

Masters World Championships, Beitostolen, Norway, 2019

At one point, the British Team looked reasonable, at seven, together with Steve Smigiel and Patrick o'Connor, both BMCCSA members but racing for the US, and Janet Alexander, also a BMCCSA member but racing for New Zealand. But quite some time before the event, I ruled myself out on account of the tendinitis and then, in the last few days before the event itself, both Hans Nilsson and Roger Homyer, both at the time already in Norway, ruled themselves out through illness. A great shame, because both, I know, had trained hard for this event. So this makes it a rather difficult article to write, since I'd delegated the writing to Roger. Instead, it will be made up of a report I received from Chris Richards, together with extracts from E-mails I received and other information from, e.g. Team Captains' meeting. There are very few photos from the event, either (the organisers posted photos of only one day, and quite a few of these seemed to be taken from "Fun with flags" with Sheldon Cooper), and I apologise for this.



Chris Maund and Janet were the first to arrive, on the 25th February for some pre-event training, and reported a lot of snow melt, sheet ice and one particularly tricky downhill not far after the start (which the organisers subsequently apologised for). Janet said that the organisers had put mattresses on trees, just in case, and I suggested that she should check whether they'd used memory foam, just in case she hit the same tree twice. She was going to look into this!

Chris Richards takes up the story "We arrived in Beitostolen with high expectations that the Norwegians would put on a good event, and we were not disappointed. Getting there is the only drawback. A 3.5 – 4 hour drive from Gardermoen makes it one of the less accessible destinations, but it was worth the effort. The tracks in and around the stadium were first class, mostly woodland tracks, some running around lakes. Plenty of up and down but not too technical on the descents. By contrast, there were also upland tracks across the fjells, with fine long distance views toward the Jotunheimen National Park. These suffered from wind-blown snow filling the tracks and making it hard going where the groomers had not had a chance to re-groom.

The town is compact, but a shuttle bus provided transport between the stadium and the main hotels (1-2 km). Facilities were more than adequate: a couple of supermarkets, good bakery, excellent ski shops of course and some quite decent restaurants which were surprisingly quiet given the number of visitors. And an excellent pub, which is not always to be found in this part of the world!

The race tracks followed the modern practice of quite short loops, with frequent passes through the stadium area. This works well in practice – supporters/spectators get to see and encourage their team members frequently. Much better than the old way when the skiers would disappear down the track and not reappear until the finish. There were three loops, each of about 5 km, and each with a respectable climb of about 50-60 metres. So a 30 km race meant that competitors skied all three loops twice, passing through the stadium area twelve times in all, as each pass doubled back on itself. The races could also be watched from the comfort of the café above the tracks."

This whole event had been moved forward by one day, to allow people to enter the Birkebeiner at the end, which meant that the first race, middle distance classic, took place on Friday rather than the normal Saturday. Luckily for everyone, there was snow fall on the Thursday evening, which led to near-perfect conditions for this first race, -6 °C in the morning, rising to -4 °C at 14:00, partly sunny and with a light breeze (good for those upland parts of the course) – ideal for classic skiing! Also new for this year, and following FIS practice, there was one no-double-pole zone per lap, which meant that younger skiers had 6 zones to pass through. One small problem reported was that there was no transfer of clothes from start to finish.

We had most of the BMCCSA contingent racing on this first day, three of them, Chris M., Janet and Kelley making their debuts. Again, Chris R. takes up the story “First race for me was the 15 km classic. Conditions were pretty good for classic that day. The snow was new, firm and the temperature about -6 °C, so the Blue Extra worked nicely. Despite the hills, some skiers were clearly double poling the whole way round, apart from the short “technique control” stretches where they were obliged to diagonal stride or herringbone.”

For Janet, this was her best performance of the event, while everyone else was to produce better races later in the week. Top of the class on this first day, though, was Kelley; bronze medal (but, for those who remember the system, also a British bronze medal) and, ironically, her second best performance, in percentage terms, of the whole event.



Not the best close-up action shot of Janet (but the best I could find); that’s her on the left, Number 625. Clothing seems to show the cool conditions.

