

June 1, 2024

Dear Ernst Family,

As you know better than I, Mark was not someone you could keep entirely to yourselves. Extroversion bubbled out of him like some sort of interpersonal glue and, as such, people readily stuck to him. Instantly likeable, predictably offbeat, almost spasmodically energetic, he was nothing short of a hoot to include in any undertaking wherein his qualities elevated the whole experience. Mark thrived on motion. Thinking about him, I looked up the definition of “kinetic energy.” *Energy which a body possesses by being in motion.* (Thank you, Oxford online dictionary.) He was not a guy I could easily imagine playing chess, tending to a garden plot, or discussing accounting practices. Maybe he did all these things brilliantly, I don’t know, but he was at his best as a *body in motion*.



Dogs Unleashed. Just about at the same time (late 70s) when Mark was achieving sufficient thrust to escape Green Bay’s gravitational pull, a smattering of other youth about the Midwest began to spring from their warm homes to take up a punishing sport typically contested over extreme distances on frigid winter mornings. Many, including some parents, might have considered Nordic skiing an irrational career choice, but then, like Mark, these young men & women had likely already rebuffed team sports as being too regimented, too restrictive of an intense personal desire to explore one’s own physical limits. Like Mark, these aerobic anomalies had enjoyed venting their excessive energy through running, cycling, or speed skating. Skiing, after all, was & is the perfect therapy for the intensely focused active person with an excessive aerobic capacity and a conviction that doing still more would make one a little bit more proficient each day.

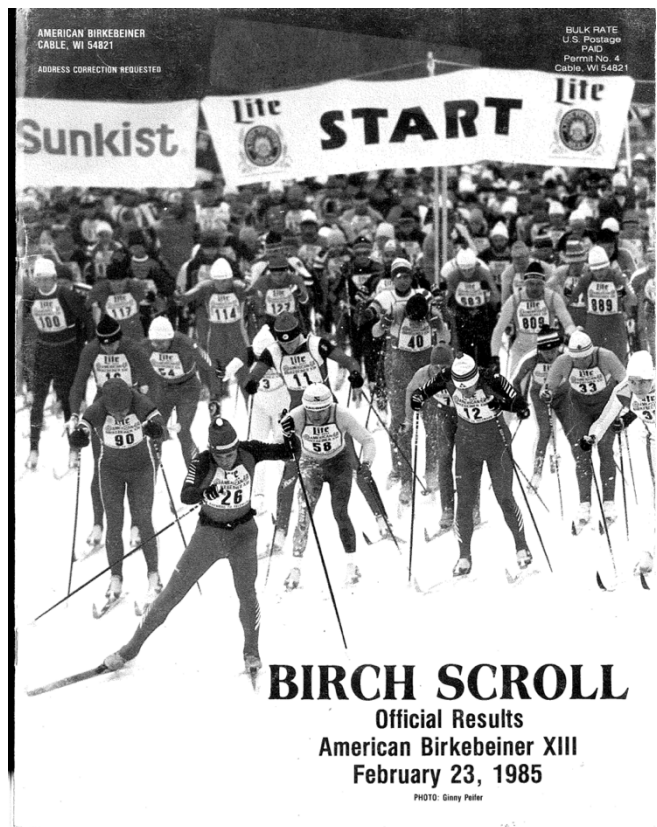
In time, though widely dispersed throughout Wisconsin, Michigan, & Minnesota, these skiers found each other & aggregated as a matter of convenience & fraternity. Nordic ski columnist Bob Woodward, observing the scrappy lot of uncoached, unfunded personalities who emerged from unfurnished apartments & crammed into abused personal vehicles for weekly forays to races, labeled us the *Central Dogs*. (“Central” was the US Ski Association’s designation for the Midwest portion of the country.) Yes, Mark was a Dog. Should that sound in the least bit belittling, I assure you it is not. I apply that title as the highest honorific I can bestow upon a ski mate.



