

China Vasaloppet 2008
by
Kristin Johansen

It all began with the 2007 Mora Vasaloppet classic race in Mora, Minnesota where I joined my fellow University of Minnesota Nordic teammates to compete in what I thought would be just another race to add to my first year of ski racing. As I gobbled down blueberry soup and double-poled my way in quest of the elusive Swedish horse, little did I know that months later I would hear of my selection by the Silent Sports Foundation to join the 2008 Tour de Ski and Vasaloppet China as a good-will classical skiing ambassador.

Stage 1 of the Tour began in Shangri-la near Tibet. After a warm greeting at the airport including singing and a presentation of silk scarves and wine by the locals, our first day of skiing began with a trip into the mountains. We passed crystal clear lakes and road-wandering yaks as we approached the “ski area” for the opening ceremony of the Tour. For fifteen minutes we warmed-up on a man-made, 800 meter track designed specifically for our use, only to head back down to the town stadium to begin the first sprint skate race of the Tour. Being a classic “specialist”, I found myself racing my first sprint race, in my first international competition against skiers including World Cup champions and Olympic medalists, on my first day on skate skis, at over 12,000 feet, in front of 1.5 million Chinese television viewers. After recovering from the shock to appreciate the unique experience, I can also say that I learned my first lesson from the Tour, humility.

Stage 2 of the Tour took us to Changchun which is a city north of Beijing and the home of over 7 million people. The man-power of Changchun is undeniable from the 150,000 workers at the Volkswagen factory to the force of over 200 workers it took to break the World Record for the longest snow sculpture located at the race course. Our first race in Changchun was a sprint classic race and another first for me. The technical course taught me to release my inhibitions towards sprinting and even towards the unforgiving hills. I also had the opportunity to practice my Chinese language which I have studied at the University of Minnesota for 3 years. I learned about the ski schools Chinese children as young as six attend in preparation for the day when they too can represent their country on the world scene and about how to cheer on athletes with “jia you, jia you!”. I even took notes on waxing from the Swedish waxing team and technique from fellow skiers. The next day, I joined Amy Xu of Minnesota’s Pioneer Midwest Nordic Team, the only person to complete all 6 China Vasaloppet races, in the 50K China Vasaloppet. After a frantic mass start, I was lucky to survive my first 50K race with only a broken pole!

Stage 3 in Xi Wu Qi, Inner Mongolia, began in a one-room airport. After a 2 hour drive through grasslands we arrived in Xi Wu Qi, the location of the final sprint skate race. This small town marked by hardship came to embody the spirit of the Tour de Ski China. On race day, we arrived at the course to find not only towering and inexplicably detailed snow sculptures including ruler and warrior Genghis Khan, but also the majority of the town, dressed in traditional attire, bracing the cold with friends and family to watch the first ski race ever in Inner Mongolia. Many citizens wanted to touch my skis and have me take pictures with their children and grandchildren. Here, I found myself

grateful for the opportunity to have had cross country skiing in my life and fortunate to experience and share the values of competition, a healthy lifestyle, and friendship that are synonymous with sports.

Fabio Pasini of Italy for the men's competition and Solfrid Braaten of Norway for the women's competition won the Tour de Ski China. But even more importantly, it was the Swiss skier Philip Sebastian Furrer who skied each stage in a different local traditional hat, the Chinese citizens who arrived in mass to participate in Changchun, workers in Inner Mongolia who joined in an unprecedented dance party, the Chinese whose compassion and sense of national pride can not be understated, and the dedication of those who created and sponsored the competitions that defined the Tour de Ski China who continue to render me speechless.