

**Broken Records, Beautiful Birkie**

Ski Festival blessed with mild weather and beautiful trails

February 18, 2009

Edmonton – With no winds and mild temperatures, the 21st Annual Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival finished as a great success Saturday afternoon. The beautiful weather helped to create some of the best ski trails the festival has ever seen, and led to some record setting time from competitors.

Overall Birkebeiner Ski Festival winner Will Critchley posted the fastest time since 1999 with his time of 3:06:22 in the full 55km Torskeklubben Birkebeiner with pack event. Critchley, 24, came second overall in 2007's Birkebeiner and managed to cut down his time by ten minutes. Coming in second in the pack event was 32-year-old Haakon Solberg with a time of 3:09:33, followed by Robin Bloom, with a time of 3:20:05.

Record times appeared in the 55km StatoilHydro Birkie Lite event as well, with 24-year-old David Nighbor coming in at 2:37:33. Nighbor, who is a member of the Senior National Ski Team, is one of Canada's top sprint skiers and is slated to participate in eight World Cup events in the future. Following Nighbor were Fraser Mills-Connery, 19, with a time of 2:46:52, and Shane Stevens, 30, with a time of 2:46:53. This was the first Birkie for all three gentlemen.

On the women's side, Whitehorse's Sara Nielson came in at 3:41:29 in the 55km with pack event, followed by Christina Johnson (3:57:00) and Wietske Eikelenboom (3:59:38). In the Women's Birkie Lite, Maria Hawkins crossed the finish line with a time of 3:25:15, and was followed by Edmontonians Claire Critchley (3:32:29) and Theres Klaesi (3:33:11). This was Critchley and Klaesi's first Birkebeiner, and Hawkins' third.

Approximately 1500 skiers registered this year, and from them the first to cross the finish line was Phil Wood on the 31km Journal Tour after only one hour and 30 minutes. Close behind him were Ian Daffern (1:35:38) and Michael Groeschel (1:42:46). At 1:54:44, Kelly Geisheimer was the first woman to complete the Journal Tour this year, followed by Cindy Bruntjen (2:02:38), and Megan Hudson (2:04:55).

"We want to thank everyone who participated in the Birkie, skier or volunteer," Executive Director Cathy Schreiner said. "With the success of this year's Festival, we expect that next year will be even bigger and better."

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