

Horizon Biathlon n°1 - Biathlon in the land of cowboys #2

Second episode of our brand new long format series called "Horizon Biathlon". Through this series, we wish to highlight biathlon and its actors in countries where it is still little known or recognized. Today we cross the Atlantic to fly to the United States! This second episode continues to develop the subject of American biathlon today but also tries to provide some insights into its future.

American biathlon : present & futur

Being a biathlete in the United States in 2019

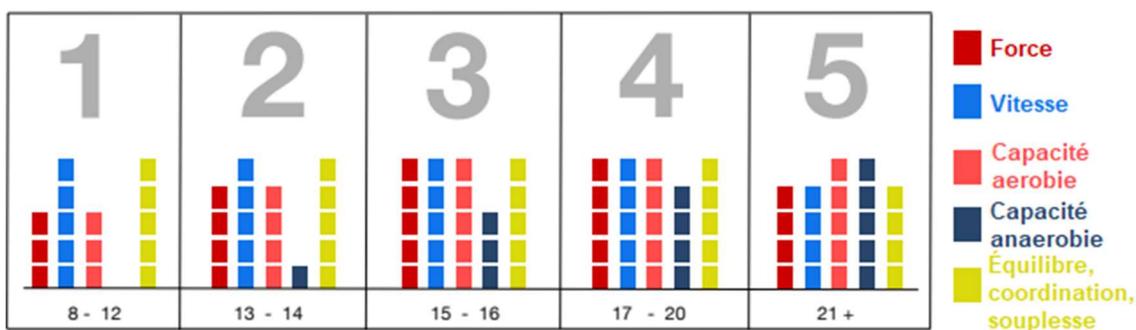
Biathlon and youth

One of the ways to enter the biathlon world in the United States is to follow a model defined by the USBA and divided into 5 phases, depending on your age:

- From 8 to 12 years old: introduction to biathlon;
- From 13 to 14 years old: the basics of biathlon;
- From 15 to 16 years old: learn to train;
- From 17 to 20 years old: practice competing;
- From the age of 21: train for high performance.

Its 5 phases will each be divided into 5 orientation axes for optimal development and allow the development of various physical parameters of the biathlete depending on your age:

- Strength,
- Speed,
- Aerobic capacity,
- Anaerobic capacity,
- Balance, coordination and flexibility.



While it is preferable to become familiar with biathlon as early as possible in order to maximize the opportunities available to young biathletes, many start biathlon late. These young people go through the university cross-country circuit.

There are two ways of exposure to biathlon in the university system:

- Before university: the opportunity to build on talent and compete in junior and senior youth competitions. The athlete can give priority to northern university races and return to full-time biathlon after university races,

- During and after university: attend a USBA talent identification camp one year before graduation. This offers the opportunity to participate in biathlon races as a senior and to develop a long-term career as a biathlete.

For example, **Susan Dunklee** and **Lowell Bailey** have both participated in university races. Lowell Bailey represented the University of Vermont for 4 years on cross-country ski races, while keeping in touch with the biathlon world. Susan Dunklee started learning to shoot while running for Dartmouth University. She only began to practice biathlon seriously after graduating from university.

Each year, various events are organized by the USBA to introduce as many people as possible to biathlon. This involves camps to learn about biathlon and the basics. Camps for young people wishing to fully engage in biathlon but also a week of training before or after the summer national championships during which young people from across the country are invited to train in Lake Placid with the coaches of the national teams.

An international exchange programme has been set up. Every year, several young biathletes from Sweden, Italy and other countries are invited to train and compete in Jericho and Lake Placid for the summer national championships and the USBA development summit. In exchange, young American biathletes have the opportunity to train and participate in the Swedish National Biathlon Championships or other international races in winter.

A few years ago, the women of the American biathlon team organized their famous "Girls with Guns" discovery camps. At the origin of this project was **Emily Dreissigacker**, who was inspired by a similar program set up to promote cross-country skiing in the United States and Canada. Since then, at each camp, the best American biathletes have gathered with young girls for activities on rifle safety, shooting and skiing. These discovery camps are organized once or twice a year and are totally free of charge. Girls between 10 and 18 years old of all levels are welcome. This year, the event was held in Jericho, Vermont and welcomed approximately 100 children.

Emily Dreissigacker: *"It's usually about 2 hours of shooting practice, fun games or ski (or walk in the summer) relays, with a little time at the end to relax and chat."*

The financing

To discuss the subject of funding a biathlete's career in the United States, we must first differentiate between two "types" of biathletes. On the one hand, the confirmed biathletes competing in the World Cup, and on the other hand the "Espoirs", those competing in the IBU Cup. To better understand what will follow, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between these two types of categories, because it changes a lot of things financially.

An experienced biathlete will have the majority of his expenses related to the smooth running of his sporting career paid by the USBA, while "the others" will have to pay fees themselves. **Clare Egan** told us: *"The USBA covers most of the World Cup team's sports expenses (travel, food, accommodation, training camps, races, training, ammunition,...), but not all. And all the athletes in the IBU Cup and the development group all pay their own running and travel expenses."*

Exceptionally, it happens that some confirmed American biathletes are forced to pay some expenses out of their own pocket, as the USBA tries as much as possible to make this type of situation happen as rarely as possible. As for the "hopes" that run in the IBU Cup and whose financial support is almost nil, this could for some people put an early end to their careers due to a lack of resources.