Men’s M01-M06 30 km classic technique, Friday 8th March

Fastest	Yuriy Surkov	RUS	M04	1.21:03.0	22.2 km/h		
1)	Truls Valmestad	NOR	M05	1.21:56.0	22.0 km/h		
22)	Chris Maund	GBR	M05	1.45:44.0	17.0 km/h	29.1 %	(36 starters)

Men’s M07-M09 15 km classic technique, Friday 8th March

Fastest	Olivo Antoniacomi	ITA	M07	41:51.0	21.5 km/h		
1)	Silvana Berlanda	ITA	M08	45:06.0	20.0 km/h		
46)	Chris Richards	GBR	M08	1.01:03.0	14.7 km/h	35.4 %	(59 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 15 km classic technique, Friday 8th March

Fastest	Eli Anne Yoeksa	NOR	F01	48:41.0	18.5 km/h		
1)	Martina Gabcikova	SVK	F03	54:00.0	16.7 km/h		
3)	Kelley Haniver	GBR	F03	56:12.0	16.0 km/h	1.0 %	(5 starters)
1)	Elena Veselova	RUS	F06	51:26.0	17.5 km/h		
13)	Janet Alexander	NZL	F06	1.04:37.0	13.9 km/h	25.6 %	(16 starters)

Men's M10-M13 10 km classic technique, Friday 8th March

Fastest	Alpo Virtanen	FIN	M10	33:01.0	18.2 km/h		
32)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M10	1.01:18.0	9.8 km/h	85.8 %	(35 starters)

Day 2, medium distance free technique day, dawned cool! The temperature had dipped to -12 °C overnight, rising slightly to -11 °C at race start and then warming to -6 °C by 14:00, with partial sun until midday and full sun after that. This day saw Alasdair Wilson and Steve Smigiel in their first races and, unusually, Chris M. and Janet taking advantage of the “Any three races” option to do their second race in two days. For Chris it made no difference – his percentage was better than the previous day but, for Janet, things went in the opposite direction! For Alasdair, who had complained of a lack of speed prior to the event, it was his least good finish and some way off previous Masters results while, for Steve, it was his best race.

Men's M01-M06 30 km free technique, Saturday 9th March

Fastest	Joachim Gustafsson	FIN	M02	1.10:46.0	25.4 km/h		
1)	Igor Kuznetsov	RUS	M05	1.12:52.0	24.7 km/h		
33)	Chris Maund	GBR	M05	1.32:28.0	19.5 km/h	26.5 %	(41 starters)

Men's M07-M09 15 km free technique, Saturday 9th March

Fastest	Ilmo Pulkkinen	FIN	M07	37:34.0	24.0 km/h		
62)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M07	57:36.0	15.6 km/h	53.3 %	(66 starters)
1)	Harri Makela	FIN	M09	43:33.0	20.7 km/h		
33)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M09	56:25.0	16.0 km/h	29.6 %	(38 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 15 km free technique, Saturday 9th March

Fastest	Nikki Kassel	CAN	F04	40:17.0	22.3 km/h		
1)	Elizabeth Youngman	USA	F06	43:05.0	20.9 km/h		
12)	Janet Alexander	NZL	F06	56:36.0	15.9 km/h	31.3 %	(15 starters)

Sunday, short-distance day, also remained cool. -13 °C overnight surely meant no problems for track preparation overnight, while -9 °C at race start was cool but good for grip waxing. There was full sun for the whole day, though, and those starting the free technique short race in the afternoon had the best of the conditions, -6 °C. The speed of the winning classic skier seems to show how good the conditions were; 25.5 km/h was even quicker than the winner of the free technique races of the day before.



Alasdair Wilson, in classic pose, and with a word for our sponsors

I'm not sure that classic is Steve's favourite technique. But, although this was his least good percentage of this event, as far as I can see it was his second-ever best Masters classic performance (we should maybe keep quiet about the fact that this was also his second-only Masters classic race). For Patrick, this was his best performance of the week, 3 minutes slower than his time in Minneapolis last year (but there were doubts about course lengths in Minneapolis), but much the same percentage.

For Chris M. and Janet, the third race in three day! Chris confounded the principle that so many races close together should make one tired – this was his best performance and puts him comfortably on the front page of the BMCCSA best-of-all-time list and, if we discount Peter Moysey of New Zealand, it was the best-ever British classic performance, just pipping the 21.9 % of Brian Adams 6 years ago in Asiago. Janet, sadly, upheld the general principle!

