

Biathlon History

Biathlon, which means dual event, has its roots in Scandinavia and Finland. Rock carvings in Norway dating from over 4,000 years ago depict two men stalking animals on skis. Less as a means of personal survival and more as a form of national protection, Biathlon played an integral role in military life from the 1700's on. The earliest recorded biathlon competition took place in 1767 between "ski-runner companies" which guarded the Swedish-Norwegian border. The world's first known ski club, the "Trysil Rifle and Ski Club" was formed in Norway in 1861 to promote national defense at the local level. Statistics from the quarter century from 1919 on, show an average of 2000 men participating in biathlon each winter in Finland. In the late 1930's, the Finnish Army on skis, carrying rifles, and out-numbered 10 to 1, routed the Russians from their border.

The first true international competition in biathlon came during the Winter Olympics in Chamonix, France in 1924. During these Games, the Military Patrol was included as a demonstration event and was continued in the Winter Olympics of 1928, 1936 and 1948. The Norwegians and the Finns generally dominated this event, with the Italians sneaking in a victory in 1936. Due to anti-military feelings following World War II, the Military Patrol was dropped from the Olympic program.

In 1948, the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne et Biathlon (UIPMB) formed as the international governing body of biathlon and modern pentathlon, and biathlon was accepted as an official Winter Olympic Sport in 1955. The first World Biathlon Championships were held at Saalfelden, Austria, in 1958 with six nations participating. The UIPMB had supervision of the sport until recently, with the formation of the International Biathlon Union in 1993 and its recognition by the IOC in 1998. The IBU is now the international federation for the sport of biathlon. At present, 59 nations are regular members.

Competitions held from 1958 to 1965 were significantly different than today's events. Competitors used the NATO calibers, first 3.08 and then large bore .223 until the .22 caliber was made the standard in 1978. The ammunition was carried in a belt worn around the athlete's waist. The only race was a 20 kilometer individual competition, with four different ranges and firing distances of 100 to 250 meters. In 1966, this format was abandoned in favor of a single 150-meter range. The relay was added at that time and the current individual format was established.

The .22 caliber rifle that is standard today was adopted as the official rifle caliber in 1978. The standard shooting distance was reduced from 150 meters to 50 meters, and remains the same today. In 1980, mechanical targets, almost identical to those used today, were first used in a major competition at the Winter

Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

In 1968 the relay became a medal event at the Grenoble Olympic Winter Games. The sprint competition was included in the 1974 World Championship program in Minsk, Belarus, and was added to the Olympic program for the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympic Games.

The first US Women's National Championships were conducted in 1980, 4 years prior to the first World Championships program for women in Chamonix, France. The US women's relay, won a bronze medal at these inaugural Championships.

The men's and women's World Championships were held together for the first time in 1987 in Feistritz, Austria, and they have been held together ever since. One year later, in 1988, the IOC voted to include Women's Biathlon in future Winter Olympic Games. Women's Biathlon was included as a full medal sport for the first time at the 1992 Winter Games in Albertville, France. The next technical innovation in the sport came when electronic targets were used for the first time in the 1986 Biathlon World Championships in Austria. By 1993, the sport was strong enough to separate itself from the UIPMB. The IBU was founded in 1993 and remains the sport's governing body. Since its inception, the IBU has steadily raised Biathlon's profile, and the pursuit and mass start competitions have been added to the World Championship program.

The Pursuit was added as a medal event at the 2002 Salt Lake Olympic Winter Games and was one of the most exciting competitions of the Games. With the success and popularity of biathlon in general, the Mass Start was added for the 2006 Torino Olympic Winter Games. This addition increased the Olympic Biathlon Program to five medal events for both men and women.

The fast-paced exciting competitive atmosphere created by these events is perfect TV fare. The introduction of the new events to the European television audience has helped make biathlon the #1 watched winter sport in Europe, with tens of millions of viewers each week. Not being a sport to rest on its successes, in 2004, the IBU approved the mixed relay format as a World Championship event, beginning in 2006. The IOC approved the mixed relay as a medal sport for the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi Russia.

In the United States, the history of biathlon is developing a rich tradition. Over the last 50 years, the US has hosted many international events, including three Olympic Winter Games, most recently in Salt Lake, as well as the 1987 World Championships and seven World Cups. The 2004 World Cups in Lake Placid and Fort Kent were hugely successful, from the technical, athlete, and spectator points of view. The enthusiasm and organization in Fort Kent resulted in over 30,000 spectators jamming the stadium over the four days, a record attendance

at a North American World Cup. The success of these recent events bodes well for future international competitions in the USA. The next major event scheduled is the 2014 Youth and Junior Biathlon World Championships in Presque Isle, Maine, also hosted by the Maine Winter Sports Center.

The US Biathlon Association (USBA) has been the national governing body for the sport in the United States since 1980. A member-based organization, the USBA now has over 20 clubs national-wide, 3 Regional Centers of Excellence, and over 700 members, who compete in both the winter and summer versions of the sport. With growing interest in Biathlon, the USBA sees the coming years as a period of continued growth, with more talented athletes vying for podium positions and by hosting increasing numbers of prestigious international events.