

Worldloppet: a dream that has brought skiers together around the world

Tom Kelly

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Tom Kelly worked closely with Tony Wise in the formation of the Worldloppet as public relations director. He was on hand for the first meeting of the member races at Telemark in 1978 and the very first Worldloppet race in Austria in 1979. He later went on to form a travel company, Worldwide Nordic USA, which specialised in Worldloppet travel. Today Kelly remains active in the sport as the vice president of the U.S. Ski Team and is active in the International Ski Federation as FIS PR and Mass Media Committee chairman.

In all of sport on our great planet, there is nothing like the Worldloppet. Each year tens of thousands of skiers from around the globe come together to compete in remote locations known to them only because of the Worldloppet. And thousands of skiers have achieved a personal dream by competing in ten or more races, proudly displaying a gold medallion for their personal achievement as Worldloppet Masters.

The Worldloppet was the dream of Tony Wise, an American entrepreneur who conceived the idea as a means of bringing long distance cross country ski races around the world together. It is its first 30 years, it has touched literally millions. Today the Worldloppet Ski Federation unites 14 ski marathons on four continents: Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, with over 90,000 skiers enjoying the excitement of the Worldloppet marathons and building new friendships around the world every year.

WORLDLOPPET FOUNDER TONY WISE: A MAN OF DREAMS

Tony Wise, who died in 1995, was a man of dreams. And he saw his dream of an international ski series for what he called 'citizen skiers' come true with the formation of the Worldloppet in 1978. But his dream was a long time coming.

Wise grew up in the small logging town of Hayward in remote northwestern Wisconsin, over 700 km north of Chicago, where lumberjacks felling trees had been one of the primary industries for a century. Wise served in Germany's Bavaria region with the U.S. Army during World War II. He first learned about alpine skiing in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, site of the 1936 Olympic Winter Games.

Wise returned to America after the war, getting his MBA from Harvard. He settled back in his hometown of Hayward, Wisconsin to start his own ski area in the nearby village of Cable. He named it Telemark in honor of his ancestral roots in Norway, the birthplace of the sport. Telemark boasted a very tiny ski hill – just over 120 meters – but became a very popular destination for alpine skiers in the 1940's, 50's and 60's. What made it popular was Wise's ability for pleasing people with entertainment and camaraderie among skiers, offsetting the fact that the hill just wasn't very big. Telemark's Rathskeller bar became one of the most popular après ski spots in America.

Wise was a big thinker. He and his staff were always on the lookout for the next great idea. He was a pioneer in snowmaking and grooming in an era when resort owners had to develop the technology themselves. And he would hire the best ski instructors from Norway and Austria, two countries most associated with the sport's roots. He and his staff would constantly look at the big resorts in the American Rocky Mountains and around the world for new ideas.

CROSS COUNTRY SKIING COMES TO TELEMARK

Wise knew that his Mount Telemark could never rival the big mountains of the Alps or the Rockies. But in the 1970's, he discovered cross country skiing and knew that the rolling hills and wooded trails were ideal for a world class cross country ski area. Cross country skiing was still a fledgling sport in America. But statistics like that never influenced Wise in his decisions.

In the winter of 1972-73, Wise opened his cross country ski trails. It was the same year the first guests enjoyed the fabulous, four-star Telemark Lodge hotel and conference center. Wise was known far and wide as the P.T. Barnum (historic circus owner) of skiing. At times it seemed like he had a new idea every day on how to promote his new lodge and his new sport of cross country skiing. He was the kind of marketing genius who would throw thousands of ideas against the wall in the hope that one would stick. And in 1973, one stuck!

Wise was steeped in history, including his own personal Norwegian heritage. He had long admired the history of the sport in Norway, and was familiar with the legendary story of the child prince Haakon Haakonson, who was carried to safety from Norway to Sweden centuries earlier. The daring rescue was embodied in the Norwegian Birkebeinerrennet ski race where participants carry a small rucksack signifying the child prince.

So in 1973, the American version of that race was born as the American Birkebeiner. Wise's dream was that someday thousands of skiers would participate and that the resultant promotion would put his new cross country ski area at Telemark on the map. 35 skiers took part in the first race from Hayward to Telemark, 55-km away (34 were to finish). Within just a few years, thousands of skiers were participating, including three charter planes of Norwegians in the mid-70s. Within three years, his dream of becoming a true international race had come true.

With the American Birkebeiner well on its way, Wise had another international idea. He knew that inviting the U.S. Ski Team to train at Telemark would boost the awareness of his resort. It worked. And when there was no snow for the U.S. Olympic Trials in December, 1975, Wise invited the Team to Telemark where young Bill Koch led the qualifying and went on to win America's only Olympic medal. A year later, the top cross country skiers in the world came to Telemark for the first Gitchi Gami Games, part of the