

March 1, 2009:

Crystal Mountain Vertfest '09

I missed the Crystal Mountain Vertfest last year, and really wanted to participate in 2009. Even though I'd only toured twice this year due to business problems and medical issues with my dad, it seemed like it would be kind of lame to show up and just demo skis, so I signed up for the rando race. Lowell had space in his car and lives just down the street, so I caught a ride with him and we picked up his brother Gordy (another of my ski buddies from back before the day) in Enumclaw.

We were first in line to sign up, and hung out in the lodge eating and chatting with some of the other racers. I talked with Mike Traslin from Vancouver, BC for quite a while; one thing about rando racing is that it's still a "bro" scene, and elite racers still hang and chat with the regular joes. It became apparent that some ringers had driven in for the event - Cary Smith from Jackson Hole, Stano Faban from Vancouver/Slovenia, and Ben Parson from Montana were present with full skinsuits and national team skinny skis. The Traslin brothers came down from BC, and some XC guy from Bend.

The weather seemed a little cold and windy at the start, and all but the fastest racers chose to wear some sort of softshell rather than just tights, but it turned out to be perfect once we got going. Weather was beautiful, clear with some high clouds, and a foot or so of new snow covered most of the icy bumps from the past month's drought.

The race got off more or less on schedule, with 67 skiers taking the start, and headed directly up Ferk's (I call this Lower Bull Run). About a third of the way up, the snow got very hard, and my new "race" skins (straight 65mm mohair NOS Black Diamonds with a home-brew tip attachment) slipped and took me down, right in the middle of a bunch of racers. Ooops. Several other people also lost grip, one guy on teles taking out a couple of people as he slid downhill. I looked up the hill and saw the elite guys booting (all except Seth, who made it all the way on his skis and jumped up to 2nd place), so I followed suit.



Lowell brings home the schwag in Men's Race 50-and-over, making the big boys sweat with a time of 2:03:07

My skin problems continued, and I fell a couple of times and lost traction but caught myself numerous more times. Guess I should have actually used the skins a couple of times before the race (not to mention done some training), but it was too late for that. Each time I paused, a couple of people passed me, and most of the rest of the race division was long gone. Holly passed me on the second boot-up section, a 300ft vert portion of the K2 face, and I wished her luck.

The race route wound up to the Campbell Basin Lodge, then up the basin to ascend Silver Queen. Skinning up the icy mogulled ridge with semi-functional skins was miserable, and several people on big tele and Fritschi rigs passed me, but I made it to the top (just downhill from the postage stamp sized lift station) and ripped the skins. The course traversed into Campbell Basin just under the ridge over some funky icy bumps. I managed to pass several people on the traverse, and a couple more on the ski down. As soon as the course hit the groomed, I hit a high tuck and tried to relax, hoping no one would turn suddenly in front of me.

I had my regular skins stashed, and at the bottom I switched over and headed out again. Halfway up the Ferk's face, I started to cramp badly in my right thigh, and had to slow to a crawl for several minutes. I thought about bailing, but after a few minutes of moving slowly and trying to breathe as deeply as I could, it got better, so I kept booting. There were only two race category guys behind me, but it looked like they had dropped out, as no one was following me up from the finish area. So much for my goal of not finishing DFL in the race division.

After the cramping issues, I decided to turn it into a tour day, and pretty much cruised the rest. My old Sunnyside Slider gang (Hunter Eng, Mark Rohrback, Rick Reininger, and Stan Larsen) buzzed me on way up, shouting encouragement. Kaj Bune was there taking photos, and the rest of the OR volunteer staff cheered me on as well, thankful that they could finally start dismantling the course and head down. I did manage to catch one guy at the Bearpits turnaround gate, and passed him a few turns into the descent, so at least I wasn't last . . .



Holly won the women's race division, completing two laps of the course in 2:41:10. Nice work!

