



Giulio Giovannini of Marcialonga



Worldloppet logo in ice

Lindstrom first skied the Vasaloppet in the early '70s. And he went to the Finlandia (skiing it five times in that decade), where he was the only American. The Finnish promoters Risto and Leila Rytökoski would later play a key role in the Worldloppet. He then brought word of the formation of the Euroloppet in 1975 back to Wise. "Tony knew quite a bit about it but said he really wanted to make it a bigger international series," recalled Lindstrom.

The origin actually goes back to 1973 when three of eventual Worldloppet races formed the Alpenfris – three important races in the heart of the European Alps – Germany's König-Ludwig-Lauf, Austria's Dolomitenlauf and Italy's Marcialonga. The first Alpenfris was held in 1974. That same year the Swedish Vasaloppet and Finnish Finlandia Hiihto had sent their requests to join. The request was discussed at a meeting in Moena, Italy and in 1975 new long distance race series the Euroloppet began.

Wise mapped out a plan with his staff at Telemark including manager Dick Simono and Public Relations Director Tom Kelly. His plan included the five Euroloppet races (Austria, Dolomitenlauf; Italy, Marcialonga; Germany, König Ludwig Lauf; Finland, Finlandia Hiihto; and Sweden, Vasaloppet). Looking to add more races, he included the Swiss Engadin Skimarathon and the Norwegian Birkebeinerrennet. And for North America, he added the Canadian Rivière Rouge along with his own American Birkebeiner for the original nine races.

Wise and his staff then began to contact each of the races, inviting each nation to send its race director and a skier to the 1978 American Birkebeiner, providing them with airline tickets to fly to a place most of them had never heard of. And on Feb. 23-24, 1978, at Telemark Lodge, Wise presented his plan to a gathering of representatives from nine nations.

Wise presented an ingenious plan to mix what he called 'citizen skiers' with the elite racers in the sport – something still today unique among global sports. Think about it, in what other sport can thousands of recreational athletes share a race course with the best in the world? It was a brilliant idea.

Reaction from the European organisers was generally enthusiastic, albeit a bit sceptical at this new friend from America who had sent them all free airline tickets.

Skiers from each of the invited nations enhanced the international field at the sixth American Birkebeiner. And the discussion among the international race organizers set the groundwork for what would be an historic accomplishment when the Worldloppet was officially formed a few months later.

#### **THE WORLDLOPET DREAM BECOMES A REALITY**

It was a spirited discussion in Uppsala, Sweden, a few months later at the annual meeting of the Euroloppet at the Esso Motor Hotel. In addition to the agenda for the five-event series, members of all the proposed Worldloppet nations (except Norway) convened to discuss the little challenges and rules to establish the new series.

When Wise asked the attendees who was in favour, only the USA and Canada were initially ready to confirm. The others approved the idea in principle but had questions: Germany wondered about financing, Finland wanted to maintain the Euroloppet as an independent organisation and keep the original race dates, Switzerland supported Finland regarding keeping the calendar, and Italy stressed keeping the individual identity of the races.

"The races should retain their own individuality," said Italy's Giulio Giovannini. "Some aspects of the races should have uniformity such as trail markings, ski markings and timing. And we could all gain better knowledge of the technicalities involving racing by an exchange of ideas."

"If such a league is to be formed it is most important that all communications and advertisements for our races contain information promoting the World Loppet League in order to gain worldwide publicity," said Germany's Fritz Lang.

In the end, most of the questions were answered and the group moved forward with the plan. Finland was selected to design the Worldloppet medal and logo. And the American Birkebeiner was nominated as headquarters of the new World Loppet League for the next three years, with Wise named as the first secretary general.

The Norwegian Birkebeinerrennet's requirement that skiers all wear a backpack to symbolise the rescue of the child prince Haakon Haakonsson would be a burden for elite skiers. Many were reluctant to agree to having elite