

Biathlon back on track in Thunder Bay

By Graham Strong

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

[Email this article](#)

[Send a Letter to the Editor](#)

[Printer friendly page](#)

Imagine running as fast as you can, then coming to a full stop for one minute. No heavy breathing, no shaking hands, just a completely still body. When that minute is over, off you go running again to the next stop.

Understand how difficult that would be, and you'll have a pretty good idea why the transition from cross-country skiing into biathlon is not as easy as it sounds.

But that's exactly what Becky Puiras and Alison Bortolon – both fixtures on the Thunder Bay cross-country skiing competitive circuit – are trying to do.

As members of the Lappe Biathlon Club, they competed two weekends ago at the Noram Cup team trials in Canmore, Alta., trying to fill one of four spots on the national team in their respective age groups.

However, both came up short of their goal.

"Obviously I would have liked to have shot better, but that will come with time," Puiras said, adding that she didn't shoot better than 50 per cent. "It's only been a year since we've been shooting at the range. The skiing is there, it's just a matter of being able to shoot with a heart rate," she said.

"I was really happy with how I did," Bortolon said, adding she hopes to go to at least two other competitions this year, including the Nationals in Quebec.

Biathlon is a sport that has its roots in Scandinavian and Finnish military.

A variation of the sport was introduced at the 1924 Olympic Games, but biathlon wasn't officially included until 1960. Today though, it is the biggest winter spectator sport in Europe, drawing crowds of up to 100,000 people.

The sport first came to Thunder Bay in the 1960s, but then disappeared shortly after the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics – at least among the civilian population. The local army cadets had it in their program for those interested.

Dorothy Brandt was the driving force behind bringing the sport back to the Lakehead in the summer of 2007, Puiras said, and the team has about seven members today.

The modern sport has three types of races: sprint, individual, and pursuit. In all races, competitors must ski a certain distance before arriving at the target range.

Using a .22 calibre rifle, competitors knock down five targets set 50 metres away. For each target missed the skier incurs a penalty, usually in the form a 150-metre penalty-loop.

In the sprint, the shortest biathlon race, competitors shoot twice: once from the prone position (lying on your belly) and once from the standing position. The target in the prone position is just 1.8 inches wide, and in the standing position it is 4.5 inches.

In longer races, skiers enter the target area more often, and usually alternate between prone and standing positions.

But no matter what the race, the key is to control your body so that you can aim at the small targets accurately.

"It's that ability to go from rabbits to stone," said Timo Tikka, a past competitor and now a coach with the club. "You really have to control your muscles and fire these shots off and then away you go again."

It is the fact that these two sports are not complementary that makes it so challenging, Tikka said.

He added it would take a four-year commitment for a cross-country skier to learn the shooting aspect and become a good biathlete.

In Canada, and mainly Ontario, gun laws are an added challenge, especially so for younger competitors. Crossing the border to compete in the U.S. is even more difficult, and teams must file permits six-to-eight weeks in advance.

To make it more accessible, the Lappe Biathlon Club will be applying for funding to set up a laser rifle system, Puiras said.

The rifles are obviously much safer, lighter, and are not subject to regulations so that anyone from kids to adults can try the sport.

According to Tikka, there are also plans to open a club in the Nipigon area, which will help with training and allow for local competitions.

The Lappe Biathlon Club trains & accepts new members year round. For more information, visit its website at:

www.skiandshoot.com



Hannes Penttinen readies to shoot at the rifle range on Pento Road during biathlon practice.