As for the results, the top three in Men's race were Ben Parson, Cary Smith, and Stano Faban. Andy and Mike Traslin took 4th and 5th respectively, and homeboy Seth Davis came in 6th. Middle-aged phenom Lowell Skoog, who it turns out had been training with Seth under cover of darkness at an undisclosed location for some weeks prior to the race, came home in 7th and won the 50+ Men's Division. Seth's wife Holly won Women's Race and a nice new OR coat to match Seth's from last season's events.

After changing into dry clothes and eating/hydrating for a while, I went out for a few runs with Lowell, Seth and Holly. Since I hadn't brought any alpine skis, I demoed a pair of 178 Dynafit Manaslus, a ski I had heard good things about from a couple of people. We went straight up to Upper Bull Run, which turned out to be sun-crusted cut up mank with ice underneath. The skiing was terrible and all of our legs were toast, but the Manaslus rocked.

There were only ten minutes left of the demo period, but the Dynafit guy cut me some slack and said to take another run, so we did a fast groomer down Iceberg Gulch/Lower Bull, and the skis worked great there as well. They carved really well at high speed, were quite damp considering their light weight, and tracked as well as can be expected for a 95mm waisted ski. They have binding inserts that will only accept Dynafit bindings, and were mounted with Vertical ST's, so your binding choice would be somewhat limited. I don't know about running even FT12's all the time for lift-served, but the ski is light enough that I wouldn't mind touring with it for deep snow days.

Aside from skiing really well (the demo pair could have used a little de-tuning at the tip, as they were a tad hooky), the thing that stood out about the Manaslus was that they LOOKED really big. Seth, Holly and Lowell all noticed the same thing, not only wide (as might be expected of a 95mm waist) but LONG (though they said 178 on the tail). They are also really beautiful, with natural wood grain showing through underneath the black, and have a uniquely long and graduated tip curvature that rode over the crappy snow very well. The rep said they were on sale now at Marmot, so feel free to stimulate the economy if you have any free cash . . .



A winner in the Demo division

March 28, 2009:

Vertfest Alpental

I got up early this morning and packed the light gear, a bunch of food, and some dry clothes. It was time for the second OR Vertfest rando race of the year, and this time I had actually done a few days of training. Well, one day of training, anyway - I went up to Hyak last Tuesday and did 3-plus laps in driving wet snow, but it helped. At least I was pretty sure my skins would work this time, and my transitions were becoming, if not exactly fast, somewhat smooth.

I picked up Mike O'Brien, who had generously agreed to hang on to my coat and car keys, and take some pictures of the event. We made our way to Alpental in a more-or-less driving snowstorm, and pulled into the employee lot after spotting Seth and Holly coming out of their condo. The procedure was straightforward - sign waivers, pay money, pin your number and get ready to suffer.

Regular course-setter Martin Völken was in Europe, so Pro Guiding's Ben Haskell stepped up to set the course and coordinate the event. The course was much like last year, heading straight up from the lodge under Debbie's Gold, through the creek bed, and up the steepest and most visible terrain Ben could find. No ladder this time, but some huge-ass steps had been cut into the snow through the cliff bands under chair two.



Racers line up in front of the Alpental day lodge, race (two laps) in front and open (one lap) in back. Mike O'Brien photo

The race got off pretty much on schedule, and as usual the really fast guys ran for the first few minutes to jump into the lead. Ben Parsons, who seems to be the fastest guy in the US at the moment (he won the PowderKeg last week, as well as the Crystal Vertfest and several other races this year) was out of sight in a hurry, with the Traslin brothers and Seth Davis in hot pursuit. Old guys Lowell Skoog and Garth Ferber (of NWAC forecaster fame) were not far behind. There was a traffic jam of sorts as the group entered the creekbed, as several columns of racers filtered into the single-track lane and no one thought it was worth the effort to break trail through 10 inches of frozen crust.

As soon as the going got steep, traction problems from the icy crust underneath an inch or so of fresh became apparent. Many racers, including some of the elite guys, had varying degrees of difficulty, although I wasn't close enough to witness them firsthand. I did find that it helped to follow someone who seemed to have a reasonable amount of grip and decent technique, and watch to see when they slipped . . . and be really careful when you got there.



