

Reflections of the Season

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It is now the end of the racing season and I've settled into my spring life of work and recovery. This break has provided me a chance to reflect on my experiences and learning opportunities over the last season. The biggest of these was qualifying for the Under-23 World Championships in Turkey, it was the first time that I got a taste of international level competition and racing as part of Team Canada. And what a learning experience it was. So pull up a comfy chair and grab a cup of tea, because this is going to be the longest article that I have ever written. Enjoy!



My World Championship odyssey began on February 11th, with departure from Thunder Bay and eventually arriving in Erzurum, Turkey. This was obviously no simple point to point flight. It required multiple plane changes and long layovers in Toronto, London, and Istanbul. After a full day and a half of continuous travel, I arrived along with the rest of the Canadian Junior and Under-23 Team. After what seemed like a never ending drive up, up and up a mountain, we finally arrived at our hotel and stumbled to long awaited beds to sleep off the numbing exhaustion of flying across the world.

When I woke from my coma like sleep in the morning, I was amazed at what awaited me outside the window. We were perched on the side of a mountain (at 7,800 ft I later learned) overlooking the completely barren white steppe of Central Turkey with the city of Erzurum in the valley about 2,000ft below us. The entire horizon was bleach white mountains and bare valley, without any substantial clump of trees within sight!



My amazement continued when I made my way down to breakfast.

The staff had set out an enormous buffet of breakfast foods including; eggs, sausages, pancakes, cinnamon buns, croissants, cereals, fresh fruits and vegetables. There was no way I was going to starve on this trip!

The days of training and acclimatization flew by once we got into our routine of large delicious meals, bus shuttles back and forth to the race venue, and training on the hilly courses at the race site. The course was well designed, with excellent snow cover and a challenging climbing section that really tested your stamina. The courses looped up and down a hill in the valley bottom, climbing approximately 400ft per 3.5km loop. It was quite the feeling to stand on the top of the hill, overlooking the bare valley with a few villages in the distance and hearing the "Call to Prayer" from the village mosques floating on the wind.



The Team took some time to relax after training sessions, exploring downtown Erzurum in the evenings. We got to wander the busy business district, smoky teahouses and beautiful stone walled mosques. We even got the surprise of finding a Go-Kart course in the parking garage basement of the local mall! We all felt like Formula-One drivers as we flew around the twisty course with the squealing of tires and several good crashes!

Before long it was real race time, in the span of a day most of the other international teams showed up on the mountain, and our quiet roomy hotel turned into the chaos of ski bags, team

uniforms and many different languages. I found it very exciting to see so many of the world's teams in one place, as I never have been to an international level race before.

The races began with a 1.6 km freestyle sprint on Monday the 20th. I do not traditionally excel at sprint races, so the coaches and I treated this race as a test run for the upcoming distance races. This would give me my first taste of racing at this level and a final prep for my body, without the pressure of needing to achieve an amazing result. That morning I felt surprisingly relaxed about the upcoming event, I was even able to enjoy my breakfast (normally my stress level causes me to have no appetite). Everyone piled into the shuttle buses and departed to the race site in almost complete silence, definitely other people were feeling the pressure now! I got a good warm-up in at the site and headed out on my Sprint Qualifier run. In sprint races every competitor gets to do one run of the course to clock their fastest time possible, and the Top 30 racers get a spot in the Heats. I was quite happy with my qualifier run; while I didn't place high enough to qualify I felt that I completed the course to the best of my ability. I headed back to the hotel knowing that I had no regrets about my day.



After another day of training and ski testing I got my chance to race my favourite event, classical distance. The 15km individual start classic race was run on Wednesday the 22nd, this had been the race I'd been thinking about for months! In the day or so leading up to this race the weather started taking a turn for the worse. The temperatures dropped to -30C during the night and the air completely dried out. I have been struggling with some asthma-related breathing problems over the last 5 years, and these were the worst possible conditions for my ability to maintain efficient breathing. The race began very well, I started out of the gate relaxed and powered through the first 5km of climbs feeling great. However, on the long, winding descent back into the stadium, the cold dry air took its toll. The cold air froze my lungs and throat, and once I began climbing again from the bottom of the course it felt like my lung capacity had been cut in half. I tried to regain my rhythm throughout the remaining 10km, but was struggling to keep from hyperventilating. I made it through to the finish line, crumbling after the line until I could get my breathing back under control. I knew that this race was far below my hopes and expectations, it stung really badly that after all the work I'd put in over the years I was not even able to perform at my normal ability. I ended the day in 52nd; far from the results I'd been hoping for leading into one of my best events.

