

BACKGROUND

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BIATHLON: A BRIEF HISTORY

The term “biathlon” originates with the Greek “bi” meaning “two” and “athlon” meaning “competition” or “contest”, and current use generally assigns the meaning to competitions of physical prowess, or “athletics.” Thus, “biathlon” could be taken as the combination of any two competitions or sports.

Traditionally, however, the term is assigned to that sport marrying cross-country skiing and marksmanship. It is without question a test of physical endurance, mental discipline and great personal determination.

Remnants of ancient Scandinavian and Finnish art and pictographs depict hunters on skis dated as far back as 4000 years ago. As more and more of these men grouped together, competitions developed to determine who among them was the best.

In the 18th century, biathlon played an integral role in military life, having become more a form of national protection than personal survival. The first recorded biathlon took place in 1767 among patrol units guarding the Swedish-Norwegian border. The first recorded ski club promoting skiing and marksmanship was formed in 1861 in Norway, to promote national defence among soldiers during the winter.

True international biathletic competition began in 1924 when what was then known as “Military Patrol” was a demonstration sport during the Winter Olympic Games at Chamonix, France. With this event, biathlon moved from the realm of national defence into competitive sport and recreation. Demonstration continued in the Winter Olympics of 1928, 1936 and 1948 with Norway and Finland generally dominating the event.

Biathlon competition rules were first developed in 1955 and the concept of Modern Winter Biathlon was introduced in Macolin, Switzerland. A year later, international competition rules were approved in Melbourne, Australia.

The first biathlon world championships took place in 1958 in Saalfelden, Austria, and a men’s individual 20-km event was included in the 1960 Olympic Winter Games at Squaw Valley, USA. Relay rules were approved in 1965 and relay events added to world competition two years later and to the Grenoble, France Winter Olympics of 1968.

1981 saw the first women’s international competition in Czechoslovakia and the first women’s World Championships occurred in Chamonix, France in 1984. Three years later, Canadian biathlete Myriam Bédard skied to national prominence, winning the Canadian Junior Biathlon Championship. It was to be

only her first stop on the trail to international acclaim. She went on in 1991 to become the first Canadian athlete to win a World Cup biathlon event. In 1992, when women first competed in Winter Olympic biathlon events in Albertville, France, Myriam Bédard was one of the field and, impressively, emerged with a bronze medal.

Two years later, at the 1994 Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway, Myriam Bédard stunned the field and captured worldwide acclaim by becoming the only Canadian woman to win two gold medals in a single Winter Olympics. Her double-gold performance made her the first North American ever to bring home two gold medals from the gruelling biathlon event: a thrilling climax to a quest for gold that began on the ranges and trails of Valcartier, Que. as a cadet.