

# #384: BIRKEBEINER



Image: *Birkebeinerne på Ski over Fjeldet med Kongsbarne* by Knud Bergslien, 1869.

From 1130 to 1240, Norway was mired in a civil war amongst various aristocratic parties, the Church and King. The *Birkebeiner* (rebel army) and *Bagler* (church-supporting) factions were struggling for power and land. The Birkebeiners were led by King Håkon III, who gained control over most of the country by 1204. But Viken and Oppland were still Bagler strongholds.

Originally a mocking name, Birkebeiner (birch feet or legs) was what the established party (the Bagler—a party of aristocrats, clergy and merchants) called the opposition, because they were so poor that they wore shoes of birch bark. The opposition party formed in 1174 and officially adopted the Birkebeiner name around 1184.

Their leader, King Håkon III Sverresson of Norway, was assassinated by poisoning on New Year's Day 1204, a few months before his son Håkon was born to Inga from Varteig near Lillehammer. Inga could not become queen, as she and the king had never married. Baby Håkon was born in Bagler territory, and his mother's assertion that he was the king's son put them both in a treacherous position. The Bagler party desperately wanted to control the throne, so they naturally wanted to thwart anyone who the Birkebeiner party recognized as a prince.

After Håkon III's death, the Baglers tried to hunt down 18-month-old Prince Håkon, the supposed heir to the throne. But the Birkebeiner warriors devised a plan to carry the child to the safety of Nidaros (now Trondheim), to the protection of Birkebeiner King Inge II. The two best skiers, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka, carried the young prince

on their backs from Lillehammer over the mountains of the Østerdalen valley, skiing 60 miles through a blizzard in perilous conditions. Once they reached safety, farmers then showed them the way to Nidaros, the final leg of their journey.

They had no idea that they were forging the path for so many other future skiers. They only knew that they had saved the son of their King to secure their country's future. Håkon Håkonson later became King Håkon IV and ended the civil war. His long reign changed the course of European history and was a golden era for Norway during the Middle Ages. A famous 1869 painting *Birkebeinerne på Ski over Fjeldet med Kongsbarne* (Skiing Birkebeiner Crossing the Mountain with the Royal Child) by Knud Bergslien has become a national icon. Birkebeiner warriors became a Norwegian symbol of bravery, determination and fortitude in the face of hardship.

The coat of arms of the city of Lillehammer pays tribute to the Birkebeiner, depicting a skiing warrior in profile. The 1994 Winter Olympics also featured mascots with the names of Håkon and Kristin, the names of King Sverre's children.

The modern day annual race, skied in the classic style, honors the brave actions of the Birkebeiner. It was the brainchild of an author from Lillehammer, Håkon Lie, who pitched the idea in the Oslo Evening Journal in 1930. The race founders were Lars Høgvold and Halvor Kampen from the Lillehammer Ski Club and Agnar Renolen and Peder Olsen from the Åmot Athletic Association in Rena. The first Birkebeiner took place on March 20, 1932, with 155 men skiing 60 km from Rena, crossing mountains and valleys to end in Lillehammer. The actual historical skiing distance was much longer—the organizers



shortened the mileage and set up food stations along the route. Racers were encouraged to wear a backpack to symbolize the carrying of young Prince Håkon. Between 1932 and 1992, the weight of the “prince” was 5.5 kilograms (12.1 pounds). In 1993, the weight was reduced to 3.5 kilograms, or 7.7 pounds.

The 1936 Birkebeiner marked the finish with the most dramatic flair. Reidar Inglingstad was in the lead as he sped toward the end in Lillehammer. He had about 5 meters on Oscar Gjøslie when he encountered a “Welcome” sign about 100 yards before the finish line. Inglingstad simply stopped, while Gjøslie forged ahead, for the win.

Between 1932 and 1991, the race start alternated between Lillehammer and Rena. From 1992 on, because of the facilities at the Olympic village, the start has been Rena with the finish in Lillehammer.

The race, nicknamed “Birken,” has been scheduled annually except during World War II and in 1948, when the organizers couldn’t agree on whether to keep it a public event, or hold it for elite athletes only. The first year in which women participated in the Birkebeiner was 1976, when 69 women competed. In 2007, the race was canceled due to severe winds of 90 km/h or 55 mph. Racers were already on the course when the decision was made, and 55 of the 13,000 still finished the event. The 2014 race, which was the 77th time the event had been held, was also cancelled a day in advance due to extremely high winds, but thousands of stubborn skiers still decided to complete the route.

The modern race length is 54 km (33.5 miles) with a total climb of around 1000 m or 3280 feet. The highest number of racers in the Norwegian Birkebeiner was in 2011 when 14,609 people finished. Since the Birken takes place during other World Cup events, it has become a citizens’ race rather than one for professional athletes. One man has raced the Norwegian Birkebeiner 50 times. The skiers with the most wins are both Norwegians: Erling Jevne, with seven times in first place, and Anita Moen, with four victories.

Several Birkebeiner offshoot races have sprung up in Norway—a run, *Birkebeinerløpet*, a mountain bike race, *Birkebeinerrittet*, and a road bike race, *Landeveisbirken*. There are also tribute cross-country ski races in Hayward, WI, USA, Edmonton, Canada and Falls Creek, Australia.

The American Birkebeiner (Birkie) in Hayward, Wisconsin, 10,000 miles away from the Norwegian version, was founded by Norwegian-American Tony Wise in 1973. In a world of ongoing conflicts, Wise hoped that ski marathons would bring a new level of global understanding. Thirty-four men and one woman— all amateurs, some on skis for the first time— skied 50 km from Hayward to Telemark Lodge in Cable. In 2014, over 13,000 racers from many different countries participated.