Across Canada in a Mark's Stuffed Rabbit

Maybe this was Mark as a Puppy? If you were not on this earth in the 1970s, there was generally snow aplenty. Snow so deep that you could hide Mark – standing fully upright – in your average Green Bay January snowbank. (This is a continued gag Mark & I played on each other. We were the same height, so we each insisted the other was a shrimp. The final score was something like 183 to 22 with Mark easily in the lead, so I owed him one final poke.) As you know perfectly well given whom we honor, snow meant skiing. Not gravity skiing. Skiing against gravity. Skiing through snow, sleet, & rain over powder, mush, & boilerplate. Skiing at the Stump Farm during inclement weather & inconvenient hours while others were snug at home in their Packer jammies watching the tube. Skiing with nervous intensity then turning the cycling & running seasons into an ongoing extension of a personal promise to leap past “good” & “better” to “best.” Mark made himself into the finest skier he could be & then emerged onto the competitive calendar as a Force.

I will remind you, as anyone my age does with tedious predictability, that “back in the day” we had no amenities, conveniences, or short-cuts. We had no coaches, or local clubs, or Strava to inform us or to guide our decisions. (John Caldwell’s “Bible of the Sport” was the only readily available English language book on the topic, so it served as our sole reference manual.) Athletes like Mark pretty much got up in the morning without any plan whatsoever other than to eat, train, make a few bucks, train some more, eat some more, sleep. Mark, like the rest of us, did this in isolation (remember – no Internet, no social media, no cell phones, no selfies) for most of the year & only really had a sense of how things were going when



Mark, #58, pursues Bill Koch out of the gate

finally meeting up with the rest of the Midwestern Nordic world at celebrated events like the Calumet Season Opener. The best expression you ever saw of how pent up 8-9 months of training alone could leave a person was to witness the start line explosion which was shot-out-of-a-cannon Mark Ernst launching upon that Yooper trail.

Mark, as he would occasionally remind us, had an impressive record at the Season Opener though his success did not come without controversy. Precisely the same unrestrained “out of the box” spontaneity that made Mark such a trip to be around once got him into hot water with the Upper Peninsula’s guardians of Nordic tradition. You require some background for this tale:

Then as now, a visit to the Keweenaw takes you about as far “into the box” as you can get. If you want a real-life trip through the dimensions of time & space, heck, forget the fantasy movie & get to Calumet. First, the hours upon hours of driving will convince you your destination truly is at the end of the earth. When you finally arrive after coursing through ancient woods on convoluted roads, past sepia-toned old mining towns on life support, and enter Calumet, a village SO venerated for its industrious past that the *entire* downtown is on the National Historic Register, you will conclude you’ve arrived a century or so before you started out. Then there’s this thing about snow. You might have had to dust off your windshield before you left home but now take care where you park your car because you’re not going to find it again if you forgot which snowbank you left it behind.



Chasing spring snow to the end of the Keweenaw

It's only fitting that hard old Nordic legends populate this hard old land. The one-armed man who never missed a ski race. The three fellows who skied across the entire UP on the railroad grades. The Swedetown event timer – though legally blind, this Michigan Tech chemistry professor would slap a stopwatch to his bottle-bottomed glasses & bark out times that no one dared dispute. The largest of the legends, a towering man of not inconsequential weight, was Leonard Oikarinen who imposed cross-country skiing upon the Keweenaw by force of enthusiasm & good will. Universally known as “Mr Ski” (verified by his vanity plate), Leonard communicated directly with – well, possibly God, too, but definitely with folks back in Finland via ham radio. (If this concept confuses you, Google it. It has nothing to do with musically curious swine.) To those of us who were just figuring out the sport of skiing, Leonard was nothing shy of a lighthouse guiding us to the promised land

– a land which included a network of crudely groomed trails whimsically marked out with arrows of rotten apples lined up in the snow or a mitten on a stick (follow the thumb).

Sit! Stay! So, let’s recall one particularly memorable Season Opener. Upon the word of the vision-impaired man with the clock, skiers went out on course at 30 second intervals. Finally, it was Mark’s turn. With all that pent up energy he stood at the line twitching like a caffeinated meerkat. In his deep Finnglish accent, Leonard boomed his countdown:

FIVE...

