

Biathlon combines speed, marksmanship

By **MARTHA BELLISLE**
Associated Press

WEST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. — It's 17 degrees outside and I'm lying on my stomach in the snow with my cheek against a rifle, focusing through concentric circles on a small black dot 50 meters away.

I take a deep breath and squeeze the trigger half way. While letting out the second deep breath, I pause, hold still and ping - the black dot turns to white and I smile.

I repeat the process on the next four targets, enjoying success each time, before pushing myself off the mat. I stand on my cross country skate skis while slipping my gloved hands into my pole grips and glide away from the biathlon range both pleased and intrigued.

The day before when I signed up for this "Try It-Biathlon" clinic, part of the annual West Yellowstone Ski Festival, the woman at the counter asked if I also wanted to register for the biathlon race the following day and I said: "I've never shot a rifle before and I don't know if I can hit the broad side of a barn, so let's wait and see."

Turns out I'm a good shot, so I signed up for the race, which ended up being in one of the more challenging cross country ski competitions I've done. I've been Nordic ski racing for more than a decade and have won three National Masters medals, but biathlon moved the difficulty bar up a few notches.

It combines the physical demands of Nordic skiing with the psychological control of marksmanship.

Cross country skiing is a full-body activity that places extraordinary demands on your arms, shoulders, legs, core and lungs. Nordic ski racers also must master the fine art of picking the perfect ski wax to match snow conditions. Biathlon requires all of those skills, but adds an 8-pound rifle that's strapped to the skier's back with a specially designed harness and the discipline to calm everything down in an instant to fire off five shots in between skiing laps.

Biathlon races start off with a lap around a course that ends in the stadium where skiers lie prone on a mat and empty a five-bullet magazine before skiing the course again. Racers must ski one lap on a short penalty loop for each missed shot.

Racers shoot twice prone and twice standing in between the loops on the course before their final lap to the finish line. The standing targets are 11.5 centimeters — about the size of a coffee cup saucer. Since shooting from on the ground is a bit easier, the targets are smaller — 4.5 centimeters or slightly less than 2 inches, about the size of a silver dollar.



AP Photo/Martha Bellisle

In this photo taken Nov. 23, biathlon racers practice on the firing range at the West Yellowstone Rendezvous Ski Trails center, in West Yellowstone, Mont. Cross country skiing is a full-body activity that places demands on arms, shoulders, legs, core and lungs, and racers must also master the art of picking the perfect ski wax to match snow conditions.

Biathlon clubs

Bridger Biathlon Club, Bozeman, Montana
bridgerbiathlonclub.org
Casper Mountain Biathlon Club, Casper, Wyoming
caspermountainbiathlonclub.org
Auburn Ski Club Biathlon, Soda Springs, California
auburnskiclub.com/biathlon
Methow Valley Biathlon, Winthrop and Mazama, Washington
methowvalleynordic.com/biathlon-home
Washington Biathlon Association, Issaquah, Washington
www.wabiathlon.org

Many a heart has been broken by a race leader who cruised into the stadium to the roar of the crowd but cracked under pressure and missed one shot while the skiers breathing down his neck "shot clean" — hit every target — and took over the lead.

"There's great drama with the head-to-head races," said Max Cobb, the president and CEO of the U.S. Biathlon Association, based in New Gloucester, Maine. "It's all about being able to hold it together when you're having a good race and you have to hit your 18th and 19th shot."

Biathlon started as a training exercise for Norwegian soldiers. It's not surprising that the most decorated Winter Olympian in history is Norway's star biathlete Ole Einar Bjoerndalen, who has won 13 Olympic medals — eight of them gold.



AP Photo

In this photo taken Nov. 23, Associated Press reporter Martha Bellisle takes her first rifle shots during a "Try-It Biathlon" clinic at the West Yellowstone Rendezvous Ski Trails center

I've always been intrigued by the sport, but I fell in love with the skill and excitement of biathlon while covering the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia for Gannett and USA Today.

The races were held in the evening so they could be broadcast live in prime time to Europe, where the sport is insanely popular. World Cup biathlon races in European venues can draw crowds in the tens of thousands.

Biathlon remains an exotic and illusive activity in the U.S., but it's growing in popularity, Cobb said.

Driving the sport's growth in the U.S. is the strength of the U.S. Biathlon Team and the dedication of former racers who are running biathlon centers across the country.

In addition to the West Yellowstone biathlon clinics hosted by Marc Sheppard, the owner of

Altius Handcrafted Firearms, and the Auburn Ski Club Training Center biathlon range near Truckee, California, run by former Olympian Glenn Jobe, new biathlon centers are popping up in Casper, Wyoming; Bozeman, Montana; and Lebanon, New Hampshire, Cobb said.

These local clubs promote the sport by offering "Try It Biathlon" clinics so people can see what it's like without having to buy a rifle.

The Washington Biathlon Association keeps the sport fresh year-round by hosting mountain bike and running biathlon races, and of course, cross country ski-biathlon.

