



Photo by William Swanson

FIRING LINE – The White Mountain biathlon range was bustling during the 33rd Annual Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships biathlon race in White Mountain on Friday. The transition from skiing to shooting is tough, as biathletes work to lower their heart rates enough to hit the 4.5-inch targets from the 50-meter distance. On the mats, from left to right, Sable Scotton of Galena, Clara Hansen of Nome, Bethany Daniel of Nome, Landen Olin Duncan of Galena and Lucas Echenique of Galena.

Rural Alaskan biathletes earn Arctic Winter Games spots at 33rd Annual WISA Ski and Biathlon Championships

By Keith Conger

Saturday morning's dense Seward Peninsula fog prevented rural state championship ski race observers in White Mountain, Alaska from seeing the summit of their namesake mountain and the trees across the Fish River. The one thing onlookers from Western Alaska's ski mecca had no trouble catching sight of, however, was Nome Nordic sophomore Tobin Hobbs hurriedly emerging from the fog with the fastest time of the day.

Hobbs created a two-minute margin of victory over freshman Lucas Echenique of Galena in the 7.7-kilometer freestyle ski race at the 33rd Annual Western Interior Ski Association (WISA) Ski and Biathlon Championships. This helped Hobbs cap a double-gold medal weekend. It also ensured him winning his third consecutive Skimeister Award, as he was recognized as this year's top rural skier and biathlete in his age category.

It was his victory in the 5.4-kilometer high school boys biathlon on Friday that ensured Hobbs a place on Team Alaska's eight-person Ski Biathlon team. Hobbs earned one of WISA's six allotted biathlon spots to attend the Arctic Winter Games in Whitehorse, Yukon Territories, Canada in March of 2020. His high school boys best eight of ten shooting helped create a two minute, 17 second victory over freshman Caedon Merriner of Galena.

Hobbs attended the 2018 Arctic Winter Games in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, Canada as part of Team Alaska's cross-country ski squad.

By virtue of his second-place finish, Merriner will be joining Hobbs at the 2020 Arctic Winter Games as a member of the eight-person Snowshoe Biathlon team.

Junior Carlee Merriner of Galena secured a Team Alaska girls Ski Biathlon spot on Friday as the top qualified biathlon finisher in WISA's high school girls division. Her time of 21:32 was two minutes, 19 seconds faster than junior Bethany Daniel of Nome, who earned the WISA junior girls Snowshoe Biathlon position.

The 2020 games will be Carlee Merriner's second time attending the event, as she was a member of Team Alaska's Snowshoe Biathlon crew in Hay River, Northwest Territories,

Canada in 2018.

The WISA meet was established in 1987 to give remote Alaskan communities a rural state ski and biathlon championship-format competition. The Western Interior Ski Association coordinates with Team Alaska for biathlon spots.

This past year, Team Alaska increased the total number of WISA biathlon positions for the 2020 Arctic Winter Games from four to six. This benefitted seventh-grader Autumn Nanouk of Unalakleet, as she earned a position on Team Alaska's juvenile Ski Biathlon unit. Seventh-grade teammate Johnny Soderstrom locked down a place on the boys juvenile Snowshoe Biathlon squad.

Both Merriner and Daniel were outdone in the WISA biathlon race on Friday by Nome Nordic's Mallory Conger, who earned her fifth straight WISA gold medal in biathlon with a time of 20:16. She turned in a high school best nine of ten shooting. Conger, a junior in high school, used a four-shot advantage over Merriner to establish, what would become, a crucial one minute, 16 second margin of victory.

Conger attended the 2016 Arctic Winter Games in Nuuk, Greenland as a member of the Team Alaska cross-country skiing squad, and the 2018 event in the Northwest Territories on the Ski Biathlon unit. She misses being eligible for the 2020 games by 41 days.

Merriner broke Conger's string of 13 straight WISA race victories with a win in Saturday's 7.7-kilometer high school girls freestyle ski race. Merriner's time of 26:48 put her 49 seconds ahead of her rival from Nome, which led to Merriner's first individual WISA gold medal.

Conger earned a girls WISA Skimeister Award for a record-extending fifth consecutive year by virtue of an accumulated time tie-breaker. Her margin of victory in the biathlon race over Merriner was enough to overcome the deficit she created in the ski race and give her a favorable time differential of 27 seconds.

Conger is the only female skier and biathlete in WISA's 33-year history to have won more than three WISA Skimeister Awards. She ties her brother Emerson Conger as WISA's most decorated Skimeister.

The 2019 junior high girls

Skimeister Award went to Nanouk, a double gold-medal winner at the two-day WISA meet. She finished the 5.4-kilometer biathlon course in 24:08, and outshot Nome Nordic's Sarah Bahnke nine to seven to claim her first WISA biathlon title.