Out of the gate - Seth almost out of frame in yellow helmet, Lowell in white helmet, me in red and white helmet Mike O'Brien photo

There was a quick bootpack up the Fan of perhaps 50 vertical feet, then some smooth skinning to the Rollen Cliffbands. The steps cut into the ice were put in by someone with much longer legs than me (I could barely stretch up to several of them) so I was forced to use my skis to self-belay in a few spots. There was a fixed rope, but my hands were full of skis and poles (it seemed no one really put their skis on their packs for either boot-up, as they were so short).

The final push to the top (just under the patrol station) was smooth and I didn't really feel too wasted yet. I had been in a group with John Spiess and Benj Wadsworth of FOAC, and we ripped skins pretty much at the same time before setting off down International. Skiing there was not too bad, with a bit of frozen mank lining big moguls for much of the way down. The traverse around the corner from the Snakedance gate wasn't too bad either. As soon as we turned right into Snakedance, however, the icy bumps with frozen bowling balls made for some pretty sweet turns (NOT) and I heard a number of unkind comments from competitors on the way down.

When I hit the bottom, Monika Johnson was still there and I said "Hi." John S. made a very quick transition, and jumped off to about a 150 ft. lead before I was able to start skinning, but I "jogged" a bit and caught up to him before the trees. I knew Monika, Benj and Peter Avolio, who were right behind, would put a dent in our slight lead, and sure enough they caught up to us as the course wound through the trees. We stayed together for quite a while, until Monika got impatient and jumped around John and myself on a traverse, then found another gear and dropped us. We wouldn't be seeing her again until the finish. I spotted Holly also catching us, and yelled a greeting.

The shortened course this year (due to potential avy danger) didn't go out to Piss Pass as usual, but instead stopped at Knoll #1. No problem, I was plenty worked by this time. I had a pretty good transition here, and headed out quickly, nearly eating it when I hooked a ski on the crusty snow. I felt pretty sure I could hold a lead over the others in our group based on the last descent, but my legs were rubber as I made the turns down Snakedance a second time.

About halfway down, I heard a cheerful voice calling out,

"Hi Greg!"

I was in survival stem-turn mode, and turned briefly to gape as Holly blew by me like I was standing still, doing beautiful GS turns at speed through the icy bumps. I decided I would almost certainly fall and lose more time if I tried to follow her, and made my way carefully down to the base area, where Seth, Holly and Monika were still hanging out. Ben Parsons and the Traslins had probably showered and were on their second beer already, but I felt pretty good about my race given my fitness level, ending up 9th in Men's Race out of about 25 starters.



Mass start under Armstrong - I'm not sure how many racers there were, but there seems to be about 70 people in view here Mike O'Brien photo

Here's the results: [Splitboard](#) [Telemark](#) [Open \(1 lap\)](#) [Race \(2 laps\)](#)

The few rando races I do invariably serve as great learning experiences, with an emphasis on efficiency that carries over to my regular touring and skiing. It's easy to see when something works well or not, or whether you're deficient in a certain area, when a bunch of people with similar skills and fitness are skiing along side you. Transitions are especially interesting - when you pull in at the same time as someone else, and they pull out way before you, it means there's room for improvement.

What's on the list for next time? I'm pretty good with taking the skins off, but I need to work on applying them faster. I talked again with Mike Traslin, and he showed me his collection of three sets of skins he uses for racing - fast, but not too grippy, medium fast with OK grip, and grippy without much glide. I think he carries two sets while racing, and all of them are mohair Colltex skins; the fast ones the pale blue thin ones and the grippy ones black with thicker backing. I'll be looking for some mohair skins that I can use without tail hardware, maybe the new Black Diamond ones. I lost time after the second boot section because my boot toe sockets iced up - shoulda sprayed them with silicone the night before. I need to figure out a way to carry my water (actually Nuun these days, it's a pretty tasty product with electrolytes but no sugar) on my pack strap so I actually drink it before the finish. Oh, and grow some *cojones mas grandes* so I can keep up with Holly Davis on the descents!