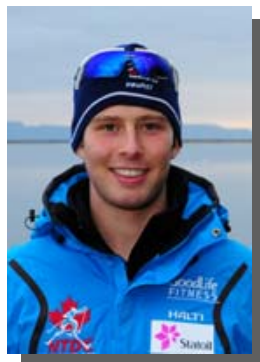


# A Steep Learning Curve

By Leif Lennie



I still remember the excitement of deciding, last May, to go to the NTDC-Thunder Bay — imagining the thrill of training with some of my peers, the adventure of leaving home, those flashy warm-ups with National Ski Team crests all over the front of them — not to mention the indecision.



Initially, I declined the invitation to go to the NTDC. However, after a telephone conversation with head coach Eric Bailey, I became quite enthusiastic about moving from Ottawa to Thunder Bay and joining the team.

Then I spoke with someone else and changed my mind.

Then I changed my mind back again.

These last three decisions happened within about 12 hours, separated only by a sleepless night spent flopping back and forth from one alternative to the other. You could say I made my decision overnight, not really considering that the ability to cook eggs in several ways might not itself sustain me, or wondering what it might be like to do laundry.

Eventually, exhausted with second-guessing, my parents, sister and I loaded up a rental van and made a three-day journey from Ottawa, through southern Ontario (to visit grandparents), via ferry to Manitoulin Island, and finally along the beautiful north shore of Lake Superior, to Thunder Bay.

I spent 10 days in Thunder Bay before our team's three-week training camp in Canmore, Alberta, which included one week of skiing on the Haig Glacier. I was keen beyond the meaning of the word. A three-hour road bike ride was planned for the fourth day of the camp. The weather was dreadful. It was about 13 degrees and raining heavily. However, as we all know, skiers train through hell and high water, and this day was no exception. After consulting my ex-personal clothing consultant, Luke Viljakainen, it was established that it would be "way too hot" for a jacket and that a short-sleeved bike jersey would be plenty warm for the day. We had an epic ride through Banff and up and down several mountains, including Mount Norquay. With strong riders like Harry Seaton, Michael Somppi, Luke and NTDC alumnus Jesse Winter along, we were assured a high pace throughout the ride. At the two-and-a-half hour mark, descending Norquay at break-neck speed, I noticed that my whole body (and with it, my whole bike) was shaking. Have I ever been this cold? . . . Am I going to get down this thing in one piece? . . . Despite having eaten all the food I'd brought along (a banana), I imagine my glycogen stores might have been depleted too.

The classic bonk.

Upon arriving back at our rented house in Canmore, the more veteran athletes ate the lunches they had

made prior to leaving that morning. Not I. Having always had a mother or father at home to make me lunches when I really needed them, or tell me to put that jacket on when it was cold out, had me lacking the necessary anticipation for this situation. I had a three-hour nap without lunch that day, and the next, I woke up with a cold. That cold would later turn into a sinus infection that would result in me being sent off the Haig and placed on the sidelines for another two weeks.

But what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger, right? What about smarter? . . . A few months later while at our training camp in Ramsau, Austria, I caught a two-day cold, which traveled around the team and made me drastically unpopular for a few days. This time there was no bike ride to blame, just common self-negligence. Must wash hands. Often. Especially when traveling.



These two experiences in particular made me realize that there are so many factors beyond the training itself that contribute to the success of an athlete. Sleep, nutrition, mental as well as physical health, . . .

Jump to December, that highly-anticipated month, for many of us the start of on-snow training and the first races of the year.

November 28 at 10:40 a.m. we left Thunder Bay airport, arrived shortly after in Calgary and continued west by van to what has become our second home, Canmore. The first week there was intended as a training camp to prepare the team for Canada Cup races two weekends later at Sovereign Lake. At the end of that first week we competed in a couple of tune-up races at the Canmore Nordic Centre — they were competitive (lots of National Team athletes and other top Canadian racers) and cold (minus 21 Celsius for the distance race). It was important for all of us to keep in mind that results at these first races were

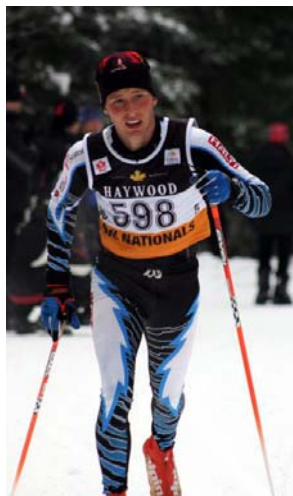


not as important as having a solid week of training and getting back into the racing groove. Still, there were some impressive results among the team. Ghislain De Laplante finished 6th in the 8 km. skate race, just seconds behind former National Team members and much older competitors. Harry Seaton also turned heads, qualifying 8th in the classic sprint, proving that he can sprint with the fastest men in Canada. Michael Somppi was 16th and Scott Sullivan 21st in the same race. All the men raced strongly in the heats.



The next morning we loaded up the van, strapped our red ski bags on its roof (making it look like a double-decker bus) and headed out on the six-hour drive to Silver Star, British Columbia, climbing and descending mountain passes through the Rockies, snow-covered peaks towering above us on either side.

For those who have never been, Silver Star is like the cross-country skier's version of Disneyland. There are trails absolutely everywhere and snow seems to never be an issue. Our team was in Heaven. We usually skied mornings at Sovereign Lake Nordic Centre — either a 10-minute drive or a 20-minute ski from Silver Star — and did afternoon recovery skis on the trails out the back door of our house on Silver Star Mountain. Come the weekend, Sovereign Lake hosted the first Canada Cup races of the season, with maybe one of the most competitive fields ever assembled in a North American-level event. Except for a handful of athletes racing World Cup in Europe, it seemed like every strong Canadian and American skier was in the Okanagan.



The first day, 127 skiers started the open/junior men's 15 km. skate race and 82 the open/junior women's 10 km. skate. Unfortunately, this day did not yield many good results for our team, with the exception of Chris Hamilton's 47th place finish (27th Canadian) — which may not sound overwhelming but considering the depth of the field, the quality of some of the



skiers Chris beat, and that he is a first-year senior skier, it sure was an impressive result.

The following day was a skate sprint. The team was determined to do better. And we did. Erin Tribe raced to a notable 26th (14th Canadian). Harry Seaton recorded an amazing 9th place (4th Canadian) in the senior men's race, beating several members of the Canadian National Team in the process. And after a disappointing qualifier, I managed to rebound and make the B final of the junior men's race, finishing 11th (10th Canadian).

Later that night, we traded skis for hockey skates and played an impromptu game against our friends from Canada's other training centre, the Centre National d'Entraînement Pierre-Harvey (CNEPH) of Québec. I'm happy to report a fairly lopsided win in our favour — those guys are a lot better at skiing than they are at hockey!

Semi-comatose from all this activity, we travelled back the next morning from Silver Star to Canmore for the Olympic trials races the next weekend. Two classic sprints on an extremely long 1.8 km. course were scheduled. A combination of fatigue and what surely is one of the hardest sprint courses in the world contributed to a few team members decision to race only one of the two days. No one from our team qualified for the Olympics, but everyone grew from the experience.

Monday, December 21, we all flew home for a much-needed break and to enjoy the holiday season with our families. I hope all of you had a great holiday too!