Men's M01-M06 10 km classic technique, Sunday 10th March

Fastest	Vlacheslav Kaydash	RUS	M02	23:34.0	25.5 km/h		
1)	Gian Jorger	SUI	M05	25:45.0	23.3 km/h		
24)	Chris Maund	GBR	M05	31:20.0	19.2 km/h	21.7 %	(34 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 10 km classic technique, Sunday 10th March

Fastest	G. Pedersen Hilde	NOR	M05	27:22.0	21.9 km/h		
1)	Elizabeth Youngman	USA	F06	31:04.0	19.3 km/h		
14=)	Janet Alexander	NZL	F06	41:00.0	14.6 km/h	32.0 %	(17 starters)

Men's M07-M09 10 km classic technique, Sunday 10th March

1)	Lars Nilsson	NOR	M09	29:33.0	20.3 km/h		
35)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M09	39:20.0	15.3 km/h	33.1 %	(47 starters)

Men's M10-M13 5 km classic technique, Sunday 10th March

Fastest	Alpo Virtanen	FIN	M10	16:47.0	17.9 km/h		
29)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M10	30:50.0	9.7 km/h	83.7 %	(31 starters)

We return to Chris Richards' account at this point "The remainder of my racing was in free technique. The 10 km short race was the typical eyeballs-out thrash round two of the loops. I'm fairly convinced that you have to develop snow fitness, lots of high intensity work on snow, to perform well in this sort of short race. I found the longer (30 km) race rather easier, even though fresh snow had fallen, which had to be plodded through on the climbs".

There were differing fortunes, though; this was Alasdair's best performance but Chris's least good. Once again, though, pride of place went to Kelley, her third best performance in percentage time (fourth best British lady ever, only Hilary Field gets into the top bracket), but a silver medal was a move in entirely the right direction!

Ladies F01-F06 10 km free technique, Sunday 10th March

Fastest	Maarit Korpi	FIN	F01	25:44.0	23.3 km/h		
1)	Annie Chenard	FRA	F03	29:45.0	20.2 km/h		
2)	Kelley Haniver	GBR	F03	30:17.0	19.8 km/h	2.0 %	(6 starters)

Men's M07-M09 10 km free technique, Sunday 10th March

Fastest	Ilmo Pulkkinen	FIN	M07	24:27.0	24.5 km/h		
69)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M07	36:00.0	16.7 km/h	47.2 %	(74 starters)
1)	David Johnston	USA	M08	25:47.0	23.3 km/h		
46)	Chris Richards	GBR	M08	35:21.0	17.0 km/h	37.0 %	(48 starters)

The following day, Monday, was the rest day, and the organisers had put on events during this day (although I don't know whether anyone from the British team attended them). In the morning there was an exhibition of Norwegian ski sport brands: Swix, Madshus and Rottfella, and what was called the Bjørn Dæhlie–Theresa Johaug “show”, covering news for the season 2019/2020 (were the stars themselves there?). In the afternoon there were two Sports Clinics, the first an unfortunately-titled one by Ine Wigernæs (former World Cup skier and Norwegian cross-country champion and PhD in Sports Science) entitled “You have to eat to perform” (I think that perhaps what she meant was “You have to eat to live, whereas you have to eat properly to perform”, and the second by Anders Aukland (former Olympic and world champion) and who, at the age of 47, is still Top 5 (*That means 5th! Ed*) in the Visma Ski Classics, on “Double- Poling – the state of the art”, which might have been interesting, because double poling is, these days, a highly developed technique.

We have a changing relationship with Australia in Masters relays. Sometimes we trounce them, to much rejoicing in the British Team, sometime they narrowly beat us (which we put down to misfortune on our part) and sometimes we collaborate with them when we don't have enough people to form a team of our own. Kelley reported that she'd met our Australian friend Friedl on the coach coming to Beitostolen and that he had claimed to show her the Relay Ashes which it was our task to win back. I feel, though, that there might have been smoke coming from his trouser department at this point, because regular listeners will know that we hold the ashes, insofar as they exist at all (we're still waiting for the Aussies to offer us a pair of skis so that we can ritually barbecue them), having stomped them (and the Danes) in Klosters two years ago.

