



Team Gregg trip with NanaNordic in Kotzebue, AK
We headed north of the Arctic Circle to the village of Kotzebue.



This past week was one of the best I can remember, Brian and I ventured back north, way north, to the small city of Kotzebue, Alaska. Kotzebue is part of the NANA Region of Alaska and is actually the main “hub” for the area. With a population of less than 3,000 it has two grocery stores, an airport, a hospital, a hotel, a few restaurants and many other amenities that are considered a luxury to its inhabitants yet I take them for granted on a daily basis in Minneapolis!



Brian's new friend!

Below is some information about the program taken from www.nananordic.com

Mission

NANANordic's mission is to introduce the lifetime sport of cross-country skiing to rural Alaska through a sustainable Nordic ski program, starting with the NANA region. The 11 villages in the NANA region, most of which are located above the Arctic Circle, have ideal terrain and an abundance of snow nearly eight months a year - perfect conditions for Nordic skiing.

Program Description

NANANordic is all about healthy lifestyles, which includes staying active year-round. The program works in cooperation with local schools and follows their annual calendars. In September, volunteer coaches work with students in the communities offering running camps. In April, some of the world's best Nordic skiers join NANANordic to teach rural Alaska students from Kindergarten through 12th grade how to cross-country ski. A team of coaches spend a week in selected villages, bringing skis, boots, poles and other gear for the children to use. After the week, NANANordic donates the equipment to the schools. Coaches incorporate a variety of games to help the kids get comfortable on their skis. Students receive instruction in their P.E. classes during the school day and an optional, after-school program. Some kids spend up to three hours or more a day on skis.

In its inaugural year, 650 students in four villages in the NANA region were introduced to Nordic skiing. The following year, 2013, more than 1,500 youth in all 11 NANA villages received instruction. In addition, coaches traveled to White Mountain in the Bering Straits region and Anaktuvuk Pass in the North Slope region. In 2014, NANANordic expects to visit at least 25 villages, including all 11 in the NANA region.

Village-to-Village Skis

Possibly one of the more unique features of the NANANordic program for coaches is the opportunity to ski from one village to the next. In 2013, some hardy coaches skied from Kotzebue to Noatak (63 miles), Kiana to Noorvik (24 miles), Ambler to Shungnak (23 miles), Noatak to Kivalina (53 miles), Noorvik to Selawik (35 miles) and Shungnak to Kobuk (10 miles). The year before, they traveled from Kotzebue to Kiana (75 miles), Kiana to Noorvik (24 miles) and Noorvik to Selawik (35 miles). Trail markers guided skiers along routes typically used by snowmachines, the primary mode of transportation in winter. Typical Arctic spring conditions greet skiers each day - blue skies and ample sun lasting well into evening. Among their supplies, some traditional foods, such as Muktuk. An added bonus - caribou sightings or perhaps skiing through a herd of 2,000, as was done in 2012 during one of the village-to-village skis.

We applied and were accepted to join this trip through the NANA Nordic program directed by Olympian Lars Flora. The program is in its 3rd year and has been a huge success met with extremely positive feedback from each of the small villages it reaches across Northern Alaska. The other villages where the program visits throughout the spring include, Noorvik, Kiana, Barrow, Kobuk, Ambler, Shungnak, Noatak, Deering, Buckland, Kivalina and Selawik. Most of the coaches are volunteers and the organization covers the cost of flying to the remote locations as well as food and housing while there. We were fortunate to have a place to stay called the Alaska Technical Center just a short walk from the school and ski trails which had beds and warm showers waiting for us every night.