FOUR...

TREE (for, as we all know, three is “tree” in Yooper)...

Mark took off like a shot! And got about 1 foot before a giant ham operator’s ham-sized hand clamped down on that fleeing shoulder & fairly lifted the perpetrator back to the start, Mark’s legs spun in air like Roadrunner’s.

Leonard instructed in a voice now stentorian: **“You go when I say go. Now, GO!”**

I don’t know if Mark felt in the least chastised by this treatment, but I guarantee that everyone after him followed the rules to a “T.”

Now that’s a first impression for you! As we were initially all strangers to each other – training, as I said, in our own locales & only becoming aware of one another when we assembled for races – a faux pas that egregious stuck like a LinkedIn resumé bullet point.

“Oh, you mean the guy that Leonard Oikarinen disciplined?”



A Spirited Dog. Mark was, if anything, memorable. With his high energy & high jinks he imparted personality to a sport which some thought somnambulistic. He would unleash these well-rehearsed comedic lines, spoken or sung, which left you musing: *“You should be smokin’ mister, not your car!”* Or from a Monty Python album: *“Finland, Finland, Finland, the country where I quite want to be. With mountains so lofty & treetops so tall.”* And despite his competitive ferocity, he had an endearing habit of hugging any living thing in arm’s reach.



Two McLeans in arm’s reach



Rabbit Regret. Beyond the Calumet Season Opener World Championships, the Central Dogs logged a whole lot of driving miles to hit races essentially wherever groomers could lay down tracks. The most wretched trek was the annual migration over Trans-Canada Highway 17 to give the Easterners a chance to witness some real racing. Why oh why (?), but I once volunteered to drive Mark's Rabbit back home across Ontario & Quebec, as if one province weren't enough. (I don't recall if Mark had decided to walk home, or what was the rationale behind this move.) Kris Storm ("Stormy") joined me which instantly made it a fun trip, & we stopped to race along the way. Here's the thing, though. Mark had not mentioned that the Rabbit's heater didn't work. It was winter (just thought I'd review that detail); it was cold; the wind chill on the front of that incredibly uninsulated vehicle made it colder. Stormy & I, dressed in all the clothing we had brought along, drove mile after tundra mile scrunched up in those plastic seats with our knees pulled up attempting to at least keep our core blood from freezing. I'm sure we popped the cigarette lighter in & out a few times in a futile attempt at warmth. *"Finland, Finland, Finland, the country where I quite want to be. With saunas so toasty & ovens so warm..."*

The Birkie this year – and we can't *not* mention the Birkie since there are a lot of folks from Wisconsin in the house & it's almost more famous than bratwurst – rightly took on the mantle of a miracle race pulled off by a team of northern stalwarts who denied global warming's (call it what you will, it was warm) attempt at ruining all our fun. To those of us Dogs who were in the traces back in 1981 it reminded us of the Bikinibeiner year. If you didn't remember this, Mark could be counted upon to set you straight because this was a crowning moment for him – quite literally so because he was on the podium of the encore edition of the Birkie which occurred with actual snow two weeks after several other mini-Birkies were held on a Mt. Telemark snow cone. Though it provided me with an irresistible opportunity to employ the height gag again ("So now you're standing on stumps so you can see?"), I joined all Central Dogs in being proud of our Green Bay brother.



Champions of the March 7 race stand tall in the winner's circle. Pictured, right to left, are champion Tim Caldwell, second place Bjorn Arvnes and third place Mark Ernst.

A Dog Park. The UP earned its reputation for winter by frustrating sidewalk-shoveling Yoopers with progressively crazier blizzards well into spring. These predictably did not cease until at least two weeks *after* the sagest Maki on the Range declared, “I guess winter’s over for sure then, eh?” In 1981 (yes, this was the same year in which Mark Ernst stood atop a stump at the conclusion of the Birkebeiner so that he could find his clothing bag) the snow stood so deep on Brockway Mountain Drive that a triangular chunk of



Mandan ghost cabin

yellow metal barely sticking out of the trail turned out not to be a discarded tin can but the top of a highway caution sign. It was May in the Keweenaw.