Lowell Bailey, now retired and High Performance Director, told in an interview in February 2018: "We are still facing budget deficits even as we emerge from the best year we have ever known.

Another American biathlon protagonist, **Joanne Reid**, explained: *"It's not the USBA's fault, but the financing of the USOC, which pays its CEOs several million dollars and the athletes have almost nothing, they are very poorly paid. I have much more money thanks to the donations of generous people than through sponsorship."*

Because yes, USBA does not have an "infinite" budget like some US sports and is not financed by the US State as the FFS in France can be partially financed. The USBA is privately funded and relies primarily on donations from generous donors to survive and finance the careers of its biathletes.

Media coverage

Clare Egan: "Unfortunately, our television is monopolized by four men's sports (baseball, American football, hockey and basketball) and there is almost no room for anything else." It is therefore understandable that it is difficult to find a place in the American audiovisual-sports scene in which the "Big Four" occupies the vast majority of air time.

As the 2018-2019 season approaches, NBC SPORTS, a subsidiary of the NBC television company, announced biathlon media coverage for the next four seasons with a broadcast time equivalent to more than 85 hours of live coverage per season. Americans can also follow the biathlon season on NBC Sports Gold, the streaming version of NBC Sports, by subscribing to a "Snow Pass" for \$69.99 per year.



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We must not forget to take into consideration a very important factor in the media coverage of biathlon, the time difference between the American continent and our good old continent, Europe. For example, let's take the Ruhpolding man sprint this season, which will start at 2:30 p. m. Paris time. For a person living in New York and wishing to follow the race of **Leif Nordgreen** and company, the start will be given at 8:30 am at home, when a person from California will have to turn on his TV at 5:30 am!

You will tell me that this time difference factor can be filled by the replay broadcasting of the races. But a replay race, like a soccer game, does not have the same flavour as watching the event live. Especially nowadays, with smartphones, it is difficult not to spoil a sports result as soon as it ends.

Sponsoring

A few years ago **Susan Dunklee** showed originality in order to find a sponsor. The 2017 mass-start world vice-champion placed a sticker on her rifle, where the TV cameras landed during the shooting, and on which it was written: "Millions of viewers. Your ad here ". As a result of this initiative, Susan was able to find two sponsors. However, one of them did not guarantee her anything if she did not finish on the podium, and even withdrew the following year.

Another interesting case is that of **Clare Egan**, the best American biathlete last season, who is still looking for sponsors. Synonymous with difficulty, Clare Egan promotes herself via her website, on which there is a presentation detailing the benefits that companies wishing to get involved with her could derive from it. This Clare season may follow the same initiative as Susan did a few years ago. Don't you think there's still some space on his rifle?



Clare Egan sur le pas de tir (Photo : Instagram Clare Egan)

It is difficult for this still little known sport in the United States to find a company that would like to invest financially, because very few of them are familiar with biathlon and the influence it has in Europe.

Thanks to the sporting results obtained in recent years and the growing interest in biathlon, the American team announced two new sponsors at the beginning of last season, Ariens and Maloja. A 4-year contract has been signed with Maloja, and will provide athletes with tailor-made running suits as well as training uniforms, streetwear and accessories.



Throughout the partnership, Maloja will continue to work with the entire team to adapt designs for optimal performance.

The relationship to weapons

On average in the United States there are 1.37 shootings per day. We can then ask ourselves what is the relationship between biathletes and their weapons and what is their vision of this national situation?

Following the October 2017 shooting in Las Vegas that killed 58 people, Susan Dunklee said: *"It really took away from me the joy I felt in playing my sport. For me, it's something totally different. It almost makes me want to put my rifle down and never touch it again. For me, shooting is a mastery of emotion, and a mastery of one's body."*

In each of the training camps for young biathletes in which Susan Dunklee participates, safety with rifles is one of the first things they are taught. Through these camps she tries to convey a message to the next generation of American biathletes. The use of a firearm can do real damage and is not something to be taken lightly.

A very important subject for Clare Egan, who wants her country to change: *"I think European countries have reasonable laws on gun ownership, and the United States should have the same."*

What future for biathlon in the United States?

We can imagine the future of American biathlon according to three different progression curves. A first curve that is rather stagnant, even decreasing. A second that would be growing, which seems to us to be the scenario in which it is engaged. And finally an exponential growth curve.

The first scenario, although it seems unlikely to us, would be one in which biathlon remains in a form of pseudo-national anonymity and does not evolve much. The American public gets tired of this sport and ends up being broadcast only by replay on unknown pay-TV channels. Almost no more funding or sponsorship for biathletes and therefore no more money to travel to Europe.

The second, a growing progression that would increasingly rely on training from an early age and the detection of future champions. The contribution of coaches and former national and/or foreign stars who would come to bring their experiences and the best advice. And finally, high level results that would be more and more consistent, with the short-term objective of a medal at the World Championships this season in Antholz and why not an Olympic title in 2022 in Beijing.

The last scenario that American biathlon could experience is an exponential increase. This scenario would be one of an explosion of results this season, with **Clare Egan** and **Sean Doherty** fighting for a top 10 overall or a small crystal globe, but also relays that can play for victory all season long.

So, in your opinion, where is the American biathlon heading?

We would like to thank Clare Egan, Joanne Firesteel Reid, Emily Dreissigacker, Tim Burke, Jake Brown, Lowell Bailey and USBA who have all kindly taken the time to answer our questions and allow us to write this article as close as possible to their realities. We wish the American biathletes a very good personal and collective season.