

NDC Thunder Bay Athlete Interest Article: “The Pinnacle”

By: Michael Somppi



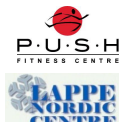
Have you ever dreamed when you were young of achieving something big? Bigger than maybe you thought possible? Or at least, big enough that it seemed the odds were against you fulfilling this dream? It could be anything: being accepted into medical school, travelling the world with only a backpack, opening your own business, and becoming a professional athlete are examples.

I remember running laps around Five-Mile Elementary School when I was in Grade 6, racing my buddies and pushing myself, a desire growing inside of me to reach for something bigger in the sporting world. At the time, I didn't know how it would transpire, but I knew I wanted to push my limitations and excel in sport.

This desire blossomed and has since taken me on a journey I could never have foreseen back when I was running those laps around Five Mile. Sixteen years later I stood on the start line of the opening World Cup race of the cross-country ski season. I took it all in. This is the pinnacle of sport; the best skiers in the world, competing for their countries, pushing the boundaries of their abilities and displaying feats of incredible strength and endurance. Time to test myself. Two deep breathes and I took off.



World Cup Racing in Ruka, Finland (Photo Credit: to Nordic Focus)



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Last year I earned the opportunity to start my ski season on the World Cup, representing Canada. It felt similar to my first season as a member of Thunder Bay's National Development Centre. Everywhere we travelled to race and train was new to me. It was exciting and at times intimidating, testing myself against the best in the business. There's nowhere to hide when the global ski community is looking at the results page.

I had results based goals for the trip, as I always do when racing, but ultimately I wanted to soak it all in. The trip took me to Gallivare, Sweden where I was above the Arctic Circle for the first time; to Kuusamo, Finland where I made the Helsinki Sanomat, the largest newspaper in Finland, after locals were intrigued by my Finnish last name and interviewed me post-race; to Lillehammer, Norway where I went for one of the top skis of my life in the high tundra of Sjusjoen; to the scenic mountain town of Davos, Switzerland where world leaders hold summit meetings; to Dobbiaco-Toblach, Italy where I ate my first true Italian pizza! Yes, it was my first time visiting Italy! All of these race venues were new to me and each week it was exciting to explore the towns and ski the trails.

Unfortunately, I did not realize my result-based goals so I walk away from this trip with some disappointment and extra motivation to train harder. Strangely though, I also feel some contentment. I tested myself against the best in the world for four weekends in a row, gave my best effort every day, pushed my limitations, and overcame my nerves to do so. In a way, I feel I achieved my big, sometimes seemingly impossible dream. I competed at the pinnacle of sport and I truly enjoyed the experience.

Michael Somppi
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