

The town plays host to another successful Morin-Heights/Viking Loppet event.

Living up to its reputation as “**Cross-country ski capital of the Laurentians**” Morin-Heights once again, on Sunday, 24th February, hosted this popular event: the Morin-Heights/Viking Loppet, now in its 36th year. Some 370 keen skiers had signed up to come enjoy this more casual event on a busy February cross-country ski calendar; following on the heels of the “majors’ like the Canadian Ski Marathon and Gatineau Loppet.

Much to the delighted relief of organizers, volunteers and participants alike, the weather was perfect, with full sun, little wind, tracks set on more than enough snow, and temperatures holding just below zero.

The choice of course distances: 10 km, 20 km and 33 km gives this event wide appeal across the spectrum of age and skiing ability as evidenced by the youngest participant of 5 years old, to a couple of gents aged 79 years! Room for all, the event embraces elite racing skiers, also individuals just happy to complete the course at their own pace, and members from some 20 cross country ski clubs. Not surprisingly, the Viking Ski Club had the most with 50 of its members participating....they were the club that initiated the event, albeit on a smaller scale, back in 1972 at their clubhouse. Since several years now, the Viking Ski Club and the Municipality of Morin-Heights have joined organizational forces and resources to expand the event to accommodate a larger and broader public participation.

A favourite with families and the younger set is the 10 km course which starts in Montfort village and follows the Aerobic Corridor (ex-railway line) down to the finish line set up at Bellevue Centre. Steam trains, once seen puffing up this railway track, were replaced some 124 participants puffing their way down to the finish line! In recognition of youngsters’ efforts in this 10 km event, the Desjardins Bank has this year kindly sponsored a new trophy for the fastest boys and girls under the age of 15. With a historical flourish, this plaque is mounted on a pair of antique children’s wooden skis; winners’ names will appear along the length of the skis. The first winners for this new trophy award were Antoine Cyr, aged 9 and Delphine Cyr, aged 11 from Gatineau.

Most popular in terms of numbers was the 20 km course which appealed to 139 participants. Those who like a “stamina challenge” took the 33 km long course and numbered 86. These later two distance courses (the 20 and 33 km) were mass starts at the Viking Ski Club facility, skiers being bussed there from the Morin-Heights Elementary School where they registered earlier. Later, they would enjoy a post-race meal back at the school while watching the medal and trophy awards presentations by popular radio and TV sports host Guy Thibaudeau.

The 20 km and 33 km courses offer nicely track-set trails that start off on the Viking Club Racing Trails (some 10 km in extent) then participants are taken out on the Viking Touring Trails which thread through mostly pleasant forested areas but with a fair share of herring-bone climbs and long descents to relax, and catch one’s breath! The home stretch of these courses is along the Aerobic Corridor, but for the 33 km participants, they are shunted off and up along the more challenging Alternative trail which runs parallel to the Aerobic Corridor.

Thanks to ChampionChip technology, the complex business of timing everyone in 27 different age and gender categories is now automated. Participants simply put on a Velcro attached ankle chip which is activated when they ski across special mats placed under the snow at the finish line. Their precise arrival time and bib ID are electronically captured and sent off over a cellular phone link to a web accessible database. This permits race results to be instantly retrieved and printed off and displayed to eager participants back at the school, which is located about 1 km from the finish line.

Viewed by satellite mid morning, this event would cover an area of 60 square km with participants spread throughout the extensive trail network and with volunteers manning 5 refreshment stations and shovelling snow on 6 road crossings. Also, First Aid and responder teams were stationed at strategic locations with radio communications.....just in case. All had been meticulously planned months ahead by the 7 person joint Morin-Heights /Viking Loppet planning committee. However, it takes the enthusiastic participation of some 100 plus volunteers to implement the event on the actual day....which they did with huge success! Their efforts were rewarded with attendance at a post-race afternoon volunteer party at City Hall where, over refreshments, prizes kindly provided by local sponsors and sports stores, were drawn in a volunteer raffle. All hoped to win a day pass to relax at one of the local spas!!

Full Loppet result details can be found on the web at: www.skiloppet.com