

NINA MOINI: Minnesota is home to many inventions, including the Rollerblade. Did you know that? No surprise, I suppose, in a state with so many skaters, skiers, and hockey players. Thousands of Rollerblades will hit Highway 61 this weekend for the longest point-to-point inline skating marathon in the world. The race stretches from Two Harbors to Duluth, and on Saturday, the NorthShore Inline Marathon is celebrating 30 years. Joe Haggemiller helps organize the event, and he is joining us. Thanks for being here, Joe.

JOE Thanks for having us.

HAGGENMILLER:

NINA MOINI: We're also thrilled to have Greg Ash, a longtime board member who's skated every previous marathon. Welcome, Greg.

GREG ASH: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you.

NINA MOINI: It's a pleasure to talk with both of you. What a cool event. 30 years. I mean, that's incredible. Joe, let's start with the big picture, if you would. What does the NorthShore Inline Marathon look like this year, as you're getting ready to celebrate 30 years? Tell us a little bit about what the race entails in that beautiful scenic area.

JOE Well, we start off in Two Harbors and come down the scenic highway along the shore of Lake Superior. And then

HAGGENMILLER: when we get into Duluth, we take London Road to the interstate. And actually, our athletes skate down the interstate until they get down to Canal Park.

NINA MOINI: Cool.

JOE Yeah. So it's pretty exciting, and our course is really, I think, one of the things that has kept us in business for

HAGGENMILLER: the last 30 years. I mean, it's just a fantastic scenic course.

NINA MOINI: Is it because it's just so beautiful? I mean, what is it like, in terms of hills, challenge-wise? What is it like?

JOE Well, it does have probably about 700 feet of drop, from the start to the finish--

HAGGENMILLER:

NINA MOINI: Wow.

JOE --right next to the deck. So I mean, that speeds things up a little bit, but it's really kind of rolling down from the

HAGGENMILLER: start to the finish. I mean, certainly the famed Lemon Drop Hill is a bugger for everybody as they get there.

Maybe I'll leave Greg to talk a little bit.

NINA MOINI: Right. Greg, you've done all previous 29 marathons. Assuming you're doing this one as well. I'm wondering what that experience is like for you after doing it so many times. Does it ever get old?

GREG ASH: It doesn't. Every year is a unique year. You never know what Lake Superior is going to throw at you in the very beginning. The last two years we've had incredible tailwinds, which really helps the skaters because depending upon the strength of the tailwind, it's almost as if the wind is blowing you uphill on some of the hills, and it makes the race very easy, yes. And other years, we've had a few headwinds, which makes it a lot tougher.

But every year is unique and different. In the very beginning, we've had some years where you get to the race start, and it could be a few degrees above zero. One year we had a situation where right at the start of the race we had a couple claps of thunder, and then we skated in the rain. So like I said, it's different every time, but that's the thrill of it.

NINA MOINI: Totally, yeah. And what is it like, Greg, to train for a marathon inline skating? Is it like you would train for running a marathon, or how similar?

GREG ASH: I'm not a runner, so I can't speak to that. But I do enjoy cross-country skiing in the wintertime, so I just transition from skiing into skating as soon as it warms up. I will say, some people are fortunate to just throw on a pair of skates and do it. And for those that are a little bit more serious, like myself, we try and get out and skate maybe two to three times a week, and/or intermittent biking as well. So yeah, but I think everybody handles it differently depending upon how well they want to do in the race.

NINA MOINI: Sure, that makes sense. And Joe, so again, the course, 26.2 miles from Two Harbors to Duluth, ending at Canal Park there. What do you think about having this largest point-to-point inline skating marathon in the world? I mean, is that something that more-- I'm afraid I didn't know that it was the largest in the world. I mean, are you still feeling like even after 30 years people are learning about the sport, getting excited about it? Do you feel like it's a hidden gem of a sport still?