Nanouk completed the 3.9-kilometer freestyle ski course in 13:46, and established a 37-second lead over the double-silver medalist Bahnke, who beat out bronze medalist Neveah Demientieff of Nenana by a scant 29 hundredths of a second.

The 2020 event in Whitehorse will be Nanouk's second time attending the Arctic Winter Games. She was a member of the 2018 Ski Biathlon squad and became a biathlon teammate of Conger's by earning a Team Alaska spot through the road system qualification races in Anchorage.

From his junior high boys division, Soderstrom joined Hobbs and Nanouk as double-gold medal winners. Soderstrom earned his first WISA Skimeister Award by narrowly beating Galena's double-silver medal winning Finn Hornfischer by thirteen seconds in the biathlon and by five seconds in the ski race.

Soderstrom and Nanouk helped the Unalakleet Wolfpack earn team honors in their respective junior high age categories. Four years had elapsed since a team other than Nome or Galena had won a team trophy in any division.

Two of the 46 elite rural athletes attending the 2019 WISA event shot "clean." Both eighth-grader Ethan Hawkins of Unalakleet and eighth-grader Shaina Hobbs of Nome Nordic knocked down a perfect ten of ten of the 4.5-inch diameter targets from 50 meters with WISA supplied .22-caliber rifles.

Hobbs led her Nome teammates in establishing the top team shooting percentage of 77.7 percent. The biathletes from White Mountain were runner's up with 70 percent accuracy.

Conger, Daniel and Clara Hansen helped extend Nome's WISA-record high school girls team-championship trophy total to eight. The high school boys team award went to Galena.

The top small school at the WISA meet was Koyuk. The Sportsmanship Award was earned by Nenana.

WISA will be represented on the 2020 biathlon coaching team by

Nome Nordic head coach Keith Conger.

For more information about the Western Interior Ski Association visit www.wisaskiing.org.

The Arctic Winter Games is an Olympic-style event made up of 21 sports. It occurs every two years and is attended regularly by over 2000 people. Only members of communities that lie north of 55-degrees latitude can attend.



Photo by William Swanson

POLES AT THE READY – Derek Hadley removes his poles and enters the White Mountain biathlon range during the Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships in White Mountain on Friday. Hadley is followed by teammate Adam Prentice and Johnny Soderstrom of Unalakleet. The annual WISA Championships serve as rural Alaska's state ski and biathlon meet.

33rd Annual Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships

White Mountain, Alaska • March 29-30, 2019

HS Boys Biathlon Race – 5.4K

(place, biathlete, site, time, shots made)
1. Tobin Hobbs, OME, 17:21, 8; 2. Caedon Merriner, GAL, 19:38, 7; 3. Lucas, Echenique, GAL, 20:49, 3; 4. Landen Olin Duncan, GAL, 21:16, 7; 5. Dean, Hawkins, UNK, 24:13, 3; 6. Bruce Eakon, UNK, 24:51, 3; 7. Colton Ivanoff, UNK, 25:02, 4; 8. Luther Walker, NEN, 28:44, 2; 9. Abram Wasuli, GAL, 31:49, 7; 10. Noah Hobbs, OME, 33:49, 5

HS Girls Biathlon Race – 5.4K

(place, biathlete, site, time, shots made)
1. Mallory Conger, OME, 20:16, 9; 2. Carlee Merriner, GAL, 21:32, 5; 3. Bethany Daniel, OME, 23:51, 8; 4. Koa Dynes, NEN, 24:01, 5; 5. Clara Hansen, OME, 24:29, 6; 6. Sable Scotton, GAL, 25:36, 7; 7. Margo Daniels, UNK, 27:14, 4; 8. Angie Samash, NEN, 27:51, 7; 9. Carmen Commack, UNK, 29:11, 7; 10. Lauryn Nanouk Jones, UNK, 32:30, 4

JH Boys Biathlon Race – 5.4K

(place, biathlete, site, time, shots made)
1. Johnny Soderstrom, UNK, 0:20:13, 9; 2. Finn Hornfischer, GAL, 0:20:26, 7; 3. Adam Prentice, KKA, 0:24:25, 5; 4. Ethan Hawkins, UNK, 0:24:27, 10; 5. Paxson Commack, UNK, 0:26:20, 7; 6. Trevin Soderstrom, UNK, 0:26:24, 3; 7. Bryson Homekingkeo, KKA, 0:26:33, 7; 8. Nanouk Jones, UNK, 0:27:00, 6; 9. Derek Hadley, KKA, 0:27:02, 6; 10. Keanan Barr, WMO, 0:27:07, 8