Bob Vallor, the group's president, said clinics help racers learn how to get in and out of position, and how to shoot under pressure. The organization purchased about a dozen rifles that people can use as

Centennial is chance to boost national parks

WASHINGTON (AP) — Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the nation prepared for the 50th birthday of the National Park Service with a spending splurge that refurbished Independence Hall in Philadelphia and helped complete the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway. Next year, the world-famous system turns 100 and the celebration will be far more modest.

The Obama administration and Republican lawmakers have vastly different ideas about what to do.

Both parties agree that the country's national parks and historic sites could use some sprucing up. Their shared goal is to use the centennial to improve trails, visitor centers, campgrounds and other park features that need maintenance work.

The question is how much of a dent Congress will make in a system-wide maintenance backlog with an estimated \$11.5 billion price tag.

President Barack Obama has recommended spending an additional \$1.5 billion on the parks over a three-year period. Republican leaders in Congress have a smaller birthday present in mind.



AP Photo/Sandy Huffaker, File

In this 2013 file photo, hikers look up at a fast moving storm as it makes its way through Zion National Park outside of Springdale, Utah. Many of the country's most prominent national parks, including Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Zion, set new visitation records in 2015.

Just the fact they are open to greater investment, though, is being viewed as a promising first step by some Democrats.

Areas of agreement include lifting the price of the \$10 lifetime park pass for seniors to \$80 and enacting a lodging tax for those who stay overnight, though how much and whether it should apply to campers as well as hotel guests, will have to be worked out in the months ahead.

The administration and lawmakers are also looking

to use some of the additional federal dollars to leverage private-sector donations and endowments.

Lawmakers go into the debate with different views on why the parks system is failing to keep up with basic maintenance. Republicans point to Congress's appetite for adding new units to the parks system, diluting the pot of federal dollars into ever-smaller slices.

"It's fun and sexy to add a new unit to the Park Service. It's not fun or sexy to talk

about fixing a sewer system," said Rep. Rob Bishop, the Republican chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee.

Democrats say Congress has simply failed to make the national parks a priority. The budget over the past five years has been largely flat, increasing from \$3.16 billion to \$3.24 billion, though Congress did just boost spending by more than \$200 million in this year's budget.

Complaints about the backlog extend decades. For instance, President George W. Bush noted during a 2001 speech at Everglades National Park that "many parks lack the resources they need for basic care and maintenance." He promised to restore and renew America's national parks. At the time, the maintenance backlog stood at about \$5.5 billion. The September 11 terror attacks would soon upend the nation's spending priorities though.

Most of the nation's 409 park units have a piece of the backlog.

Alcatraz, the former federal prison in California, has crumbling walls and deteriorated windows. "The walls leak, concrete falls off

the building, rust jacking is causing the building to move and crack..." the National Park Service said in a report to Congress this past year detailing its budget requests.

Mammoth Cave in Kentucky needs to have dirt trails replaced for safety reasons. "Without this project, the park may have to severely curtail visitor access to Mammoth Cave and eliminate significant visitor experiences," the Park Service said.

And a historic hotel at Glacier National Park needs a new fire sprinkler system and other work. "Failure to rehabilitate this building will pose serious health and life safety threats to park visitors and park and concession employees," the Park Service wrote.

Congress is just beginning to take a closer look at the administration's request for more money and the debate will extend well into 2016. In a recent hearing, Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, called the backlog a travesty, but said spending \$1.5 billion without identifying how most of that money would be raised was troubling.

Crater Lake National Park reopens Rim Village

KLAMATH FALLS (AP) — After a brief hiatus while Oregon was pounded with snowfall, Crater Lake National Park has reopened Rim Village.

The *Klamath Falls Herald and News* reports that park staff reopened the area Wednesday and expect

to keep it open, weather permitting.

Park spokeswoman Jennifer Walgrave says snowshoeing tours have also resumed as the weather has cleared up. Rim Drive remains closed, but the west entrance to the park along Highway 62 has reopened.

After weeks of storms, Walgrave says snowpack at the mountain has reached 103 inches, 40 inches more than the average for this time of year.

In addition, officials with the park are offering ranger-led snowshoe walks starting Saturday.

The *Statesman Journal* reports that it has been hit with more than 130 inches of snow since Dec. 9, transforming it into a white wilderness.

Rangers will take people through about one mile of the park on foot. Snowshoes are provided.

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
Open for first time in three years. Open daily through Jan. 3 at 4 p.m. Night skiing started Jan. 1 and runs Friday and Saturday from 5-9 p.m.

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
New snow: Trace
Base depth: 49"
Good coverage for New Year, light winds and soft snow.

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
New snow: None
Base depth: 60"
Good early snows have set up what should be solid season.

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
Good snow. Holiday season runs through Jan. 3.

Mt. Hood Meadows
Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 81"
Conditions: All lifts open. Packed powder groom transitioning to hardpack in areas. Skier-packed powder, spots of hardpack.

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