

KESKINADA SUGGESTIONS FROM XC OTTAWA

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A GREAT CANADIAN RACE

The Keskinada Worldloppet is one of the jewels of Canadian cross-country skiing. It has a lot to offer, and for good reason it has become the most well-attended cross-country skiing event in Canada.

Among its strengths is its history, dating back to the Riviere Rouge event of the late 1970's, its period as the Gatineau 55, and finally, as the Keskinada. It is the only event in Canada (and one of two in North America, along with the American Birkebeiner) that is a member of the Worldloppet series, a prestigious group of some of the most popular international ski marathons. It has also served occasionally as part of the FIS Marathon Cup, the highest level international ski marathon series for elite skiers. This kind of tradition did not develop without the hard work of many staff and volunteers, year after year, in what were often very challenging conditions.

As an asset, it would be hard to come up with something better than Gatineau Park for hosting a ski marathon. There is an absolutely incredible variety of beautiful, scenic, interesting and challenging terrain from which to develop suitable courses for the events. The cooperation of the NCC and contractors such as Lafleur is to be noted and much appreciated.

From a skier's perspective, there are many great things about the Keskinada. The staff and volunteers are always friendly, bilingual and well organized. Things are generally set up in such a way that it is easy to figure out the logistics of where to park, where get your

bib, how to get to the start, how to find the food, the washrooms etc. Seeding and results have also been well organized. In addition, the ski conditions themselves have been incredibly reliable. While the courses are sometimes modified, the event has never been cancelled. The middle of February has always been very reliable for snow, and generally cold (many times maybe a bit too cold) weather. During the last several years, race day grooming has been excellent

The National Capital Region as a destination during Winterlude also constitutes a major selling point. The Keskinada is not the only show in town at this time of year. Activities such as skating on the canal, visiting the Nation's capital and taking in the bilingual culture of the area mean that there is more than simply a ski race for which to justify the trip. Finally, as far as skiing in Canada goes, Ottawa is relatively central and easy to get to. It is accessible within a one-day drive from places including Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto, New York City, and even Boston. It is also serviced by an international airport.

A VIEW FOR THE FUTURE

With the Ottawa-Gatineau region's great snow, proximity to a local airport, ample accommodation and tourist attractions, we believe that the Keskinada loppet should be more popular and attract a greater number of skiers. In fact, we believe it should equal if not surpass the popularity of the American Birkebeiner race, which has none of these assets, yet manages to attract over 8,000 competitors yearly. In addition, the Keski has access to a greater population of individuals that can ski regularly. The Birkie is doing something right (arguably, they have a bigger budget, but there's more to it).

As a popular local ski resource, XC Ottawa receives a great deal of feedback about local races, especially the Keskinada. We would like to share some of that feedback with Keskinada organizers. Our website readers are of a wide range of skiing abilities and ages. Most are passionate about cross country skiing, and involved as competitors or race organizers for a number of events. Although we are an elite racing team, our suggestions are mindful that the majority of the racers are of all ages and abilities.

XC OTTAWA'S EFFORTS

XC Ottawa is committed to making the Keskinada a better event, and have already made great efforts to promote the race through our website www.xcottawa.ca, which receives over 1,000 visitors/day during the winter, and up to 1,700 around Keskinada race time. Here's what we've done:

- **Keskinada Loppet Archives.** We had heard comments that the Keskinada lacked this sort of history . . . a collection of race stories, photos, training strategies, etc. from years past. We put this information together, and encourage readers to send us stories and photos about their racing experience. <http://www.xcottawa.ca/keskinada.php>
- **Keskinada Waxing Suggestions.** We test various wax combinations for the conditions the day before the race and post the results up on our website. This feature has been very popular.
- **Keskinada Articles.** We post many articles about the Keskinada. For example, since the local media is sometimes uninformed about who's racing or who are the

race favorites, we have posted preview articles highlighting who to watch. We also have many great stories from an older generation (Keski moms/Keski dads).

SUGGESTIONS

Website

- The Keskinada website (www.keskinada.com) format and content could be improved to make it more interesting and easier to navigate to help users easily find what they're looking for. It should also include more content and articles that will motivate them to enter the race. We suggest that you look at the following:
 - www.birkie.com for ideas. They have very good content and format. Specifically the FAQs, race survey, and trail reports are very informative.
 - Another great event website is that of the Ottawa National Capital Marathon Race weekend race (www.ncm.ca). Of note, the progression and current status of this event is impressive and a good model to follow (from a small marathon to a race attracting a world-class field and over 10,000 competitors). The race director (John Halvorsen) is a Norwegian and involved in xc skiing, so he may have some ideas for you.
- A few content ideas:
 - Provide many more updates to maintain interest.
 - People love photos. Photos of event should go up within the week of the event.
 - Skier profiles. From beginner, elite, older folks skiing both days – these stories are almost always inspiring and motivating.
 - A prominent link to the XC Ottawa Keskinada Archives.
 - Add more trail reports or links to reports (e.g. XC Ottawa trail reports).
 - Add photos of trail throughout the year.
 - More recommendations on travel details (getting to Ottawa).

