

2008 Hoigaard's Challenge Recap

The City of Lakes Trail Loppet – the third leg of the Hoigaard's Challenge – became a battle of attrition. David Nelson of Medicine Lake came into the race with eight men within 27 minutes of his combined Loppet-Tri-Loppet time of 2:52:07. Many of those athletes did not make it out for the Trail Loppet. But looking around the start line, Nelson saw Everett Myers, who was in third place after the Tri-Loppet, and David Piphon, who won the Tri-Loppet but still sat nearly 27 minutes back, in ninth position.

On the women's side, Kim Rudd led Hilary Patzer and Diana Munger after the Tri-Loppet, with the next fastest woman sitting more than an hour back, in fourth position. Rudd had been sick in the week before the race, but decided to tough it out in order to earn her shot at the Bearskin trip. When she showed up at the start line, Rudd did not see Patzer (she has apparently moved out of the state) and her friend Diana Munger was out because of a torn anterior cruciate ligament (an ultimate Frisbee injury). Barring disaster, all Rudd needed to do was finish and she would be the Hoigaard's Challenge champion.

Rudd took the pace out slow and for the first several miles was running in third place for the women – with Kathy Provenzano and another woman in front of her. Provenzano is a seasoned runner (she was eighth at the recent City of Lakes 25K) and a Bryn Mawr resident (and her husband Jon manages Chiang Mai Thai – an Uptown Thai restaurant that sponsors the Loppet). But at about the 10 kilometer mark, Provenzano followed a group of men in the wrong direction (apparently they ran the last mile of the race a bit early). Provenzano's misfortune worked in Rudd's favor. As it turned out, she magically went from third to first place and never relinquished her lead again.

"I felt good," said Rudd. "I was a little nervous about being sick in the beginning, and I just wanted to make it through the race since I had a pretty good lead for the Hoigaard's Challenge crown – but as the race wore on I felt better and better. I kept expecting to see the other women coming up behind me and really poured it all on the last two miles . . ."

On the men's side, because the *Half-Marathon* and the *5K* started separately this year, the pace off of the start was not quite as brutal as it was in past years. Still, once the runners hit the hills, the field spread out quickly, with two physicians, local favorite Zach Handler and Dave Piphon of Duluth, quickly establishing themselves at the front of the pack.

Handler and Piphon ran the entire race together, trading leads back and forth. Piphon (pronounced Peep-O) came into the race in ninth place in the Challenge Race Series – over 26 minutes behind Nelson. Piphon had made up 11 seconds on Nelson while edging him out for the overall victory in the City of Lakes Tri-Loppet (see www.tri-loppet.com), but after finishing nearly 27 minutes behind Nelson in the Loppet ski race, he had a monumental task ahead of him if he wanted to wrest the Challenge prize from Nelson in the Trail Loppet.

As the race developed, a number of factors worked in Piphon's favor. First, Piphon and Handler formed a great combination – trading the lead and never having any problems staying on course (it

doesn't hurt that Handler runs these trails every day as he lives just 300 meters from the course). Second, Nelson recently returned from a six-week trip to the Arctic – where he did a lot of paddling but not much running. Third, and maybe most important, Nelson took a wrong turn at the 10K mark and ended up running some “bonus” mileage. Finally, Everett Myers, who entered the Trail Loppet in third place in the Series, lasted only five miles before he had to call it a day. Myers had tendinitis in his Achilles all summer and it flared up in the hills over the first five miles of the race.

Perhaps sensing his opportunity, Piphoh pushed the pace until the last mile – when Handler finally dropped him on the flats along Bassett Creek. In the end, Piphoh made up almost 17 minutes on Nelson – but still finished more than nine minutes back in the Challenge results.

“I’ve got to learn how to ski,” lamented Piphoh after the race. “You can’t give away 26 minutes at the Loppet and expect to compete for the Bearskin prize (the male and female Hoigaard’s Challenge champions each win a free one-week stay at Bearskin Lodge) . . .”

Joining Nelson and Rudd in winning a Bearskin trip was Damon Struyk of Golden Valley, who won the third Bearskin trip, which goes to a randomly selected person who competed in all three Challenge events. Struyk completed the Loppet and Trail Loppet and ran the 5K running leg for Team Angelique (2nd place general relay team) at the Tri-Loppet. “Never thought I would win the Bearskin trip,” said Struyk. “My wife is certainly happy with me. But next year I’m going to complete all three events myself . . .”

In age class competition, Genevieve Johnson was the fastest in the 50-59 division, Mary Luoma edged Jan Kihm of St. Paul for the 40-49 division crown and, of course, Kim Rudd won the 30-39 age class.

On the men’s side, David Nelson and David Piphoh were first and second in the 30-39 division, with Michael McKinney of Stillwater edging Kurt Stromberg of St. Paul for third. Mike Berkopec of Eagan won the 40-49 year age class, with Thomas Peterson second and Dave Nelson of Eagan (not to be confused with champion David Nelson of Medicine Lake) second and third. Rob Ogren of Bloomington won the 50-59 age class, edging Rich Spielberg of Minnetonka, with Minneapolis’ Keith Jones rounding out the top three. As a 59-year-old Ogren’s overall combined time of 5:56:56 might be the most impressive result of the year. Finishing just over an hour behind his much younger competitors, Ogren proved that the ultimate test of Minnesota-ness requires a little wisdom . . .