

Tim Burke Leads the Way for US Team: Strong Showing from Juniors and Development Team

The 2008 Biathlon Season was not a record-setting year like 2007 for the US Biathlon Team, but with a strong finish by Tim Burke (Paul Smiths, NY) and some big results from the National Junior and Development Teams, the US program progressed once again.

The year could be summed up by Coach Mikael Lofgren's comments after Burke roared across the finish to take 8th place in the Oslo Mass Start, the final World Cup competition of the year, "This was perfect race for Tim. This is where he belongs. After all of the struggles (with his health) earlier in the year, this is a great way to finish."

Burke finished the season on a high note, as did the US Biathlon Team as a whole. Overall, the US athletes at all levels "saved" their best performances for the mid-January to March period.

The US men once again provided many of the highlights of the year. In the Nations Cup scoring, the US finished 12th (72 points from 11th place), with 3506 points shy of their all-time best 10th place, 4224 points) last year. This is still the team's second-best showing ever, despite Burke either sub-par or not competing from early December to late January, and Jay Hakkinen (Kasilof, AK) making virtually all of his contributions in the first six weeks of the season.

Going into the season, all signs pointed to another record-setting year and possibly that elusive top-3 finish by one of the US men. Prior to the Kontiolahti World Cup, Lofgren commented, "The athletes have done a good job training in the spring, summer and fall and we are now just fine tuning for the first competitions." The year's training had been at a higher level than the previous year, with several athletes including Burke, Lowell Bailey (Lake Placid, NY) and Jeremy Teela (Anchorage, AK) racking up impressive improvements in physical and shooting tests. This was shown during the Ostersund summer competitions, when Burke reached had two third place finishes and Bailey one. At the time, Coach per Nilsson commented, "I am really pleased with the results. Comparing this year and last year, we can see that we moved up against our competition. These races are a good evaluation point. It is still several (three) months until the first World Cup. For those who did well, this will add to their confidence. In places where we are needing work, there is still plenty of time to train and make adjustments. We can see progress and that is most important."

At the first World Cup in Kontiolahti, the results seemed to reflect Nilsson's optimism. Jay Hakkinen opened the year with the sixth best performance of his career, ninth place in the 20K Individual and scored World Cup points in all three competitions. At the same time, Burke finished 12th in the Sprint and 28th in the Pursuit. After the Pursuit with Hakkinen 22nd and Burke 28th, High Performance Director Bernd Eisenbichler commented, "I think the week was perfect. We wanted to start strong with some top 15 results and we got that. The team was focused all week. It is the best first week our team has ever had." At the time, no one realized this would be Hakkinen's best week of the season and that Burke was not feeling 100%.



Everything started to fall together again in Oberhof, Germany as Lowell Bailey had a clean shooting day in the Sprint, going on to collect his first World Cup points of the season in the Ruhpolding Sprint/Pursuit. Bailey also led off with a strong leg for the US Relay Team at Ruhpolding, putting the team in tenth position at the first exchange. That same weekend, Hakkinen scored 17th and 16th places in the Sprint/Pursuit, putting him back on track. Burke came back that weekend, feeling fully recovered, and placed in the thirties in both competitions.

In Antholz, Burke continued his comeback jumping back into World Cup points with 26th in the Sprint, following with 16th in the Pursuit. With Hakkinen having a clean-shooting day, the US Team seemed set for a big World Championships.

Tim Burke was again the US Star at the Biathlon World Championships. Burke had two top 10 finishes, ninth in the Sprint, followed by tenth in the Pursuit. He placed 29th in the Individual and 25th in the Mass Start. However, Burke felt he was better than his results showed and expected more from himself. He commented, "The skiing was nothing special today. I am definitely a little tired after five races in 10 days (including the relay competition) just 24 hours before the Mass Start). As for the Championships as a whole, I scored World Cup Points in every race and had two top 10 finishes. However, I never showed the improvements that I made in my training this year. The results are really nothing special. I expect to be in the points in every race."

Three other athletes had significant performances. Lowell Bailey showed that he is probably the permanent

leadoff leg for the Men's Relay with another strong opening for the team. He used just two spare rounds, putting the US just 39 seconds from the lead at the handoff.

Like Bailey and Burke, two women from the Development Team, Caitlin Compton (Minneapolis, MN) and Haley Johnson (Lake Placid, NY) provided a reason for the US Coaches to smile. The first year (actually only eight-month) biathlete shot 80% in the Women's 15K Individual and scored a stunning 37th place. With this result, this highly talented skier showed she would be more than just competitive in future World Cup seasons. Johnson, like Compton shot 80% but in the Sprint, taking 53rd in her first-ever World cup level competition, the Women's 7.5K Sprint.