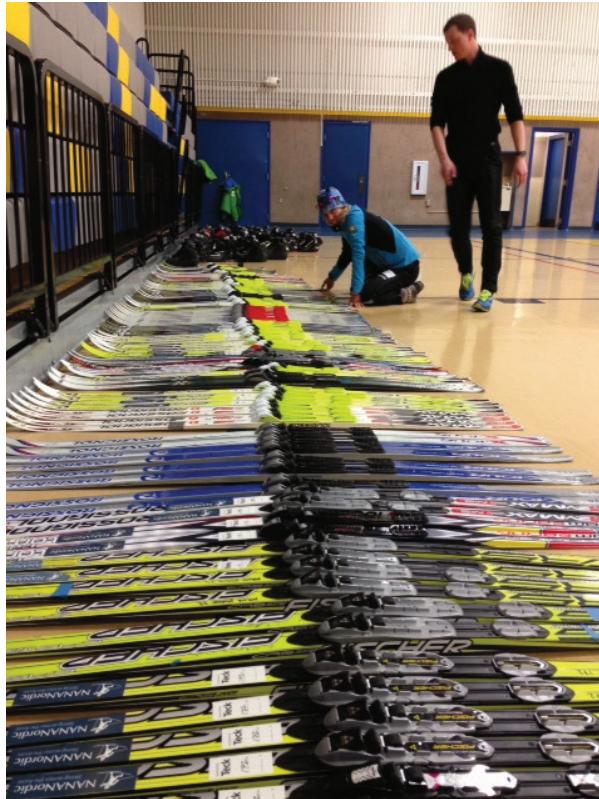
Every morning started off the same. Brian and I would wake up early and head out for a morning run around town. We ate all of our meals at the local school, an incredible facility and were allowed to cook breakfast and dinner in the home economics room. Lunch was in the cafeteria with all the students and offered even more time to connect with them.



We spent a while organizing all of the equipment so that when 50+ kids showed up all at once we could easily help them get outfitted quickly.



Sara Organizing the poles.



David and I lining the skis up from smallest to biggest.

We worked with each PE class throughout the day, 3 in the morning a break for lunch at noon and then 3 more classes in the afternoon. The students ranged from 4th graders through high school seniors. After school we offered skiing to all community members and all ages. The turnout was phenomenal. We worked with an average of 100+ students a day and it was a blast getting to know each of them.



So cute!



Some of the older kids getting their ski stuff on.



Teaching some Biathlon technique again.

Biathlon was a big emphasis during the week because Zach and Sarah, both former former Biathlon National Team members are trying to grow the sport throughout all of Alaska. Brian and I were both happy to see two former athletes working hard to make sure the sport has a great place to prosper with lots of interested athletes.



Erin and Sammy came out every day during their PE class as well as each afternoon once school was over! These two logged a lot of K's throughout the week.



Best friends Brooke and Amelia found a new way to spend quality time together while staying healthy. Amelia was happy to learn that multiple pairs of skis, boots and poles will be available at the Rec Center for her and her family (and Brooke) to check out after we left.



Me and some of the older girls.



Working on Technique and gliding without poles.



Brian with a pack of kids!



Zach playing Seals and Polar Bears (Sharks and Minnows).

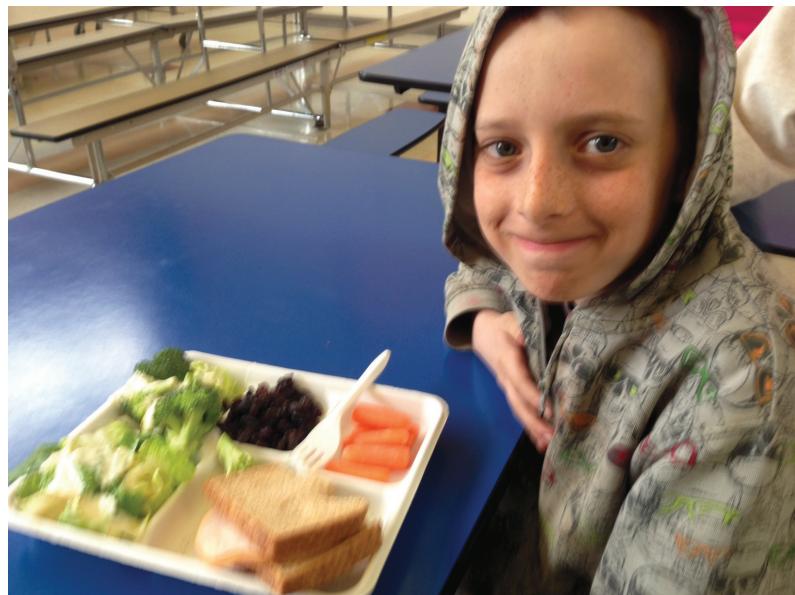


Me and my new friend Tara!



Psyched to be skiing!

We joined the students in the cafeteria each day for lunch, we were happy to see that a salad bar was available everyday with a variety of “kid friendly” options. Just because it was there doesn’t mean that the kids would take any, so we tried to get the kids pumped on healthy nutrition as a way to make sure they had plenty of energy for the ski adventures that lay ahead. It worked GREAT and we spent most of the lunch period high-fiving those who wanted to show us their salad plates!



Kobe showing off his healthy lunch with pride.



Jacob on his second plate of salad.

