



Published February 25, 2014

LOCAL SPORTS

## Victory for Villeneuve at Sigge's P'ayak

Strong turnout despite clash with BC Winter Games Cross-country ski Vince Shuley

The fourth annual Sigge's P'ayakentsut (P'ayak) cross country ski event descended on Whistler Olympic Park last weekend with over 475 competitors racing on Saturday (Feb. 22) and 145 youth participating in the kids' tournament on Sunday (Feb. 23).

Canmore's Phil Villeneuve won the 50 km loppet for the second year in a row with a time of 2 hours 39 min. 40 seconds, 12 min. short of his course record last year, but still 18 seconds ahead of runner up Leighton Poidevin. Michele Wolfe came away with the women's 50 km victory.

Turnout was a little less than expected given the BC Winter Games were taking place over the weekend, but organizers were still happy with the level of participation. Callaghan Valley Cross Country (CVXC), which has board members from cross country ski clubs along the Sea to Sky corridor, has been using the event as a fundraiser to help host larger events in the future.

"Our real focus is to raise money so we can eventually host large scale events like a FIS race or a World Cup," said Margot Murdoch, the vice president of the Whistler Nordics Ski Club. "We've hosted NORAM races, BC Cups and Nationals to gain more experience and we're also talking with Cross Country BC about organizing a loppet tour series to be held at different venues."

The P'ayak currently draws most of its competitors regionally with some entrants from the U.S., but the hope is to extend the draw to as far away as Europe. This year it was named as a qualifier for the American Birkebeiner race in Wisconsin, which has helped encourage racers to travel to Whistler.

"Our goal is to get 1,000 participants and we have a three year plan for that," said Murdoch. "We sent one of our organizing committee (members) to Gatineau Park in Ottawa to do a lot of promotion, hand out race buffs and stuff like that. We also put a couple ads in big magazines in North America. We do get a lot of racers from B.C., but you can't grow unless you get people from Quebec, the states and Europe."

The P'ayak was also a big draw for families, with kids as young as five able to participate in activities like the Mad Dash, Terrain Park Relay, Three-Legged Relay, Monster Skis Race, as well as opening and closing ceremonies. The older kids in the 10 – 14 year category also had a ski cross course with rolling jumps and both classic and skate skis.

While fun was being had by racers of all ages, rewards for performing well at the P'ayak were backed by a strong list of sponsors.

"What sets the P'ayak apart is the huge amounts of prizing," said Murdoch. "I'd say about 30 per cent of racers and a higher number of volunteers went home with a Salomon, Swix or Fischer prize. We've also upped the cash prizing in order to get in better racers."

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