JH Girls Biathlon Race – 5.4K

(place, biathlete, site, time, shots made)
1. Autumn Nanouk, UNK, 24:08, 9; 2. Sarah Bahnke, OME, 25:57, 7; 3. Neveah Demientieff, NEN, 25:57, 8; 4. Sarah Nanouk Jones, UNK, 26:15, 7; 5. Cedar Busk, UNK, 27:28, 8; 6. Ourea Busk, UNK, 29:25, 5; 7. Shaina Hobbs, OME, 30:05, 10; 8. Ayu Roesch, UNK, 30:07, 9; 9. Naomi Oxereok, WMO, 31:26, 9; 10. Angelical Titus, WMO, 36:41, 8

Biathlon Shooting Percentages by Entire Team

1. Nome, 77.7%; 2. White Mountain, 70%; 3. Galena, 62.5%; 4. Koyuk, 60%; 5. Unalakleet, 60%; 6. Nenana, 55%

HS Boys Ski Race – 7.7K

1. Tobin Hobbs, OME, 22:57; 2. Lucas Echenique, GAL, 25:07; 3. Caedon Merriner, GAL, 25:37; 4. Dean Hawkins, UNK, 28:06; 5. Colton Ivanoff, UNK, 29:08; 6. Landen Olin Dun-

can, GAL, 30:38; 7. Bruce Eakon, UNK, 31:09; 8. Luther Walker, NEN, 34:43; 9. Noah Hobbs, OME, 38:03; 10. Abram Wasuli, GAL, 43:36

HS Girls Ski Race – 7.7K

1. Carlee Merriner, GAL, 26:48; 2. Mallory Conger, OME, 27:37; 3. Koa Dynes, NEN, 30:30; 4. Clara Hansen, OME, 32:06; 5. Sable Scotton, GAL, 33:04; 6. Bethany Daniel, OME, 34:54; 7. Carmen Wasuli, GAL, 36:16; 8. Angie Samash, NEN, 37:25; 9. Lauryn, Nanouk Jones, UNK, 42:18; 10. Margo Daniels, UNK, 44:50

JH Boys Ski Race – 3.9K

1. Johnny Soderstrom, UNK, 11:41; 2. Finn Hornfischer, GAL, 11:46; 3. Derek Hadley, KKA, 12:44; 4. Adam Prentice, KKA, 13:40; 5. Ethan Hawkins, UNK, 13:46; 6. Jady Barr, WMO, 15:05; 7. Keanan Barr, WMO, 15:12; 8. Paxson Commack, UNK, 15:16; 9. Wass Nanouk Jones, UNK, 15:16; 10. Ryan Outwater, OME, 15:17

JH Girls Ski Race – 3.9K

1. Autumn Nanouk, UNK, 13:46; 2. Sarah Bahnke, OME, 14:23; 3. Cedar Busk, UNK, 14:30; 4. Sarah Nanouk Jones, UNK, 14:42; 5. Ourea Busk, UNK, 15:03; 6. Ayu Roesch, UNK, 15:57; 7. Shaina Hobbs, OME, 16:34; 8. Naomi Oxereok, WMO, 16:49; 9. Angelical Titus, WMO, 19:22; 10. Neveah Demientieff, NEN, DNF

Team Awards

High School Boys: 1. Galena, 2. Nome, 3. Unalakleet
High School Girls: 1. Nome, 2. Galena, 3. Nenana
Junior High Boys: 1. Unalakleet, 2. Koyuk, 3. White Mountain
Junior High Girls: 1. Unalakleet, 2. Nome, 3. White Mountain

Skimeisters

High School Boys, Tobin Hobbs, Nome
High School Girls, Mallory Conger, Nome
Junior High Boys, Johnny Soderstrom, Unalakleet
Junior High Girls, Autumn Nanouk, Unalakleet

Cloud Cup (Small School Team Award): Koyuk

Sportsmanship: Nenana

Clean Shots (10 of 10 shots in Biathlon): Ethan Hawkins, Unalakleet; Shaina Hobbs, Nome.



Photo by William Swanson

RELAY START – Skiers from around the state head out for the first leg of the relay race at the 33rd Annual Western Interior Ski and Biathlon Championships in White Mountain on Thursday. The annual WISA Championships serve as rural Alaska's state ski and biathlon meet. Left to right, Luther Walker of Scammon Bay, Derek Hadley of Koyuk, Margo Daniels of Unalakleet, Koa Dynes of Denali, Angie Samash of Nenana, Ethan Hawkins of Unalakleet, and Lauryn and Sarah Nanouk Jones of Unalakleet.