JOE HAGGENMILLER: I definitely think it is a little bit of a hidden gem. It is a little bit of a niche sport. And when you led in, you talked about Rollerblade being invented here in Minnesota. Scott Olson, who invented Rollerblade, I'm sure he'll be here this weekend skating the race as well.

NINA MOINI: That's awesome. Greg, do you want to tell us a little bit about race day, what that experience is like for you? How do you typically handle the day of the race?

GREG ASH: Oh, great question. So typically, the night before I always do an annual spaghetti feed with my family and friends, and that's kind of starting the excitement. Race morning, the first thing you do is you check the weather forecast again to see, is it going to be a headwind? Tailwind? What are the conditions?

It starts when you get dropped off with the buses, and part of the experience is being with this caravan of buses up to Two Harbors, getting off the buses and walking uphill to where they have hundreds and hundreds of chairs lined up along 61 to put on your skates. And then over the loudspeakers, you're listening to some really rocking music, and people are really getting excited.

And as the gun sounds, we literally are starting off on a downhill. So speeds are probably, within the first 30 seconds, people are going anywhere from 15, 20, 25 miles per hour. And for the pro-level skaters, they can reach speeds up to 35 to 40 miles per hour, overtaking the motorcycles that are trying to watch them. So yeah. Yeah, so it's just the atmosphere of being around a few thousand skaters and spectators that just makes it so exciting. Yeah.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And who knows, too, if it's going to be chilly one year or if it's going to be warm? But there's plenty of other stuff to do too, right, Joe? The event has grown, Saturday, just from more than inline skating. What other things can people enjoy if they're bringing the family out, that kind of thing?

JOE Yeah, we also, besides having the inline skating-- and with the inline skating, besides just the marathon-- we also
HAGGENMILLER: have a half marathon and a 10k for folks to do. We've got kid sprints on Friday. And then we've got a group of skaters that do both the half marathon and the full marathon-- we call that event the combined-- for 39.3 miles. And then we have a half marathon run and 10k run, and we have a half marathon roller ski and a full marathon roller ski.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. And so Joe, this year, the marathon, too, I understand is part of the World Inline Cup, which brings elite skaters from across the world to Minnesota. Can you talk a little bit about that and how it fits into the whole race?

JOE Sure. We have about 25 Europeans and Central Americans that have been doing the full World Cup circuit and
HAGGENMILLER: are ranked in the top 50 of the World Cup. So we are one of six other events that happen in the world. Four of them happen in Europe, one happens in China, and we are the only one in the Americas.

NINA MOINI: Cool. Greg, what is it like to see elite international racers sharing the course with recreational skaters? What is the balance like when you're in the mix?

GREG ASH: Yeah, so at the very beginning of the race, obviously, they will start the pro-level skaters and the international skaters right off the bat. And so I will try and just run up to the start line and just watch them sprint off. It's also a thrill to be at the expo on Friday because they're usually skating around in their team suits. You get a chance to talk with them a little bit, maybe take a few selfies with people that are probably going to be on the podium. They're very positive, and yeah. So it's a thrill to be amongst some of the world's best inline skaters, and it's a thrill, yeah.

NINA MOINI: But also, Greg, too, I'm told that your son, your grandson are going to be participating too. One of them's doing the half marathon. What is that like, after 30 years, to now be there with a couple more generations of your family? That must be kind of fun.

GREG ASH: That's a great question. My son was a pro-level skater in the latter years of his high school, and then he went into the army. And so after coming out of the army, now he will skate with his dad. And trust me, when you cross the finish line with your son, hand-in-hand, the thrill is beyond belief. Yeah, my grandson who's 14 years old will be doing his second half marathon, and I think it would just be amazing to have him be with us, have three generations cross the finish line together.

NINA MOINI: Congratulations. Yeah, congratulations to the both of you, Greg and Joe. Really appreciate your time. That's NorthShore Inline Marathon organizer Joe Haggenmiller, along with longtime participant and board member Greg Ash.

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