

## **A LANDSCAPE WARMED BY HOPE. NORWEGIANS BRAVE COLD FOR A HERO**

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LILLEHAMMER – They are waiting for Vegard.

In the thickly wooded hills above Lillehammer, scattered along the tangle of cross-country trails leading to the Birkebeineren Ski Stadium, they are waiting for him in tents, shrouded in sleeping bags and huddled around campfires.

Walking a trail under piercing bright stars and boughs of fir trees laden with the snow of the century, you can hear the muffled voices of Vegard Ulvang's fellow Norwegians in the distance. The murmur of Bokmaal, Norway's common spoken language, sounds like an amalgam of the yoordi-woordi-poordi sing-song of Swedish and Germanic percussion.

The mercury is retreating into its bulb; eventually it reached 18 below zero on this night before Monday's 30-kilometer freestyle race for men.

Ulvang was not there Monday while teammates Thomas Alsgaard won the gold and Bjorn Daehlie won the silver.

He is "sparing his power" for the climactic Nordic ski race of the Winter Olympics -- the 50 kilometers -- that still is nearly two weeks off, although he will tune up with the 10K classical Thursday.

Never mind. The few hundred campers in the woods will swell as the progression of races leads to the 50K on Feb. 27, which may draw 100,000 people. Most will see the races for free – as Norwegian law entitles them to do – as long as they are out on the trail, not inside the 31,000-seat stadium that surrounds the start/finish line and is sold out for the Olympics.

But this night they are toasting cheese sandwiches over the fire. There is some Finnish vodka.

Until Ulvang comes, there is fun and warmth to be had in the bitter beauty of the Norwegian woods.

### **An exemplary Norwegian**

"He is kind of an extension of Norwegians' nature, and he combines the aspects of Norwegian character that we think we are," says military student Arne Syver Anmarkrud, 22, who has arranged for army tents and wood stoves for some of his friends from Hønefoss, between Lillehammer and Oslo.

Ulvang's character must be awesome, because he is an awesome man. He is 30, and two years ago he won three gold medals at the Albertville Games.

He has climbed the highest mountains of three continents: Mont Blanc in Europe, Mount McKinley in North America and Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa.

He has skied across Greenland and ridden a horse across Mongolia.

He has credited his teammates for his success, and he smiles at babies.

"I can identify with him," said Hanne Cecilie Geirbo, 18, an Oslo student, "because he is normal, just like me."

Normal, as Norwegians see themselves, means having a straightforward approach to life and other people. Sometimes it can be taken for rudeness.

Ulvang took the athletes' oath for these Games because of his near universal appeal among Norwegians. He also accused the International Olympic Committee of being undemocratic and called its president a fascist.

"He said what is true," said Sara Jacobsen, 18. "The IOC is composed of very many self-important people. Freedom of speech is very central to Norwegian society. That is not a fact everywhere in Europe."

Normal also means camping with friends and family in a land where winter dominates the calendar.

"We are very used to being out in nature from when we are very small," said Greger Teigre, 21, a University of Oslo computer science student. "Almost every family has access to a chalet in the mountains."

Ingvild Andersen said she has been camping with her family since she was a child. She learned to cross-country ski when she was 2. But this is her first winter night in a tent.

She and her scout troop are more accustomed to digging snow caves and sleeping inside. All Norwegians are used to a winter of long johns, arctic-weight sleeping bags and layers of woolen clothing.

"Sometimes when you wake up in the morning, all the heat in your sleeping bag is gone," Jacobsen said. "It's very important to have enough underwear."

Her friend, Synne Marianne, said: "There is so much winter here, we simply have to be fond of it."

As they have to be fond of Ulvang. For his best event, the 50K, is the distillation of the essence of Norwegian winter sports as he embodies a magnified vision of the national psyche.

### **31 miles of endurance**

The race is a marathon on skis, more than 31 miles of hills and forest, and it is in the classical style of Sondre Nordheim, the 19th-century outdoorsman revered by Norwegians as the father of skiing.

They already were spending nights in the forest by Nordheim's time. He simply gave Norwegians something they could do after waking up in the morning.

Nearly every Norwegian now skis, to get to school or the supermarket, for enjoyment or for competition. No country skis as well.

Its national cross-country team, led by Ulvang and Daehlie, lost only one race at last year's world championships. To spend a night – or a couple of weeks – in a tent to watch them beat the world in a sport Norwegians equate with existence is therefore not so unusual.

"One of us must stay up one hour each night in rotation to watch the oven and put on the firewood. It is not heroic or something," Anmarkrud said. "It is quite normal."

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