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Article assigned to emphasize performance of Midwesterners at the 2007 US Cross Country Championships

CXC Team, Midwesterners Make Mark at Championships

By Dean Woodbeck

Laura Valaas helped turn the U.S. Cross Country Championships into a coming out party for the CXC Team's first year of competition, earning three podium spots at the four-race competition at the Michigan Tech Nordic Training Center in Houghton.

Her teammates didn't do so bad, either, capturing 11 top-20 spots during the event, which took place January 1-7, 2007.

Valaas placed third in the 5 kilometer classic, second in the individual sprint, and first in the team sprint (with CXC teammate Caitlin Compton). She was also 12th in the 10km freestyle.

Other Midwesterners made their marks, as well. Chad Giese of the Subaru Factory Team won the men's team sprint with Lars Flora. Giese lives in St. Paul and was an All-American at Middlebury College. He finished 10th in the freestyle and 20th in the classic.

Lindsey Weier won the women's 5km classic, placed fifth in the freestyle and third in the individual sprint. The 2006 Olympian is from Mahtomedi, Minn., and skis at Northern Michigan University.

CXC Team member Compton came into the week as the SuperTour points leader. In addition to winning the team sprint, she placed fourth in the 5km classic and seventh in the 10km freestyle.

On the men's side, Garrett Kuzzy turned in the most consistent distance performance, finishing fifth in the freestyle and seventh in the classic. Kuzzy is from Hopkins, Minnesota, and did his college skiing at Middlebury College.

Another CXC skier, Bryan Cook (Rhineland, WI), was ninth in the classic race and 12th in the freestyle. His brother, Chris, a 2006 Olympian who skis for the U.S. Ski Team, finished third in the sprint.

Valaas Makes Her Mark

The Central Cross Country Skiing Association (CXC) sponsors the CXC Team, which supports seven post-college skiers to train full-time. "Our ultimate goal is to support the athletes as they attempt to make the U.S. Ski Team," said Yuri Gusev, chief executive of CXC.

If Valaas is any indication, the CXC plan is working. Over the last two years, Valaas was one of the top 20 collegiate skiers in the country, just missing the podium at the NCAA Championships last year with a fourth place in the 15km skate race.

The CXC Team recruited her and she now spends part of her time in Hayward, Wisconsin, living at Cresthill Resort and concentrating on training. It seems to be paying off -- she leads the SuperTour sprint points race, giving her plenty of experience for plotting strategy. She outlined how she and Compton approached the team sprint.

"It was our intent," Valaas explained, "to take it a little easy in the morning [qualifying rounds], doing what it took to move forward and this afternoon we had our strategy [for the finals]. Caitlin would take the first lap and stay near the front, out of trouble...and then ski off. Second lap, she'd put some gap on the field because we knew [U.S. Olympian] Kikkan [Randall] could probably out-sprint me on the last lap.

"She did it superbly and I was able to hold that final gap. She increased it and I was able to maintain it," Valaas said.

Valaas also enthusiastically participates in one of the team's other responsibilities, community outreach.

While in Houghton, she and Caitlin Compton lived with the Oppliger family, whose three teenage girls ski for the Copper Country Ski Tigers. The Ski Tigers, along with Valaas and Compton, made headbands one night. The CXC Team members wore theirs while winning the team sprint.

Valaas posted the podium photo on her blog (lauravalaas.com) and said: "Maybe you notice our headbands peaking out from under our CXC hats? We raced in our Ski Tigers headbands... representin' the local club! Thanks to the ladies who made them for us."

Event No Picnic in the Snow

Organizers of the U.S. Cross Country Championships drew high praise from skiers and coaches, but it wasn't easy. A week before the event, the race course consisted of two inches of ice. Usually snowy Houghton, where a typical December brings almost five feet of snow, received just 12 inches this year. Almost all of it came before three weeks of 30-degree temperatures set in.

"We basically shoveled snow onto an entire 5 kilometer course," said organizing chair Mike Abbott. "The number of people willing to shovel for several days – and sometimes all night – was just amazing."

A Christmas Eve snowfall saved the day, providing three inches of heavy white stuff. Later in the week, front-end loaders scraped the snow from every athletic field around, with dump trucks taking 200 loads to the trail head.

The grooming team at the Michigan Tech Nordic Training Center fashioned trailers out of rollers, mounting large wooden boxes on top of the grooming equipment. A tractor with a bucket filled the trailers, which snowmobiles pulled to waiting volunteers, shovels in hand. A side benefit: the rollers helped compact the course during the hundreds of round-trips to the snow piles.

"There hasn't been much snow, and the community has done an incredible job pulling snow from everywhere for these championships," said Pete Vordenberg, head coach of the U.S. Ski Team. "They've trucked it in, they've shoveled it onto the trails...it's very impressive how they've done it with tons of volunteers and lots of hard work."

Right up to the end, Mother Nature refused to cooperate. On Sunday, just two days before the first race, it rained all afternoon.

The rain eventually turned to snow, but the organizing committee closed the course on Monday (an official training day) and sent skiers to a trail 12 miles up the road. Overnight, temperatures dropped below freezing and the groomers worked their magic to create a hard and fast classic course.

"They did an amazing job," Vordenberg said. "It takes a lot of work, not just a couple of people driving a Pisten Bully. It takes a whole bunch of people shoveling all night, which is what they did."

On to Europe

For some participants, including Valaas, the U.S. Championships also helped them earn a trip to Europe. Team selections for the Nordic World Championships, Junior World Championships and Under-23 Championships, plus a Continental Cup trip to Europe, were all announced after the event. For SuperTour participants, the championship races carried double points.

“Yesterday I bought a plane ticket to Munich,” Valaas said in her blog. “Just a ticket to Munich; no return flight scheduled. I know I will be competing at U23 Worlds in Italy. Then a couple races in Germany.”

She may also ski in races in Norway, Sweden and Slovakia.

Meanwhile, organizers in Houghton have already started looking forward to next year, when the championships will return to the Michigan Tech Nordic Training Center December 31, 2007, through January 6, 2008.

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SIDEBAR – CXC TEAM

These are the CXC Team members, supported by the Central Cross Country Skiing Association, The American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation, Lake Express, Salomon, Toko, Hoigaards and Finn Sisu.

Caitlin Compton, Minneapolis, Minn

Bryan Cook, Rhinelander, Wis.

Brian Gregg, Winthrop, Wash.

Garrett Kuzzy, Minneapolis, Minn.

Matt Liebsch, Minneapolis, Minn.

Laura Valaas, Wenatchee, Wash.

Andre Watt, Duluth, Minn.