their very own version of the famous race. They hosted the 25km Australian Birkebeiner, attracting around 80 eager participants, each carrying a 5kg pack that symbolised the weight of Prince Haakon from the original Birkebeiner legend. The race course beautifully started and finished at the cozy alpine ski village of Falls Creek, weaving through the breathtaking wilderness of the nearby Bogong High Plains. (See below for some fascinating details and photos about the course and how it was created back then.)

The Club ran this event for ten years to 1988, and in early 1989, in a decision that seemed very simple at the time, it was decided that since they had the best ski race in Australia there was no reason why it should not become part of the Worldloppet series of marathon ski races that a small but growing number of Australians had travelled overseas to take part in.

Would a small local ski club be able to host a 42km event? The simplest way to find out was to try it. In 1989, the *Australian Birkebeiner Ski Marathon* took place, featuring the full 42km race as well as shorter options like the 21km *Birkebeiner* and a 7km *Birkebeiner Lite*. The race was done in the traditional classical style, reflecting the original race in Norway and Australia's adoption of it. Thanks to the event's success, preparations quickly began to pursue membership in the prestigious Worldloppet race series.

After a lot of communication, mainly by fax, (remember those good old days before email) representatives from the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club and the Australian Ski Federation headed off to a **Worldloppet Annual Meeting in Haamaliina (FIN) in June 1990** to put the case for a southern hemisphere race in the series. Their main task was convincing the assembled northern hemisphere folk that there really was snow in Australia.

The meeting decided that before being admitted the club had to demonstrate to Worldloppet that Australia could conduct world-class citizens cross-country ski events. So another trial event had to be held. In 1990 *The Australian International Ski Marathon* with a half distance of 21km called the *Australian Birkebeiner* and a 7km race called the *Birkebeiner Lite* was conducted in late August. It was decided to change the style of skiing the event from the traditional classic to the free technique which meant skiers could use the classical style or the skating style or a combination. **The organisation, course layout, local infrastructure and participants were assessed by a delegation made up of Rolf Kjaernsli (NOR), Robert Steiner (AUT) and Tom Duffy (USA) and their report was discussed three months later (November 1990) at a special Worldloppet Meeting in Munich.** The result was that Australia became the 12th member of Worldloppet ... but with one important proviso – a new name. Worldloppet already had two Birkebeiner events (Norway and USA) and two Ski Marathons (SUI and JAP). Australian Birkebeiner or Australian International Ski Marathon was definitely not on.

What's in a Name?

Such an important decision definitely needed a committee meeting, no minutes were kept, but it went something like this. *We need something Australian. Something to do with skiing. 'Too hard .. let's have a drink'. Kangaroos are Australian. Kangaroos hop. Hopp is a word in Scandinavia meaning ski jump (or so some local linguistic expert claimed). Loppet is a Swedish word meaning bloody long ski race. 'Let us open another bottle of this excellent northeast Victorian red wine'. Kangaroo loppet .. Kangaroo hop .. 'Aargh! Someone go out and get another bottle'. Kangaroo Hoppet!*

And the race had a new name.

The process of gaining Worldloppet accreditation took 18 months of hard work not only by members of the Birkebeiner Club but with the support of many people and agencies that could see the potential of having a world-class ski race at Falls Creek.

Movers and shakers in this process included the following: Paul L'Huillier (*National Cross Country Skiing Development Officer and Coaching Director and Club member*), Allan Marsland (*Executive Officer and Club member*), Bob Lawton (*Chairman-Australian Ski Federation*), Peter Keage (*Alpine Resorts Commission*), Phil Bentley (*CEO Alpine Resorts Commission*) and Richard Green (*Chairman-Falls Creek Resort Management*).

Government departments and agencies that supported the event were: Alpine Resorts Commission, Falls Creek Resort Management, Tourism Victoria, Sport and Recreation Victoria, State Electricity Commission, Parks Victoria and the Shire of Bright (now the Alpine Shire).

The First Hoppet

The winter of 1991 was a year that all participants will never forget. It was the year the first Kangaroo Hoppet (42km) was conducted and we had not seen such heavy snowfalls in over a decade. When a further metre of snow fell in 24 hours the event had to be postponed for one day as the trail groomers could not keep the course open.

The following day dawned with a cloudless sky and gentle breeze. The USA National Team were down-under for training and racing and the biggest field ever assembled for an Australian cross-country ski race lined up in the starting area. The event was a huge success and the Kangaroo Hoppet, held at Falls Creek on the last Saturday in August became a regular fixture on the international ski calendar.

Features of the Event

In a country better known internationally for its natural environment – Uluru (Ayers Rock) and deserts, coral reefs, tropical rain forests, together with the wildlife – kangaroos, koalas, penguins and the incredible egg-laying mammals the platypus and echidna; the idea of snowfields and ski racing in Australia seems quite surreal.

