

# Taking aim at the biathlon

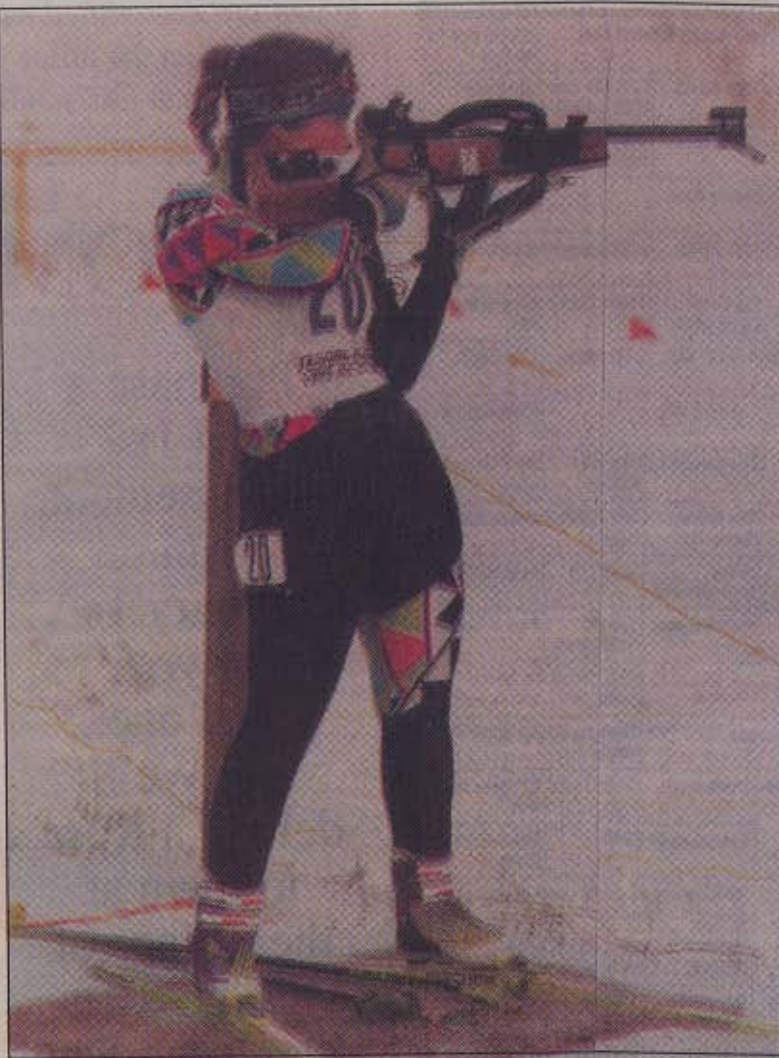
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Imagine running full tilt for one lap around a running track and then stopping suddenly to thread a needle. With the run, your adrenalin flows as your heart rate hits its maximum and your lungs feel like they're ready to explode. Threading the needle, on the other hand, requires a steady hand, calm breathing and relaxation. The two activities are pretty much diametrically opposed to each other in what they require for success.

Christi Boggs, University of Wyoming Nordic ski coach, said the sport of biathlon, which combines cross-country skate skiing with rifle marksmanship, is similar. "You end up going like crazy and getting all excited and hyped up on the ski portions," she said. "Then you stop and have to shoot at these little targets, where it's important to be calm and relaxed. Putting the two together is what makes the sport of biathlon so challenging."

Boggs was a member of the University of Wyoming NCAA Nordic Ski Team from 1987 to 1992. While at UW, Boggs was first-team All-American three times and second-team All-American once. After college, Boggs changed her focus to biathlon and made it to the 1993 World University Games, won the Rocky Mountain Cup and took top honors by winning the North American Cup twice. Now Boggs coaches the UW Nordic Ski Team and is a certified official with the U.S. Biathlon Association.

While the general public has some understanding of the sport of cross-country skiing, biathlon is more obscure. Boggs admits it's not a well-know sport in the U.S. but it is very popular in



Courtesy photo

**Current University of Wyoming Nordic ski coach Christi Boggs competes in the biathlon, which combines cross-country skate skiing with marksmanship. Boggs was first-team All-American three times and second-team All-American one when she was on the UW Nordic team from 1987-1992. She then switched her focus to a successful biathlon career before coming back to UW.**

Europe. "Biathlon is the number one winter spectator sport over there," Boggs said. "People love to watch it and it draws large crowds." Because of the public appeal, Boggs said racing in Europe is exciting. "It's like being a rock star where the crowds shout and yell as you compete on the course," she said.

Biathlon, which means dual event, has its roots in Scandinavia and Finland. To

survive the winter, Norwegian hunters had no choice but to stalk prey while on skis. The dual competitions, which began with the Winter Olympics in Chamonix, France, in 1924, used larger caliber rifles. The .22 caliber rifle that is standard today was adopted as the official caliber in 1978.

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Biathlon events include the sprint that is 7.5K for women and 10K for men, with two shooting stops. The athlete shoots prone at one set of targets and then stands at the other. The individual race is longer, extending to 15K for women and 20K for men, with four shooting stops. The pursuit race has two days of racing with competitors lined up the second day based on their times the first day. The relay event has four members, each skiing 7.5K and shooting twice.

For all events, the shooting distance is 50 meters, or a little more than half the length of a football field. The targets measure 115 mm, or about the size of a CD disc. When shooting from a standing position, the target is the entire disc-sized circle, but it's reduced to a mere 45 mm, or about the size of a 50-cent piece, for the prone position.

In the sprint and pursuit events the racer has five shots to hit five targets, while in the relay the racer can reload three extra shots to allow eight chances to hit five targets. In all races there is a penalty for missing a target. Extra seconds are added for the sprint and pursuit events, while one

minute is added to the time for each miss in the individual event.

Boggs said the penalty influences what types of racers are favored in the various events. "The sprint and pursuit events generally favor the strong skiers since the penalty involves more skiing," she said. "The individual event is considered a 'shooters' race" because there is no way you can make up for a missed shot."

Shooting a target the size of your palm from half a football field away is no easy feat. Try it after skiing full out and getting your heart rate up in the stratosphere. It is that difficulty in taking two drastically different activities that makes the sport so difficult. Boggs admits that is what attracted her to the biathlon in the first place.

If that challenge attracts you, too, the nearest biathlon course is at the Snow Mountain Ranch/YMCA of the Rockies, south of Granby, Colo. In Wyoming, the nearest course is the new one at Lander. Biathletes also need to get certified to carry a gun during a race. This certification process is similar to a hunter safety course and is designed to ensure safety.