



Photos by Joe Kennedy

WHAT A RIDE (left)—Sarah Kennedy enjoys a sled dog ride while Keith Conger mashes.

ALL SMILES—Donovan Cooper, Kayli Kunnuk and Samantha Goodwin all wait their turn on the dog sled.

Five Alaskan biathletes shoot their way to the podium in Canada

By WISA reporters

This past week the northern Canadian town of Grande Prairie, Alberta, was not to be outdone by its neighbor to the east—Vancouver, the recent Olympic site—as it hosted its own international, multi-sport competition, the Arctic Winter Games.

Five Alaskan athletes—four from Western Alaska and one from the Interior—competed as part of Team Alaska at the eight-day, Olympic-style event in biathlon. The sport combines either skiing or snowshoeing with target shooting.

Emerson Conger and Miranda Murphy, a junior and freshman at Nome-Beltz High school, respectively; Sierra Corsetti, a junior from Unalakleet; Asa Bergamaschi, a freshman from White Mountain; and Cy Conrad, a junior from Tanana, found themselves donning the Team Alaska uniform and walking among 2,000 athletes in the opening ceremonies of the games.

The five athletes qualified for the games by virtue of their performances at the 2009 state rural ski and biathlon championships, which are hosted by the Western Interior Ski/Biathlon Association (WISA). Conger and Corsetti were the biathlon winners in their respective high school divisions last spring, while Murphy and Bergamaschi were the winners in their junior high divisions. Conrad had taken second place in the high school boys division.

WISA athletes had one their best, if not the best ever, overall results at the Arctic Winter Games, with no athlete placing lower than fourth in any individual event. The WISA medal charge was led by the younger members, who competed in the snowshoe biathlon event, each in the juvenile category for athletes ages 10-15. Bergamaschi left the games with one gold and two silver medals in his three individual events. Murphy came away with three silver medals in her individual events. The two were members of the gold medal snowshoe biathlon relay team in the juvenile category.

Conger and Corsetti were the WISA representatives in ski biathlon and competed in the junior category for 16- and 17-year-olds. Conger took the bronze medal—missing silver by three seconds—in his second individual race, with only seven in the field of nearly 60 athletes outshooting him that day.

Both junior Alaskan ski biathletes were impressed by the Russian contingent, which sent only four members, all competing in ski biathlon. The Russian biathletes, who hailed

from the northern province of Yamal, earned nine gold and two silver medals (with one disqualification) in their 12 individual races. Conger and Corsetti, as members of Team Alaska's junior ski biathlon relay team, came close to topping the Russians, earning silver medals.

Conrad was the lone WISA snowshoe biathlete in the junior category. He earned a bronze medal in his third individual race.

Compared to their Anchorage teammates, who have access to a world-class, lit-at-night, biathlon venue, rural WISA athletes face great challenges in practicing their shooting. The group shot extremely well despite the disadvantages.

The most outstanding shooter of the team was Murphy, who had the highest shooting percentage of any of the field—junior or juvenile, ski or snowshoe—on the first day of the competition.

Both biathlon events are structured similarly, the only difference being the mode of transport. Athletes ski or snowshoe several times around a course, each time entering a shooting range where they gather their biathlon-specific 22-caliber rifles.

At each shooting session the athlete takes five shots from a distance of 50 meters. Juvenile competitors shoot all of their 10 or 15 rounds in

the prone position, at a target 1.5 inches in diameter. In the junior category, athletes shoot half of their 10 or 20 shots in standing position, at targets 4.5 inches in diameter. Hitting a biathlon target after skiing or snowshoeing with an elevated heart rate has been likened to trying to thread a needle while riding a snowmachine.

Occurring every other year, the Arctic Winter Games is a high profile, circumpolar sports competition for northern and arctic athletes. The games celebrate sport, and promote social and cultural exchange.

Although it started in 1970 with just a handful of sports, and only three contingencies (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Alaska), nine northern "nations" now compete in 21 different sports. Participation is limited to regions located north of the 55th parallel. Currently joining the three original members are Greenland, Russia, Northern Alberta, Nunavut, Northern Quebec and the Sámi Nation (northern Scandinavia).

While the juveniles did not have the chance to race head-to-head against the juniors in Alberta, both Bergamaschi and Murphy will be looking to unseat the incumbent high school rural biathlon champions at this year's Western Interior Rural Ski/Biathlon Championships to be held April 1-4 in Tanana.



Photo by Edward Todd

PRIDE IN COLORS—Four western Alaska and one Interior biathletes qualified for the Team Alaska to compete at the 2010 Arctic Winter Games in Grande Prairie, Alberta. Among the 16 Alaskans were Emerson Conger of Nome, junior ski biathlon, top row, fourth from the left; Sierra Corsetti of Unalakleet, junior ski biathlon, middle row, second from the left; Miranda Murphy of Nome, juvenile snowshoe biathlon, middle row, third from the left; Asa Bergamaschi of White Mountain, juvenile snowshoe biathlon, far right in the middle row, and Cy Conrad from Tanana, junior snowshoe biathlon, far right in the front row.

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