After the 10 days of competition in Ostersund, everyone needed a break, but this year, the time was short as the Pyeong Chang/ Khanty Mansiysk/ Oslo trek loomed in less than a week. The trip to Korea was long and tiring. Yet the person most disappointed in his year to that point, Lowell Bailey had a career weekend. He had shown big improvements in his off-season training, but just scratched the surface during competitions. Other than the relay in Ostersund, Bailey was disappointed with his time in Sweden. He said, "I am happy with my leg. It was solid. I have not been happy with my results here." On February 28th and 29th, that all changed. Bailey had one penalty in the Sprint to finish 29th. He stormed back the next day with a personal-best 11th place in the Pursuit, again with one penalty to finish 1:07 behind Michael Greis. Bailey felt redeemed as he said, "This is such a huge relief for me. All of the work suddenly paid off. I put a lot work and effort into shooting over the summer."



Except for Burke's 29th place (jumping from 45th in the Sprint) in the Pursuit at Khanty Mansiysk, the rest of the long trek was fairly quiet until Oslo. In Oslo,

Burke showed everyone that he is one of the best biathletes in the world by finishing 7th in the Pursuit and 8th in the Mass Start on consecutive days. In those two days, he virtually wiped away his disappointments of earlier in the year. Most importantly, he did this by having the fastest ski time in the Pursuit and coming back with the second fastest in the Mass Start.

The good places and the fast ski times were only part of this huge weekend for Burke and the US Biathlon program. In the Pursuit, Burke recorded the FASTEST scratch time In Saturday's Pursuit, (deducting his start time back, 2:25 from his finish time of 36:26) which gave him a scratch time of 34:01, 24.9 seconds faster than the winner Ivan Tcherezov did! This top overall time plus the fastest overall ski time is the **first time ever** that a US Biathlete has recorded the fastest overall time (with the bonus of the fastest ski time) in a World Cup level biathlon. What a way to cap off the World Cup season.

While most of the focus is on the World Cup Team, athletes from the National Junior Team made their own headlines. The biggest news from the Junior Team was the series of outstanding performances of Leif Nordgren (Marine-on-St. Croix, MN) at the Youth/Junior Biathlon World Championships in Ruhpolding, Germany. Nordgren won a Bronze Medal, with a strong sprint finish in the Pursuit. This was just one day after he narrowly missed a medal by 24 seconds with a 6th place finish in the Sprint, after a rifle malfunction. Nordgren also placed 10th in the Individual and produced an excellent leadoff leg for the junior relay team.

Nordgren's medal was first ever for the US in the Youth category and the first US medal in the Youth/Junior World championships since 2002!

At the same time, both Laura Spector (Lenox, MA) and Russell Currier produced top results in both Ruhpolding and in Europa Cup competitions, which earned them spots at the Biathlon World Championships in Ostersund. Currier had three top 20 finishes in the strong Junior Men's category (15th Sprint and Individual, 20th Pursuit) while Spector three top 25 results (20th Sprint, 24th Individual and 25th Pursuit). Yet in the European Championships in Nove Mesto, Czech Republic, Spector had the best result of her career with 6th place in the Junior Women's Pursuit. time, "This is such a great way to end my junior career. I will really appreciate this flower ceremony."

Tallying up all of these highlights it is easy to see that it was a pretty good year across the board for the US Biathlon Team.

Individual Highlights

Tim Burke

• The **FIRST US Biathlete** to record the fastest time in an international biathlon competition in the Oslo 12.5K Pursuit

- 29th in Overall World Cup with 171 points, 5 times in top 15 and twice in the top 8
- 9th place, World Championships 10K Sprint
- 10th place, World Championships 12.5K Pursuit
- Oslo World Cup— 7th 12.5K Pursuit, 8th 15K Mass Start
- Scored World Cup Points in 9 of final 12 competitions



Tim Burke battles Tomasz Sikora of Poland In Ostersund.

Burke is a typical high-achiever, never happy with the status-quo, always looking for something more, thus he was disappointed with his year until the final competitions at Oslo, where he pulled off the 7th and 8th place finishes on consecutive days. At that time he commented on his late-season surge (scoring World cup points in three of his final four competitions), **“Before these last two World Cups (Khanty Mansiysk and Oslo), I was feeling very disappointed with my season. I knew that back in the early fall and November, I was in great shape. To this point, it was frustrating to know that I was capable of more and never was able to show that. The last two weeks really changed my outlook and feelings about the season. At this point, there is only one further step to take (victories and top 3 finishes), but that one is the hardest to take. After today and yesterday, I know I am closer than ever before and I cannot wait for the next season to start.”**



Jay Hakkinen

- 47th in Overall World Cup, with 75 points scored in 5 competitions
- 9th place, Kontiolahti World Cup 20K Individual
- 16th place, Ruhpolding 12.5K Pursuit
- 17th place, Ruhpolding Sprint with clean shooting

Hakkinen scored more World Cup points this season than in the previous year, but fell 6 spots in the seasonal rankings, attesting to the depth of World Cup fields. The highlight of his season was the 9th place finish in the season-opening competition in Kontiolahti, yet he probably was in his best form of the season in Ruhpolding. He brought the team from 10th position to fourth position in the second leg of the relay competition, during which he needed only one spare round to shoot clean. He came back with clean shooting in the 10K Sprint to take 17th place, finishing 1:23.7 behind Olympic Champion Michael Greis. He confirmed his fitness with 16th in the 12.5K pursuit the next day. After the Sprint, he commented on how his best weekend of the year was going, **“I just tried to continue the momentum that I had in the relay Thursday evening here. I was a little conservative skiing, so I would be OK in the shooting range and it paid off. It is still all about the shooting. I have worked hard on that.”**