That Australia is a land of contrasts is quickly made apparent to northern hemisphere skiers who arrive in Melbourne. After leaving the vibrant state capital of Melbourne with its combination of magnificent gardens, big-city shopping restaurants and theatres, the would-be Hoppet skier travels through open farmlands and the world-famous vineyards and wineries of the Milawa and Alpine Valleys wine regions to the town of Mount Beauty, nestled at the foot of the mountains. While in Mount Beauty there is blossom on the plum trees, oranges and lemons on the tree and daffodils in the gardens, just a short 30km drive through tall eucalypt forest and an increase in altitude of 1200 metres brings them to the alpine village of Falls Creek, nestled in a sheltered valley on the edge of the snow-covered plateau of the Alpine National Park (altitude 1,600 metres).

Last, but by no means least, of the features of the Hoppet is the friendly and relaxed approach to life of the Australian. Australians also love to participate in sport, and the Kangaroo Hoppet caters for this passion by offering not only the main 42km and the 21km event, but also a 7km event that attracts a diverse group of skiers, ranging from elite juniors to parents, grandparents, babies in pulks and first-time skiers.

Significance of Worldloppet Membership

The Kangaroo Hoppet as a member of Wordloppet brings the Australian snowfields to an international audience, many of whom had no idea that there was snow in Australia, a land better known for deserts, coral reefs, surf beaches, koalas, kangaroos and penguins.

A Worldloppet event in Australia creates a special opportunity for northern hemisphere skiers to indulge in their passion for skiing in the middle of the northern summer, and to combine it with an extended holiday to explore the range of experiences offered across the

diverse Australian environment. Each year skiers from over twenty nations make the trip to the other side of the world to take part in the Hoppet.

The reverse is also true, Worldloppet introduces Australian citizen skiers to the fun of international skiing and increasing numbers of Australians are taking up the challenge and travelling regularly across the world to become a part of Worldloppet with the eventual goal of becoming a Worldloppet Master. Watch out for one at a Worldloppet event near you.

Australian Ski Federation's XC Committee Chairman's Report — 1990

Chairman Bob Lawton wrote:

That's exciting! The very first Worldloppet in Australia is happening at Falls Creek on Saturday, August 31st, 1991.

The Australian delegation was delighted to successfully persuade the Worldloppet League to recognise the 42km race, formerly known as the Australian Birkebeiner, as an official Worldloppet race.

The story began back in 1988 when ASF Nordic Development Officer, *Paul L Huillier*, gently suggested to the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club that their race could potentially become a part of the prestigious Worldloppet series.

The Birkebeiner NSC shared this idea with the ASF Cross Country Committee, which warmly endorsed it in March 1990. Later that June, a delegation led by Cross Country Chairman Bob Lawton, along with Allan Marsland from Birkebeiner NSC and Pekka Paavonperra, who could speak Finnish, attended a meeting of the Worldloppet League in Finland. There, they successfully persuaded the League to send three Technical Delegates to Australia to evaluate the 1990 'trial' race, marking an exciting step forward.

It's wonderful to hear that the presentation is being celebrated as the best ever! The three Technical Delegates were truly impressed with the organisation of the 1990 'trial' race and appreciated the incredible support from the Victorian Alpine Resorts Commission.

A delegation comprising the Cross Country Chairman, Allan Marsland (Birkebeiner NSC), and Peter Keage (Victorian Alpine Resorts Commission) attended an extraordinary meeting of the Worldloppet League in November 1990, where they received overwhelming support for the Australian race.

Many wonderful supporters backed the event right from the start, including the Victorian Alpine Resorts Commission, the Victorian Government, and the Australian Olympic Committee. A special shout-out goes to *Paul L Huillier, Allan Marsland, and Peter Keage* for their incredible efforts that led to Australia's most important Cross Country Skiing event. The Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club and the Victorian Alpine Resorts Commission deserve

heartfelt congratulations for their teamwork in putting together a fantastic 'trial 'event in September and for their ongoing support throughout the year.

Let's come together as the Australian skiing community to support this exciting race! I warmly encourage all skiers to be part of Australian skiing history by entering our very first Worldloppet on August 31st, 1991.

(Report extracted from the 1990 Spring issue of the 'Australian Cross Country News')

Course Setting — 1980 Birkbebeiner 25 km race



From left: Gerry Van der Ploeg, Jack Heberle, Alex Chapman & Paul L'Huillier

How it was done

Two Skidoos were used. Front skidoo towed a trailer with all course marking gear (mainly flags), drink station supplies, and water. The second skidoo towed a track setter that put in the classical tracks (no skating in those days). Behind this second skidoo was towed a skier (Gerry in the photo above) for the purpose of smoothing out the set track.



Edmondson's Hut

The 25 km course started on the north side of the Dam Wall, went out to Watched Creek, then up the Nelse Track to Fitzgerald's Hut (drinks), back through The Park to Edmondson's Hut (drinks), and back over Heathy Spur. It finished in the Nordic Bowl. It was done in the classic style, and all skiers had to carry a 5kg pack (symbolising the weight of the 18-month-old Prince Haakon of Norway), which was weighed when they finished.

The First Australian Birkebeiner (6th September 1979)

Norway's gruelling 56km Birkebeiner tour race is the ultimate Nordic skiing race, but most Australians knew little about it until March 1979, when Colleen Bolton scored second place in the women's class. Then, on September 16, at Falls Creek, the first Australian Birkebeiner was staged by the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club. The Australian course was only 25km long, but the local contenders carried the traditional 5kg pack like their overseas counterparts.

