



Photo by Pfc. Cassandra Simonton



Sgt. 1st Class Kent Pulst of the North Dakota National Guard prepares to fire on targets in the relay race at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships held at Camp Ripley, Minn., March 7.

FOR years, the big names in National Guard biathlon were Vermont and Minnesota. After sweeping all four races at this year's championships, North Dakota is emerging as an unlikely powerhouse.

North Dakota's top skier Sgt. Blake Hillerson won the sprint and the individual races here at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships on March 1 and 3. North Dakota also cruised to victory in the patrol and relay races March 5 and 6.

What makes their rise impressive is that North Dakota doesn't have its own biathlon range or course to practice on. The team's father-son duo of Sgt. 1st Class Kent Pulst and Spc. Brandon Pulst have built their own mini-biathlon course in the backyard of their country home so that they could practice.

Individual races

In the 10-kilometer "sprint" race, Hillerson skied to a one-minute victory while fighting fatigue and mild sickness from a recent trip to Germany and a 50-kilometer Nordic "marathon" two days earlier.

He said that "a lot of things fell into place" for him during the week. One was starting just behind main rival, Utah Army Master Sgt. Doug Bernard.

Hillerson said that it takes the pressure off when you start behind your main competitor, catch them and finish alongside them.

In the 20-kilometer, he simply executed a race strategy of starting conservatively.

North Dakota sweeps Guard biathlon championships

Top skier Sgt. Blake Hillerson wins the sprint and individual races.

By Air Force Master Sgt. Greg Rudl
National Guard Bureau

Hillerson told himself to "forget about everybody else and just go out, ski a modest pace in the first lap and shoot clean."

Arizona Army Capt. Karl Granroth finished second to Hillerson in the 20 kilometer by just 2 minutes, 11 seconds and credited his placing to improved shooting, courtesy of All-Guard Team coach Sgt. 1st Class Sarah Lehto.

Vermont's Sgt. 1st Class Karin Kasupski won the women's 15-kilometer individual in 1 hour, 17 minutes, missing nine out of 20 shots. Alaska Air Guard member Rebecca King won the women's 7.5-kilometer race in 35 minutes, 42 seconds, with seven penalties loops.

Team races

The patrol race on March 5 had teams of four skiing together five, 15 kilometer loops, shooting once after the third loop. Once on the range, the patrol leader directed the other three to knock down one target using three shots. Eight states had full teams and five others raced as composites.

As predicted, the North Dakota team cruised to victory in about 56 minutes, anchored by Hillerson.

A Utah team finished strong despite one of their top skiers, Bernard, having to leave for a mission to Morocco to teach biathlon there. Morocco is Utah's State Partnership Program-partner country.

The relay race was watched by the prideful eye of Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk, the adjutant general of North Dakota. "I think they did a wonderful job," he said. "It was fun to watch them ski and shoot so well, and blow away the competition."

Army Maj. Gen. David Burford, deputy commander for Mobilization and Reserve Affairs for U.S. Special Operations Command and a special assistant to CNGB, also made a special visit to view the action.

Burford spoke at the awards ceremony and help hand out medals and trophies. The Alabama native said that the only skiing he does is on water but appreciated the athleticism he witnessed.