The task facing the ¾ British team this year was not a direct one. GB/AUS had an M05 team, whereas the Australian full teams were M06 and M07. Now, it seems to me that, when one is facing a battle, even an indirect one, of honour, one does not invite a doppelganger from one's opponents to join one's team! I'm not suggesting that there was anything dubious going on, and no doubt Peter is a nice guy, but he did, nonetheless, put up the slowest time of the combined team by almost 8 minutes, and this led to a loss to the Aussie M06 team of 6 minutes and the M07 team of 4 minutes. Never mind, we'll beat them again next year. There was, by the way, a mixed team involving Kelley, Janet and two others but, for one reason or another, this team never made it to the start line.

4 x 5 km relay, Tuesday 14th March

Fastest	M02	RUS	44:00.8				
1)	M05	RUS	45:50.9				
13)	M05	GBR/AUS	1.08:15.1	Chris Maund	14:58.6	Peter Lambert	23:07.4
				Alasdair Wilson	15:24.9	Chris Richards	14:44.1
							48.9 % (13 starters)



The slightly-less-than-victorious Combined Relay Team. L to R: Alasdair, Chris R., Peter (Aus) and Chris M.

It was warmer for the long classic race than in previous days, -5 °C and snow at 09:00, having snowed overnight, rising to -3 °C and partially sunny at 14:00. Surely, however, still well within the range of “easy waxing”. There were, though, warnings of high winds, likely to make the exposed, upland parts of the tracks more challenging. The conditions led to a lot of DNSs and DNFs: there were 18 DNSs and DNFs in the M05 category compared with just 17 finishers, for example. BMCCSA had only one racer this day, Patrick.

Men’s M10-M13 15 km classic technique, Wednesday 13th March

Fastest	Alpo Virtanen	FIN	M10	57:02.6	15.8 km/h		
18)	Patrick o’Connor	USA	M10	1.53:52.0	7.9 km/h	99.6 %	(20 starters)

Final day! -8 °C at the start, rising to -3 °C throughout the day, sunny and generally triumphant! Only Alasdair had a disappointing day but, for Chris R., this was by far his best performance and, in fact, it was his third best-ever Masters performance. She’d started with bronze, progressed to silver – only one place left, really, and she didn’t disappoint! Gold medal for Kelley, and there’s only been one of those before, Hilary Field back in 2009 in Autrans. What a way to finish the event!

Men’s M07-M09 30 km free technique, Thursday 14th March

Fastest	Ilmo Pulkkinen	FIN	M07	1.24:09.4	21.4 km/h		
	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M07	DNF			
1)	Einer B. Vikingstad	NOR	M08	1.38:48.6	18.2 km/h		
28)	Chris Richards	GBR	M08	2.01:58.6	14.8 km/h	23.5 %	(39 starters)
1)	Andre Escoffier	FRA	M09	1.35:20.1	18.9 km/h		
25)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M09	2.04:50.0	14.4 km/h	30.9 %	(34 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 30 km free technique, Thursday 14th March

Fastest	Nikki Kassel	CAN	F04	1.29:15.7	20.2 km/h		
1)	Kelley Haniver	GBR	F03	1.43:32.4	17.4 km/h	0.0 %	(4 starters)



A British lady back on top of the podium for the first time in 10 years!

Let’s leave the final words to Chris Richards: “I personally experienced Kelley’s triumph. I was doing the 30 km with the older guys, who started off 10 minutes ahead of the younger women. After about 20 km, Kelley came past me, followed by her Finnish and Canadian competitors. It was clear to me then that they were not going to catch her, so that was a good moment. One of the high points of the week was a trip on the rest day up to Bigden, on the edge of the Jotunheimen National Park. This was a 35 km round trip which would have been a satisfying journey had the tracks not been wind-blown, and it was supposed to be a rest day, so we took the car and skied around the area a bit and had lunch in one of those charming Norwegian fjell lodges. That trip, followed by another of the mountain tops around Beitostolen, convinced me that it was a place to return to and enjoy the skiing, without worrying about racing.”