I do now know how we came to meet Lutheran Pastor Mark Haninen but it undoubtedly stemmed from a conversation Tony Hartmann had with him somewhere along the way. (I have yet to meet a Yooper that Tony does not know.) At any rate, Pastor Mark, proving that he was fully into spirits Holy & otherwise, owned a cabin in the barely extant ghost town of Mandan, MI.



Sharing our passion for skiing, Pastor Mark generously permitted us to stay in his getaway sanctuary for our own spring camp. Had there not been a sermon to write & a few parishioners to console, I’m sure he would have joined us to everyone’s delight.



The naughty Rabbit reenters the narrative here. Tony & I arrived first and followed instructions to park our vehicle in a narrow breach plowed in the 8-foot-high snowbank along US Highway 41. Moments later Mark (not the pastor) arrived in his Rabbit and, seeing no additional off-highway parking, actually accelerated head on into the snowdrift thereby creating his own parking cave. That Rabbit did not hop out its hole for the remainder of our stay, but there was much conjecture & maybe a little betting about whether or not it would emerge before July.

“It doesn’t get better than this” aptly described those few days of exploring the finest spring glacier skiing this side of an actual glacier.



The Penultimate Doghouse. Perhaps because he enjoyed club skiing during his renowned year in Norway, industrious Tony recognized the value of bringing together all the loner Midwesterners into one magnificent kennel. (It had to be said.) In the 70s/80s there were optimistically perhaps a dozen so-called *seniors* (a competition age designation) on the circuit, most wittingly or not following in Roger Pekuri’s* tracks. Today the serious senior may ally her-/himself with any of several high profile cohesive & coached clubs & teams. (Go to Theodore Wirth on any winter afternoon to find hundreds of kids, seniors & masters dashing off around the trails. It’s a glorious sight!) Far from the developing metropolitan hub in the Twin Cities, Marquette Michigan had the snow and, more impressively, had Nordic culture oozing out of the legendary Northern Michigan University ski program. Among the Dogs, Sten Fjeldheim, who seemed to join our traveling caravans at will despite NMU matriculation & commitments, consistently pushed the notion of coming to Marquette.

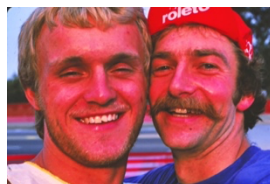
*Famously, rather than fading away after college or succumbing to the magnetic pull of more established Nordic hubs in the East, West, & Alaska, the sisu-propelled Pekuri stubbornly stayed near home & became the guaranteed regular at any event. It would be a longer tale – and humble Roger would deny it all, – but he’s the man who showed us the way.

Tony found the hulking pale yellow rental at 132 E Fair Avenue in Marquette, MI, painted *Central Nordic Training Center* on the concrete steps out front, & declared our presence. You can see what Marquette had to put up with. And you can see that Mark is right there in the middle of it all demonstrating his typically contrary way of going about things.



One final howl. I did not set out to write Mark's biography. I did not know the Mark that you know as a father or family member. I did not see him proselytizing at the customer counter or coaching the next generation of Nordic skiers. My intent has been to recount a few examples from an interval in his life that you were not privy to so that you could understand Mark's lasting impact upon some of his friends.

I have been liberal with silly Dog puns. (I think Mark would have responded in kind.) I mean no disrespect by that. In fact, I intend quite the opposite, which is to applaud Mark's stature in a world which was not so large except to those of us fellow Dogs who flourished during a period which will no doubt always be remembered as the Rise of The Midwest Nordic Dynasty or some such modest title that conjures up images of heroics performed by – well – underdogs. I assure you that those long drives, meager lodgings, & impassioned competitions would not have been nearly so captivating in our memories without Mark's contribution. We will miss those times. We will miss sharing them with Mark.



Duncan, who wrote this, is the taller one on the right.