



PHOTO: KANGAROO HOPPET

Worldloppet inspectors Rolf Kjaernsli, Robert Steiner and Tom Duffy wearing their race bibs at the 1990 inspection of the Australian International Ski Marathon

The Dolomitenlauf, which was celebrating its 10th anniversary, was a big success. Swede Matti Kuosko took the win. But it was a challenging first year with few really knowing much about the new series and few elite athletes thinking about coming to North America to qualify for the title. Wise stepped in to lobby and assist to ensure that sufficient skiers came to either the Canadian Rivière Rouge in mid-February or to his American Birkebeiner a week later – the same weekend as the Finlandia Hiihto.

While Kuosko knew little about the Worldloppet in January, he would learn much more with an invitation from Wise to come to America. He was one of a number of elite skiers who made the trek to America including Sweden's Tommy Jönsson, Norway's Per Knotten and international star Magne Myrmo (who was too sick to start), Italy's Ulrico Kostner Finland's Pentti Joronen, Austria's Rudi Kapeller, and more. Kuosko went on to win the first Worldloppet title.

The first season ended with 50,000 participants and 315 Worldloppet passport holders.

After a successful opening season, Worldloppet organisers met in Munich in June.

According to the official minutes, "In summary each race felt the World Lop-pet League was a good idea and welcomed the opportunity to be part of it. All members felt an obligation to see it work, and strengthen the League as an organisation for the benefit of cross country skiing and skiers." Finland's Risto Rytökoski was convinced that the success of the series depended on the agreement on the race dates calendar. But there was no settlement of that conflict then, and there still has not been 30 years later. Other discussion points included the ranking system and admittance of new members. Wise was very aggressive on new members, but most other races were less enthusiastic about growing too quickly.

The one race that did gather broad interest was the French La Transjurassienne. A second Italian race, the Pustertaler Ski Marathon, was also interested but Wise and others were clear on one race per nation.

1980: THE FIRST WORLDOPPET MASTERS

The challenges of date conflicts caused quite a stir in year two. It would be a few years until someone would figure out how to do both the American Birkebeiner and Finlandia Hiihto on the same weekend in the same year (American Stuart Stevens did it for a film project). So it would be year two before anyone could qualify to be the first Worldloppet Masters. And what a battle it was!

The first potential date for anyone to complete all nine races was the 1980 American Birkebeiner. Always a savvy promoter, Wise had figured that out and was ready to take advantage of the publicity opportunity at the finish line. But a strange thing happened on the way to the finish.

The first Worldloppet Master candidate across the finish line in the American Birkebeiner was local Hayward, Wis. skier Carol Duffy. Finishing a short time later was German skier Heinrich Popp. Wise proudly presented medal number one to Carol Duffy (her husband Tom received number three) and number two to Popp. Popp, however, said he should be number one – after all, Carol Duffy hadn't skied the actual Vasaloppet a year earlier. He was somewhat correct. The Vasaloppet had not yet allowed women into the primary race, so Duffy had to ski a separate race, on the same course, earlier in the week.

After a spirited discussion with Popp, Wise had the solution: Carol Duffy would receive medal number zero and Heinrich Popp received the number one medallion.

One of the most interesting Worldloppet Masters in year one was American Steve Fossett. The American commodities broker from Chicago had little cross country experience, but had heard about the Worldloppet a year earlier. Fossett went on to become one of the world's greatest adventurers, holding over 100 world records or firsts including the first non-stop flight around the globe.

THE GROWING WORLDOPPET

Wise's dream was to expand the Worldloppet literally around the globe. His plan was ambitious – far more ambitious than some of the more conservative European race organisers. In particular, Wise hoped to expand the Worldloppet into the then Eastern Block looking specifically at the Jizerska Padesatka in then Czechoslovakia and the Murmansk Marathon in the northern Soviet Union. Kelly visited both sites in the early '80s, with Wise joining him at the 1984 Murmansk event. But there was little support.

Ottawa, Canada was the site of the 1980 Worldloppet meeting – the first outside Europe. The formal title of the World Lop-pet League was officially changed to Worldloppet. The first new addition to the Worldloppet, La Transjurassienne, was approved, but it was also decided that there would be no further expansion until a development plan was implemented. The French race was an easy addition to the European-focused series. The next additions would be tougher.

Wise pushed hard to add a race in Asia. With the sport booming in Japan, that was the next natural stop. So in 1985, the Sapporo International Ski Marathon welcomed the Worldloppet despite protests from the larger Asahikawa Ski Marathon. Kelly took a large group of American skiers to the first race in Sapporo in 1985. And with the addition of the Japanese race, Wise saw the first phase of his global plan come to be.