Feedback/Communications

- **Generally the communications with race participants is poor.** The Keskinada website contains few updates, especially in the critical month leading up to the race. Course conditions, weather conditions, course changes and reasons for course changes, possibilities of race delays, etc. should all be communicated to participants as soon as possible. For example, in years where the course has changed on race morning it's been impossible to find an updated map or description. This is frustrating for every participant and to spectators alike. Simply knowing you are doing 42km isn't enough.
- **Participant Feedback.** Ask participants what they thought of the event, and what they want! See the Birkie's feedback survey for an example: <http://www.birkie.com/?page=1092>
- **Keski Newsletter.** A monthly Keskinada Newsletter similar to the Birkie's "Carpe Skiem!" This could contain event updates, reminders, nutrition tips, waxing tips, skier profiles, training advice. XC Ottawa may be willing to help with the nutrition tips, waxing tips, and training advice.

Race Promotion

- **Publicize A-seed skiers** (local, Canadian, International) and get that information to the local news media. Every running race and marathon does that, why not the Keski?
- **Invite former National Team skiers** to participate, and pay their way. What was Beckie Scott doing that weekend? Sara Renner? Robin McKeever? Milaine Theriault? Firth Sisters? Vic Emery? Pierre Harvey? They should also consider adding a former National Team skier as an event ambassador and profiling them on the website in advance.
- **Attract more European racers.** To do this, coordinate a homestay program. Many local skiers would love to host elite athletes from around the world.
- **Ottawa involvement.** There seems to be very little "Ottawa" involvement with the Keski. We don't hear or see anything about a recruitment of volunteers in Ottawa papers or on the radio. It makes sense to do this when the Ottawa side is 6 times bigger!
- **Race Day Radio.** The Birkie has race day radio coverage and interviews with people finishing. That technology is cheap and there are probably college students and local radio that would likely do it!

Pre-Keski Promotional Events

- **Keski climb.** This is a good event, but participation numbers could be improved. It's surprising that more runners and cyclists don't take part. Would it be better attended if a rollerblading component were involved? Publicize more?
- **New event idea:** organize a free day in the fall, where people "ski walk" parts of the course (e.g., #5, 15) as a "training" event. XC Ottawa could help publicize it, and try to get the local club kids out too. If it started at Skinouk it would be popular and get them in the media and help them advertise a bit. Perhaps advertise it as a huge "Nordic Walking" festival or something and get lots of press.

Link with a Charity

- Many mass participation sports events link themselves with a charity. It is an obvious means by which both the event and the charities stand to benefit. Essentially, the popularity of the one helps the other, and vice versa, with very little cost to either side other than the work involved in working out the details of the arrangement.

Lower Entry Fee

- Many skiers see the high entry fee as a deterrent to racing the Keskinada. They consider the price too expensive when they can just go skiing in the park anyway. There is no big benefit to it the way there are at running races, marathons or triathlons - closed roads, full access, etc. We believe the high price is a huge limiting factor for many.

Involve the Local Ski Community

- Running an event like the Keskinada is a huge undertaking. The Ottawa-Gatineau region hosts a number of ski clubs that have an enormous amount of knowledge

and capacity with respect to organizing ski races. For reasons that are not clear, the local clubs have never been very involved with the Keskinada. It would be worthwhile to make more use of the local clubs, who in turn, could expect to benefit from their involvement with the Keskinada.

- Of note, the Birkie gives out bursaries of \$25-50k a year to local clubs.

Keskinada Race Course

- **Early Season Preparation.** Spend more time during the early season doing work on the trails that are most likely to suffer if snow is thin, as opposed to re-routing the course to involve more sections of the parkway network. The technical sections of the present course (Ridge Road, Trail 3 and Trail 15) add immeasurably to the challenge and interest of the race. When they are missing it really hurts the event as a whole. Without doubt, this requires more work (shoveling, leveling etc) during the early part of the season. Judging from the comments we have received, however, it would be well worth the effort.
- **A Fair and Exciting Finish.** While the new Start/Finish area with a lap around a track adds to the excitement of the event, we think organizers can still make the finishing stretch better for participants and spectators.
 - Several problems have occurred in previous years when the top skiers are required to overtake skiers in the 25km event. For the elite skiers to consider it a worthwhile event, they must be guaranteed that the race will be fair. Having an adequate number of finishing lanes is also extremely important when there are often groups of several skiers arriving at the finish line at once.
- **Signage.** Signs on the course need to be improved. The #'s are small and if you are going fast, it's hard to catch anything more than the huge Keski logo.
- **Trails Used.** We have received mixed feedback about the new course (trail 15). Most skiers like using more of the trail network and less of the parkways, but we did get many comments about bottlenecks on the narrow trail 15.
 - From the perspective of quite a few xcottawa.ca readers, the current 53km race courses, while adequate in many respects, do not take full advantage of what Gatineau Park has to offer. Some ideas worthy of consideration include the following:
 - One idea might be to consider going back to the original Gatineau 55 race course, which included a descent of both Trail 3, the Fortune Parkway, a crossing of Meech Lake, and the climb to Champlain lookout from P12. Without a doubt, this course had character! Nothing like a lake crossing followed by a very tough climb at roughly 30kms to generate some good stories afterwards. While some argue that conditions on the lake were unreliable (and occasionally impassable) one could always keep the original course as Plan A, with a Plan B in as back up. Sticking to the same course year after year does generate a certain tradition, and this course, to our knowledge, was the only one to be used enough years to have that sense of tradition.

