

More medals for GB team in 2019 World Masters, by *Alasdair Wilson*

The *Masters World Cup* is the world championships for Nordic skiers over the age of 30 and this year's event was at Beitostolen in Norway, just 50km as the crow flies from Dalseter, where 25 Loipers were enjoying an excellent week of skiing in increasingly good conditions.

I had spent a few days with the Loipers at Dalseter before taking the 250km trip (on winter roads) round to Beitostollen via Lillehammer and Fagenes by hotel taxi and express coach – a good way of getting a sense of the geography of Norway, but a trifle wearing. I arrived mid-afternoon in time to do a wee ski before it got dark. By the time I returned, my team-mate, Kelley Haniver, had arrived from Oslo but also news that another GB skier had had to pull out. Hans Nilsson and now Roger Homyer, both in my age group, had succumbed to a virus. There goes a half decent M60 GB relay team!

Beitostolen is a World Cup venue with a big track network and within fairly easy reach of the Jotunheim mountains. The week of competition followed the usual format in both classic and free (skating) technique, starting with medium distance (30km, 15km and 10km, depending on age/sex), then the short races (10 or 5km), followed by the long races (45, 30 or 15km). You can now choose 3 races out of the six on offer, so if you have a short holiday then you can do a medium and the two short races, or if you are into the longer distances you can enter both classic and free long races (with the disadvantage of racing these on consecutive days).



Ladies 10km free (skate) race – Kelley Haniver wearing number 305

Kelley Haniver made up for the lack of team numbers and was the most successful member of the GB team (almost an honorary Loiper, she roller-skied with us in Town Moor a few years ago when she was stationed in Northumberland!). Two more GB skiers turned up too - Chris Richards who has competed many times (from the London Region club) and Chris Maund, an endurance athlete and fitness coach living near San Diego. His Kiwi wife Janet Alexander was also there, equally awesome in strength and fitness.

You could almost include the Australian team by association (all 12 of them) since we stayed in neighbouring accommodation and waxing huts - in fact several of us availed ourselves of the

services of their Estonian waxing expert, for a modest outlay.

There was a choice of accommodation on offer, mostly near the centre of town. Kelley and I stayed in an apartment sleeping 6 but, with Hans and Roger both absent, we had a choice of bedroom and oodles of sitting room space. The kitchen and conveniently nearby supermarket would have made self-catering a doddle, and a lot cheaper, but without the variety and quality of our half-board offer at the Radisson. It was also quite sociable, with most of the Canadians and Americans staying there. (One of the great things about going to the Masters is that you meet old friends and have ample opportunity to make new ones.)



The stiff climb at the end of each lap

Getting to know the tracks is a key part of enjoying the event and performing well. The organisers made use of shorter laps to build up the race distance, with a passage through the stadium on every lap. With the stadium near the top of the network, there was a long downhill on each lap before the climbing back up. The C lap was fairly benign (mostly used by the senior skiers) but the B and A laps had some nasty climbs without much relief. My first foray on the B lap was a bit of a shock, I had to take a breather several times on the major climb (though I knew from experience, in the race situation and with a couple more practise laps, I would manage the climbs without stopping – albeit close to the red zone!) This was the case for the 15km Free race on the second day of racing, by which time we'd had extra snow and it was pretty cold. The big hill was especially tough with the snow quite soft and clingy. A fair result in the end, I was not quite last and managed a decent time considering my lack of training. (By contrast, my team-mate Kelley– skiing classic, over 15km in F3 class, the day before – earned a Bronze medal, just over 2mins behind first place.)

Next day dawned even colder (-13C) but warmed in the sunshine to -9C for the Classic short races. Chris Maund had a great race coming 24th only 21.4% behind the winner (just pipping the GB men's record of one of our Hetton regulars, Brian Adams). In the afternoon the skating races had -6C and the sun continued. I improved to 47.2% of the winner's time and improved my average

speed by 1 km/h. Kelley did even better by placing second, less than minute behind Gold medal place.

We do get a rest day! And this was a great chance to explore the tourist tracks around Beitostolen. Sunny and nicely cold, without a lot of wind, conditions were ideal to go high above town. Kelley and I had an easy ski on our classic skis. Most of the houses and chalets in the town are metres away from a skiable trail and many seem to be rentable so it would be a grand place for a more relaxed holiday. (Also there are ski shops, supermarkets, a microbrewery pub with live music – and a large swimming pool in the Radisson Blu which the public can use.)



Trackside scenery (rest day)

‘Relay day’ is either another rest day – or a chance to have a blast over 5km and ski for your country. Sadly, as mentioned, GB didn't have a full M60 team but we did manage a mixed age group team in the M50 class, with Chris and Chris and myself, plus Peter from the Australian team. Another sunny and cold day on firm tracks with plenty of spectators in the stadium and trackside cafe led to an enjoyable day.

With continuous snow over the following night and day, conditions were quite difficult for the last days of competition (and problematic for the piste machines attempting to set tracks). The classic skiers doing 30 or 45km should have had easy waxing but the soft tracks and wind meant there were many non-starters and non-finishers. I hoped that conditions would be better for the Free technique races on the last day. They were! But I wasn't in condition to benefit – my resting pulse rate had been raised all week and despite a much better than normal start on my new skis (14 years since my last new skate skis) there was something wrong and I quickly dropped back in the field. With a feeling of "nothing in the tank" I decided to pull out after the first 5km lap of 6 - a wise choice it turned out. This gave me the chance to spectate for Kelley's race over the same 30km and watch her pull back the leaders then maintain her lead on the final lap to add a Gold medal to her collection.



Kelley Haniver finishing the 30km Free race in gold position

It would be good to have more Brits join the BMCCSA (British Masters Cross-country Ski Association) for the princely sum of £5 to qualify to enter next year's Masters in Cogne in Valle D'Aosta that promises to be an excellent venue with traditional Italian hospitality, and high altitude surely guaranteeing good snow. The programme is likely to be the same pattern but may change in future to attract a younger cohort of masters with less time to stay away from home and shorter races, leaving the ready availability of marathon distance races to cater for those wanting to compete over 40km or longer. If you have done a citizen's race you can ski a Masters one with much smaller fields and won't be in disgrace by propping up the back markers. The extended programme is a different and enjoyable way of developing your own skiing experience. I look forward to seeing you in Cogne.

Alasdair Wilson