The name "Birkebeiner" originated during the 13th century when Norway was torn by a civil war between two factions, each with a pretender to the crown. The smaller faction, consisting mainly of poor people, was often on the run, its members forced to live out in the open. These people were in dire need, so they wrapped their feet in bark torn off birch trees. Thus they were nicknamed the "Birch-legs".

When the enemy pursued their 18-month-old Prince Haakon in January 1206, two of the best skiers among the “Birch-legs” brought the little child safely over the Lillehammer Mountains. Later, Haakon became king and established peace in the country, and Norway enjoyed its heyday under him.

Now, every year, on the third Sunday in March, Norway commemorates this historical event with the “Birkebeinerrennet” (Birkebeiner race), the 5kg pack carried by contestants representing the weight of Prince Haakon.

Members of the Birkebeiner Club spent an uneasy night on the eve of the first Australian Birkebeiner. The track for the race had taken all Saturday to prepare, and the weather prospects were not good. Early on the morning of the race, threatening clouds billowed in, driven by a stiff breeze.

With this threat hanging over their heads, 90-odd participants made their way to the Rocky Valley Dam wall, anxious not only about the weather but also about their ability to race 25km—a distance that, to many, usually means a full day’s tour. Adding to this doubt was a load of a 5kg pack to be carried by young and old. Scales were available before the race to check the weight, but the packs were officially checked at the finish.

The start (*on the east side of the Dam wall*) was ideal. It was 150 metres wide and slightly uphill, and it took about 250m before the tracks converged into a mere two grooves, which were then followed for most of the course. From that point on, it was a typical tour race scenario.

By the time the tracks converge, competitors are already strung out. But only the stronger skiers manage to hang on to this pace for long. A stock is broken by the usual jostling upfront for a position and “Snap!” in typical tour race fashion. Undaunted, this poor unfortunate carries on, looking like the ugly duckling as the point of the broken stock digs into the softening snow and throws him off balance. But, thank heavens, a control point is on the ball when they hear a bellow all over the High Plains, “STOCK!!!!”

The race has settled by now, the finishing order being more or less established for the first dozen.

Aching bodies flog themselves up *Watched Creek Road*, paying the penalty for a fast start. Once at the top, it’s a beautiful ski across the plains into *Fitzgerald’s Hut*, where the drink station attendants are caught off guard, having themselves skied in before the race and taken a little longer than anticipated. But they cope very well, and most are grateful for a drink at this stage.

Minor skirmishes are shaping up back in the field, with the leaders battling out the places. The men are trying to beat the women. The wax skis out-glide the non-wax but slip uphill. Packs make their presence felt, and straps break, testing ingenuity with the question of repair – in a hurry. Hasty repairs don’t last the distance, however, and some stop four times with “pack distress” – a new dimension in tour racing. For others, enjoyment is the

object of the trip, and all is well at *Edmondson's Hut*. But then, the climb up *Heathy Spur* begins. By this time, the weather is quite warm, and the snow has that porridgy consistency.

At the top of the climb, it's a straight run home, or it usually is. Alas, the track-setters, to give everyone their full quota of enjoyment, have snaked the course back to the Dam so that the usual three or four kilometres are lengthened to six or seven. But the weather has improved, making the views towards Feathertop, Fainter, etc., superb. The descent to the dam lacks the excitement of an icy day, and most get down without a slip. A cruel finale is a climb out of the creek below the dam wall up to the observation point – a steep herringbone followed by a steep uphill ski or walk-in in most cases.

Through the finish line, then a pack weigh-in, and who would have thought anyone would voluntarily carry 6.5kg? Yet there are more than a few over the mark. Much discussion concerns the contents of the pack. Besides the compulsory parka and windproofs, "I've got rocks", "a packet of nuts and bolts", "sand", "a large bottle of water", and "dirt". At no other time in the history of the High Plains has so much junk carried for 25km on skis by so many people.

Victorious is **Lauri Jortikka** (Vic), who virtually leads from the gun. 17 places behind is **Robyn Rodd** (Vic), the first woman. A total of 83 skiers finish the course.

The race was a huge success, but not without many unselfishly giving up their time at the various checkpoints and drink stations. They all skied out to their positions before the race, carrying much more than a 5kg pack in some cases, then skied the remainder of the course, checking to see that no skier came to grief.

The thanks of all competitors go to these people.

Note: *The 1991 International Kangaroo Hoppet Worldloppet Ski Race originated from this first Australian Birkebeiner.*
(Article published in the 1979 Australian Ski Yearbook)

Kangaroo Hoppet Today (2008) & below 2018



2008 Kangaroo Hoppet

First Hoppet Poster – 1991

AUSTRALIA'S SKI MARATHON
FALLS CREEK VICTORIA

Kangaroo Hoppet



Poster for the first Kangaroo Hoppet in 1991 – Chris Heberle featured.



Hoppet 2018— another magic day!



Kangaroo Hoppet 2018