We were also in town during the annual Kobuk 440 Dog Sled races. It was not uncommon to have multiple teams come ripping through during our classes and their practice runs! Such a cool method of transportation! We were asked to help serve at the local Shee Fish Feed for the Mushers the night before the race. Shee fish is a large fish that is fished all year long in Kotzebue and has been a staple in the diets of the local residents for hundreds of years. We were psyched to try some Caribou stew as well, which was absolutely delicious! The entire community came out to wish the mushers well and pray for a safe event. Many of the elders wore their traditional outfits and the blessings were spoken in their native language.



A musher speeding past yet the dog team and sled were almost silent.



Helping out with serving of some Shee Fish.



Brian and I met John Baker and liked his “Team” jacket a lot!

John is the 2011 Iditarod Champion. We had a good time comparing his 40 Alaskan Huskies and 1 pair of skis to our 1 Alaskan Husky and 40 pairs of skis! We decided that Team Gregg has it a little easier when we have to just wax the skis! The next day we took a quick break from skiing to see the mushers off!



The entire community comes out to see the mushers off!

As the week progressed so did the student's skiing abilities. They started venturing further and further down the waterfront and we were able to get a shovel to build a jump. There was not much vertical nearby as Kotzebue is on the ocean but we were able to find some short bluff in-runs to get some air (and work on some uphill skiing!)



Zach demonstrating with a fishing boat in the background!



Luke getting air!

The last day of practice featured a race at the end of the school day. We had 80 kids come out with 70 of them entering the race. It was so much fun to see them put their new skills to work. There were lots of smiles and lots of cheers.



Brian warming the kids up at the start!



Beautiful light for 17 hours a day during April! Lots of time to ski!!!



The coaching crew heading home at 11:15 pm! The days were long but with so much daylight and having so much fun we hardly noticed.

The final adventure of our trip featured an epic 70K ski from Kotzebue to Noorvik (the next village!) One of the most unique aspects of these remote villages is the lack of roads connecting them. Winter brings the opportunity to actually travel between them because the sea and rivers are frozen over. The Ice Road exists as a way for vehicles to commute and another route which shadows the Ice Road is traveled extensively by snowmobile and dog sled. Occasionally a group of crazy nordic skiers come to town and jump for joy at the idea of skiing that far across the arctic.



We were met with a steady 25 mph headwind the entire way.

The ski was beautiful, cold and long! It was the furthest I have skied a season but I loved every minute of it. We carried all of our food and gear and few spare poles with us. We were skiing through one of the most remote areas in Alaska and it was absolutely amazing scenery! Earlier in the week while we were finishing up breakfast at school a friendly teacher stopped in to say hello. We soon realized that we were both NMU Wildcats!!! I was so pumped to find another alumni all the way up in Kotzebue, AK. Of course he was also thrilled to meet all of us and immediately invited us over for moose! Yes!!! While enjoying dinner the night before our trip we mentioned that we didn't have any support for our ski. Dave immediately offered to support us with a few of his friends by snowmobile. He drove out and met us about 40K into the ski with water and warm clothes if we needed them.



Fellow NMU alumni Dave West!!! Dave is the High School Math Teacher in Kotzebue.

Once we made it to Noorvik we were exhausted and happier than ever! Brian and I were excited to see that the small community included a Boys and Girls Club. We are always impressed with the positive environment that the Jerry Gamble Boys and Girls Club in North Minneapolis, where we volunteer during the spring, summer and fall, provides for all the kids who visit. Likewise it was apparent that the tiny Boys and Girls Club in Noorvik, AK was the same environment for their kids.



The “support” crew and a few kids who lead us into town in front of the local Boys and Girls Club.



Brian being greeted in the one room facility.



An awesome welcome from the kids at “The Club.”

Team Gregg is now back at home in North Minneapolis. Brian was on the road from September 29th this season until now and I was home only a few more days before the Battle Creek Super Tour and the Birkie. We had an absolute blast this season and cannot thank all those who supported us and enabled us to have such a successful year. Of all the places we travel train and race, the Twin Cities are our home and it feels great to be back. We have a little catching up to do in the next few days but we cannot wait to get back to the Boys and Girls Club and share all of our stories with the kids. Another season is just around the corner and Brian and I will continue to train and race at the highest level possible with the incredible support of our sponsors and donations. Our gratitude and appreciation is beyond words but we look forward to giving back to our incredible ski community for the rest of our lives! We love what we do and we love sharing it with others even more!

