

Area residents compete in 95 km long Vasaloppet cross-country ski race in Sweden

By Brian Lockhart

Two area residents travelled to Sweden in early March to participate in the 100th edition of the Vasaloppet cross-country ski race.

John and Rebecca Macdonald took the challenge of competing in the Vasaloppet on March 3 and did very well in the competition.

The race covers a course of 95 km or 56 miles, from the Village of Berga to the Town of Mora.

It is the oldest running cross-country ski race in the world and has the highest number of participants.

The race has its roots in the year 1520 when a young nobleman had to race for his life during a rebellion. The modern version of the race started in 1922 with 119 participants. There have been three cancellations since the event was created.

As many as 40,000 participants now take part in shorter races prior to the main event. Well over 15,000 skiers compete in the long-distance race which always takes place on the first Sunday in March.

Although they competed in this long-distance race, both John and Rebecca were primarily recreational skiers before taking up this challenge.

“Like a lot of people, we grew up doing recreational skiing,” John explained. “We did it as kids and a family, but Rebecca and I got back into it three or four years ago. We realized it is a great winter activity.”

They are members of the Mono Nordic ski club but had to find other venues this year due to a lack of snow.

When he learned about the Vasaloppet, John, the president of an IT company, decided to try it as a company event. The idea was to promote fitness among employees, and those who wanted to give it a try had the opportunity for training and a trip to Sweden to compete.

Preparing for a 95 km race requires a lot of training and commitment. John and Rebecca skied around 1,000 km, and another 1,000 km during the summer months on roller skis.

They had two coaches, Jordan Cascagnette of Collingwood/Highlands Nordic, and Glenn Bond, of bondxcski.com. Dominic Lonuzzo of Mono Nordic was a Nordic ski equipment advisor.

On race day, they were placed in a group of almost 16,000 skiers.

“It’s a mass start, as opposed to being a timed start – that’s one of the things that is unique about it,” John explained. “They put people in different groups. They put the top 200 elite athletes at the front. These are the top skiers in the world. For us, we’re doing it more for the experience. You just want to try and finish.”

The start of the race is the most difficult as the trail goes directly up a large hill. The skiing style is traditional Nordic on trails in the snow, as opposed to skate-style skiing.

Of the 15,800 skiers who started, over 2,300 competitors failed to complete the gruelling race, but both John and Rebecca made it all the way to the end of the 95 km.

This year, 20.5 per cent of the skiers were women, the highest percentage the race has ever seen.

For slower skiers, the course is gated at certain points and if they do not complete that area of the course in the required time, the course is closed. This is to avoid having people left behind in a wooded area after dark, potentially creating a dangerous situation.

At 54 years of age, John and Rebecca were in the 'masters' division and finished with some impressive times.

It took them over 11 hours to complete, averaging just over ten mph for the entire race.