Lowell Bailey

- 64th in Overall World Cup
- 11th place Pyeong Chang 12.5K Pursuit—personal best World Cup result
- 28th place, Ruhpolding 10K Sprint, & 29th in 12.5K Pursuit the next day
- Strong leadoff leg on US Relay Team at both Ruhpolding and World Championships



Bailey's emergence as a solid and effective leadoff for the US Relay team was one of the revelations of the season. His effort in Ruhpolding with only one spare round while tagging off just 56 seconds behind Norway set up the eventual 8th place finish for the US Team. Coach Per Nilsson commented on Bailey at the time, **"Solid as a rock...that is exactly what we expected (and received) from Lowell today."**

Nevertheless, the highlight for Bailey was his breakthrough 11th place in the 12.5K Pursuit, in Pyeong Chang. He had just one penalty, while finishing 1:07.7 behind Greis.

At the finish line that day, Bailey, who had shown a lot of improvement in his training this season, commented, **"shooting...That was the key to-day. A result like this on this course gives me a lot of confidence for the World Championships here next year."**

At the same time US Biathlon High Performance Director Bernd Eisenbichler praised Bailey's effort, **"Lowell had a world-class race to-day. It is so nice to see him up there. He worked very hard and professionally over last summer and today he got the receipt for that. He showed that he could race with the best in the relays at Ruhpolding and Ostersund. Now he showed it in an individual race; that is great!"**

Lowell Bailey before the start of the relay in Ruhpolding.

Star of the Year



• **Tim Burke** – For the second year in a row, Burke proved to be the “big dog” for the US Biathlon Team. He came to the season in top form, as shown by his best-ever season opener (12th Kontiolahhti 10K Sprint). Although he struggled with illness for several weeks after that, he came back better than ever, after a warm-up weekend in Ruhpolding. He scored World cup Points in 9 of the final 12 competitions, scored in every competition at the World Championships, before his two top 8 finishes in Oslo, and closed his year with a two-penalty win in the 20K individual at the Canadian Championships at the Whistler Olympic Park. Burke summarized his season in an interview at the Canadian Championships, **"I had a lot of ups and downs this year. Yet, at the end of the season, that was the strongest I have ever been. The next step is the toughest, getting onto the podium. I have been close several times, but now I feel confident that it will happen."**

Rising Stars

Caitlin Compton



Compton had the top result for a US woman this season a 37th place finish in the 15K Individual at the World Championships. The significance of this is simple. She had been in biathlon for only 8 months at the time and had never shot 80% in ANY competition before, let alone a four-stage 15K on the biggest stage of all, the World Championships! An accomplished cross-country skier (2008 US 5K Champion), she made the full transition to biathlete in just under 1 hour in Sweden. Coach Per Nilsson, who did not expect a result like this so soon, commented at the time, "Caitlin may have some good results sooner than we thought."

Leif Nordgren

Nordgren shares the Rising Stars honor for his Bronze Medal (first-ever Youth category for the US) in the Pursuit at the Youth/Junior World Championships. This came after his disappointing 6th place in the Sprint, where a rifle malfunction probably cost him the Gold medal, as he finished just 24 seconds from the win. He won the Bronze with a tactical effort and a strong sprint in the final 200 meters.

He explained, "I left the shooting range just ahead of him (Hofer), and then he pulled ahead by a couple of meters. When we got to the first hill, I tested him a bit and pulled away easily. I knew he did not have much left. I decided to rest (and Hofer passed again). Coming to the finish, I started to go wide to pass and he was forcing me to the left even more. We were so close that our skis touched. Then I just went for the finish line. I could hardly feel my legs as we came off the last bridge. As we approached the finish line, I was just trying to stay on my feet!"

Nordgren showed poise and maturity beyond his years in every competition all season. This 18-year-old is the one to watch!



Leif Nordgren at the Canadian Championships

Season's Defining Moment
Tim Burke's 7th Place in the Oslo Pursuit



Tim is all smiles after his big day in Oslo!

•The defining moment of the year came on the next-to-the-last day of the season in Oslo, Norway. Tim Burke culminated his run back to the most elite group of World Cup biathletes with a 7th place finish in the 12.5K Pursuit. In that competition, he recorded the fastest overall time, the first time ever that a US Biathlete has done this in World Cup history!

His overall time (deducting his start time back, 2:25 from his finish time of 36:26) which gave him a scratch time of 34:01, was 24.9 seconds faster than the winner Ivan Tcherezov had. The enormity of this achievement and his equally impressive skiing today was not lost on Burke. "That was awesome! I am really proud of that achievement. At the same time, it is very motivating as I look toward next year and beyond."

Just as Burke looks forward to the coming seasons, so does everyone at US Biathlon. It is going to be fun.