

Executive Summary: Learning from Canadian Birkebeiners

By PearlAnn Reichwein and Lyndsay Conrad
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The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival is a lively multi-day festival that takes place in the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere east of Edmonton, incorporating a variety of cross country ski events, Nordic Fair, and Viking Feast. This study reveals the origins of the festival during its first decade and contemporary implications. A community-initiated winter event in 1985, the festival saw 128 diverse participants traverse the North Saskatchewan River Valley from Devon to Edmonton. In 1990 the event moved permanently to the rolling landscape of Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area east of Edmonton. The event has evolved from early origins drawing participants from near and far to experience a Nordic ski event in Alberta. Based on Norwegian legend like the first Birkebeiner loppets held in Norway and the United States, the Canadian festival grew into a highly collaborative event as it engaged multiple stakeholders to shape parks and open spaces. The rich history of the festival provides a window into the past that illuminates the dedicated collaboration and relationship building required to support healthy citizens, communities, and environments. As sustainability, recreation, and ski heritage were central to this event, much can be learned from exploring the journey of this long standing and successful festival to inform active living and sustainable communities.

Key points highlighted in this research include:

- The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival highlights how working together achieved success in community development and local sustainability through heritage sport tourism.
- The festival attracted upward of 2,500 participants and 650 dedicated volunteers in early years, premised on Norwegian traditions, cross country skiing, and heritage.
- Encouraged by ski instructors among its first organizers, the Festival promoted a loppet concept of cross country skiing for all. Diverse participants took part, showcasing the event's wide appeal and inclusiveness.
- Volunteer organizers, skiers, and non-government organizations allied with the City of Edmonton, Alberta Parks, and County of Strathcona to align shared objectives that merged in public access to a winter sportscape and heritage sport tourism event, creating greater outcomes for conservation and nature enjoyment over time as later seen in the emergence of the Beaver Hills Biosphere designated by UNESCO in 2016.
- Outdoor winter recreation and sport intertwined with tourism and parks to create a distinctive and longstanding Canadian cross country skiing event.
- The Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival is a thriving community-driven heritage sport tourism event that showcases sport inclusion and collaborative nature-based land use.

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