Back-Up Planning

- **Have a good back-up plan for the course,** and do not wait for NCC & the groomers to take care of a revised course on short notice. Organizers should

actively go out with volunteers and shovels. If organizers asked for help, they would get it from people that want to race. Organizing this would not be hard, and pay off big time! This needs to be part of a long-term plan, not a last-minute adjustment.

- In comparison to many World Loppets and ski events that now have to truck in all of their snow, fixing up small portions of a race course is certainly achievable.

Race Format and Schedule

- **Skate Saturday, Classic Sunday.** The 53km Skate is the "main event." If the skating events were held on Saturday and the classic races Sunday, more skiers would do both events, increasing the number of participants. Also, both of these races would be more competitive. Or, consider alternating days of classic and skate race from one year to the next.
- Add a 5K skate for kids. Right now the shortest skate race is 10K.

Spectator Interest

- The 9km bottom loop is a definite plus for spectators, but a lot more could be done to attract spectators to the event, which will also make the race more interesting for skiers!
- **Spectator Areas.** One idea would be to have designated "spectator areas" with a party atmosphere: music, warm fires, food etc. These could be set up at various locations on the course. It is hard to attract spectators without some kind of draw apart from the race. Some areas where this could be considered are P5, the top of Penguin (with access from P7), and Kingsmere.

Sprints

- Sprints should be an exciting event that attracts many spectators. The Keskinada Sprints were poorly attended, which likely led to their cancellation in 2007. We believe a better location and better-run races would make for a much more popular event.

Skier Rewards/Skier Loyalty

- **Loyalty Program.** The most popular discussion at the Birkie is "What number is this for you?" Many people are doing it again so they can reach a 5-year goal, 10-year goal, etc. Instituting a sort of long-term participation award would be a great idea. For example, Race 10, get one free; free lifetime after 25 races; or similar. The Birkie also has your yearly participation number on your bib.
- **Skier rewards:** Clubs and groups should be encouraged to participate and get some sort of recognition. Some sort of participation points and a certificate for each group can go a long way!
- **Prizes.** The toques for 50K finishers are great!
- **Medals for finishers of 2, 5,10K races.** Kids really like medals and are disappointed with getting just a pin. Olympians win medals...kids want medals too!
- **Respond to complaints and concerns.** XC Ottawa received countless e-mails from frustrated skiers saying they'd never do another Keskinada because of the

course changes. More explanation of the reasons for the changes on your website may have assuaged some of the angry participants.

Elite Racing

- Currently, the brightly coloured bibs for the women, a generous top 5 prize purse and top Canadian award are positive notes for the elite event. Here are some other suggestions we have:
- **FIS World Marathon Cup Status.** Attracting a strong international elite field would add to the quality and stature of the Keskinada. Organizers should do everything possible to make the Keskinada a part of the FIS Marathon Cup circuit at least once every 2-3 years. Yes, this is expensive. On the other hand, it adds a great deal to the colour of the event to have top-level international skiers present. Many competitors, even the slower ones, are interested to see how close to the best skiers in the world they will be. It also adds considerably to spectator and media interest. If being a part of the FIS Marathon Cup is financially impossible, consider other ways of attracting top skiers. Possibilities include making it the National Championship 50km race, or having be an official part of the Canada Cup or Canada Cup Nor-Am series.
- Over the past several years the number of elite skiers has dwindled. The Keskinada is the biggest event in Canada, and it should be possible to attract the top skiers. The rationale for this is to create both prestige and publicity which, in the long run, are likely to add to the appeal of the event and to increased participation numbers.
- If the Keski manages to attract a large field of elite women, start them 20 min ahead of Elite men and use a chase format (will a woman or man cross the finish line first?). Award an extra prime for winner of the chase.

Post-Race Food

The Keskinada has a reputation for the worst-ever post-race meal. This has come up several times in xc-ski forums and even race reports! Although we feel this is secondary to the race and would prefer to see money/efforts spent on the race itself, the comments are so overwhelming that it obviously does mean a lot to many, so it's worth looking into better food.