Thankfully the following day was a rest day, I definitely needed it to recovery from the 15km. I was able to think my race through and come up with a plan for the next race, the 30km skiathlon. The skiathlon is a strange race; a race that is usually only run during Championship events. It is composed of a mass start classical race of 15km followed by a second 15km using the skating technique. While these techniques are different, the race is run continuously. This requires the athletes to

switch their equipment in booths while the race clock continues to run. I was looking forward to this race, as I am usually strong in both techniques, a definite advantage over single technique specialist racers.

With the knowledge of the course and conditions from the previous race two days before, I had a plan in place to combat the effects of the cold and long effort. Because of the 30km length of the race, it would take approximately an hour and twenty minutes to complete the course. Due to the length of the race, the coaching staff is allowed on course to provide their athletes with warm Gatorade or similar electrolyte rich fluids to help prevent dehydration. I knew that conserving energy and warmth would be extremely important. Since my 30km distance race required 8 laps of 3.5km to complete, it would come out to 3,200 vertical ft of climbing! With that much climbing if I wasted too much energy I would be in for a long, painful race well off the back of the pack. My lungs were still aching from the race before; I knew that if I wasn't careful I could easily blow them out too early. The key to accomplishing this balance would be to ski behind other skiers, using them to block as much wind as possible, a technique called getting into someone's "draft".

I immediately put this knowledge into effect once the race began; I quickly made a hard effort to make my way from my starting position of 45th into the top 30 skiers. I planned this out knowing that the leaders' pack in mass starts will often split at around this position and I didn't want to get stuck on my own over such a long race. This worked perfectly as I was able to ski for the first 10km tucked within the pack. Eventually the effort of the race before caught up with me, I was unable to hold onto the large pack at the top of the hill and got separated off on the following downhill. The following 5km were quite a bit more difficult, my breathing got ragged and I began losing positions as small groups of skiers were able to catch and drop me. By the time I reached the mid-point of the race and the transition point to skate technique, I had faded back into 50th position. I had misjudged the extent of my fatigue from the previous race. I was able to form up with a nice little pack of approximately a dozen skiers as we exited the transition zone, and I focused my attention of recovering as much energy as possible for the last half of the race.



The skate portion of the race went fairly well, I kept my plan in action of conserving energy. With 13km to go the pack that I was with began to make small spurts in speed, a version of cat and mouse. While this strategy is effective to shake off competitors, it can waste lots of energy. Definitely not a good idea on a long distance race in the cold. I remained patient, not going after the skiers that managed to break off the front of our pack, but keeping them within sight waiting for the time to act. With 5 km to go I knew it was time. I broke from my smaller pack of 5 at a feed station when the other skiers with me were distracted by warm Gatorade. I hammered through the flats to regain contact with another pack of skiers. These

were the racers who had broken from my pack of a dozen only 8km before, and they were feeling the effects of their earlier attacks. I had 2 km to go, and 400 ft of vertical climb between me and the finish line, and I was determined to beat every racer that I could, I put my head down and started hammering. I flew past racer after racer, those who tried to follow me could not hold the tempo after depleting their legs earlier in the race. I was running on pure adrenaline as I crested the final climb well ahead of all the others who I had started the climb behind. I put everything into the final sprint to the finish, knowing that I had raced as smart as I could and it had paid off. I ended up finishing 40th, not nearly as high as I'd hope for going into this week of competition, but I was happy that I'd been able to make the most out of my situation.



With the races over it was time to get all packed up for the long trip home. Thankfully our flights were split over a two-day period, providing an excellent chance to explore downtown Istanbul. It was the perfect way to end a long stressful trip. I spent the day wandering through old the palaces of Sultans and exploring the immense mosques at the center of the city. The intricate detail of the tiled mosaic walls was beyond words. Instead, I've attached a few pictures to give you an idea of what my adventures looked like.

Thank you for reading through this very, very long article. The support that the community has shown me over the last few years has been amazing. I can't express how helpful everyone has been getting me to this point. I am looking forward to next year and all the great new changes that are coming. Cheers!

Special thanks go out to my family and friends who have helped keep me sane over this winter. To my employers Fresh Air Experience, Kamview Nordic Center, Landale Landscape Management and Hamilton Archeological Consultation for being able to accommodate my scattered schedule. To my amazing equipment supplier Salomon, and my long time sponsor Dr. Blair Schoales Medical Professional Corporation. Thank you to Dave Greer for the great race photos (Check out some more pictures below!)

