



# Western Canadian Championships Recap: The Final Push

February 23, 2016 By Gerry Furseth



Canmore's Annika Hicks (54) finished second in the women's 15 k classic mass start on the final day of Western Canadian Championships on Feb. 21, just ahead of Katherine Stewart-Jones (NDC Thunder Bay) in third. (Photo: Sally Cannon)

Western Canadian Championships, the final NorAm weekend of the season took place Feb. 19-21 at the Otway Nordic Center in Prince George, B.C., with three races determining the final Ski Tour Canada (STC) roster for Canada.

Dahria Beatty and Kevin Sandau left British Columbia as the overall NorAm leaders, granting them starts at the STC eight-stage World Cup.

Beatty won the women's 7.5-kilometre freestyle individual start on Friday, Feb. 19, by nearly 11 seconds in 19:02.7 to retake the NorAm lead from fellow U23 Development Team skier, Cendrine Browne, of the Pierre-Harvey National Training Centre (CNEPH).

"I went out as if I was only racing 5km," Beatty recalled in an email. "I felt really good on the first lap and then started to fade on the second lap as my legs filled with lactate. The downhill on the second lap were the hardest part as I struggled to stay on my feet I was so tired. I managed to regain a bit of composure for the final climb and hold onto the lead I had fortified on the first lap. This was my first time racing in Prince George and I really enjoyed the trails. Lots of fun and very technical!"

U23+ Development Team skier Olivia Bouffard-Nesbitt finished second (+10.9), while Maya MacIsaac-Jones, of Rocky Mountain Racers (RMR) was 45.8 seconds behind in third, edging Annika Hicks (Canmore) by 2.1 seconds, for her first NorAm distance podium of the season.

"I'm definitely happy with the upward trend I've been experiencing," Bouffard-Nesbitt wrote. "The only thing lacking is some power, but that is a result of my (lack of) summer training, so there's nothing I can do about that now. I'm super excited to race some World Cups though!"

Browne, citing fatigue after an altitude training block, finished fifth, 52.1 seconds behind Beatty.

"I already knew in my warm up that something was wrong. I wasn't feeling good," Browne wrote in an email. "In the race, everything was confirmed. I felt awful. I couldn't push my body was tired."

"When my coach called me on the phone and asked how my race went and when I said it was awful, he just said: Perfect, the altitude camp is working," Browne added. "I was surprised by his answer but it cheered me up a little. He also said it would be hard doing the sprints too."

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Day 2 brought another win for Beatty at Saturday's 1.4 k classic sprint, as she beat out Bouffard-Nesbitt in the finishing straight to win by half a second in 3:44.2.

"I felt good in my semi and was able to carry that feeling into the final," Beatty wrote. "Olivia led the entire race, she was skiing well and had a faster start than me to get out in front early. I just sat in behind her on both climbs as the middle track was a lot better than the two outside ones. You come into the finish off a downhill so I used her draft to step out beside and sprinted to the finish. I had a comfortable advantage by halfway down the finish shoot and carried that to the finish."

"I raced the final how I wanted to," Bouffard-Nesbitt explained. "I led the whole race and unfortunately got out-sprinted at the finish. It was a good wake up call, because now I can hit the gym and do some biceps curl reps to have me ready for the tour."

*"It was a good wake up call, because now I can hit the gym and do some biceps curl reps to have me ready for the tour." — Olivia Bouffard-Nesbitt on finishing second in the Westerns classic sprint*

MacIsaac-Jones again snatched the final podium spot, 4.55 seconds behind Beatty, ahead of **Katherine Stewart-Jones** (NDC Thunder Bay) in fourth. Beatty's second win of the weekend locked up her hold of the overall NorAm. MacIsaac-Jones took the NorAm sprint lead, displacing teammate Andrea Dupont, who skipped Westerns while racing Period 3 on the World Cup in Europe.

"I went in today wanting to win, but I'm satisfied with a bronze medal," MacIsaac-Jones wrote. "The race was good redemption for me from the Canada Winter Games race on this course last year, where I didn't make the A Final. It was also a big improvement from my classic sprint at the Canmore NorAm in december, where I also didn't make the A Final."

"I knew that Dabria and Olivia would go for it once we hit the big climb so I just tried to hang on, but they were too fast for me and I wasn't able to stick with them," she added. "Katherine moved up beside me on the final climb, but I managed to hold her off and hang on to 3rd which I was really happy with."

As planned, Beatty headed home Sunday morning to start her final STC preparations.

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In Sunday's 15 k classic mass start, Browne skied away to a 52-second victory in 46:00.1, while Hicks took second, 0.6 seconds ahead of Stewart-Jones in third.

"I felt very good! The shape is back," Browne wrote on Sunday. "Annika, Katherine and I stayed together for 2 and a half laps (we had 4 laps of 3.75km to do). I was feeling good today so I started going a little harder on the 3rd lap and starting the 4th lap, I knew I was by myself. I had really good kick so climbing the big climbs was where I knew I could break away. I went even harder on the last lap just to make sure the girls couldn't catch up to me."

Junior **Katie Weaver** (Hollyburn) continued her steady rise, skiing with the lead three for the first lap before falling off the pace and finishing 2:48.1 back in fourth.

Many of the STC-bound skiers skipped the distance race on Sunday.

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Black Jack's David Palmer (l) leading early in the men's 20 k classic mass start on the final day of Western Canadian Championships in Prince George, B.C., with Michael Somppi, Evan Palmer-Charrette, Andy Shields, and Patrick Stewart-Jones (r) chasing. (Photo: Sally Connon)



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On the men's side, **Andy Shields** (NDC Thunder Bay) was within striking distance of Sandau's overall lead before the weekend. With the third-ranked man, **Knute Johnsgaard** (AWCA/NDST) focussing on a training block before STC, it was a two-way fight for the title.

In Friday's 10 k freestyle individual start, **Russell Kennedy** (Canmore) snatched the victory in 22:19.1, edging Sandau by 0.4 seconds and **Michael Somppi** (NDC Thunder Bay) by 2.5 seconds, for his first NorAm win of the season.

"I was super pumped in my race today feeling was amazing conditions were really good and the downhill were fast and technical," Kennedy wrote in an email.

"There wasn't much of a pacing strategy as it was 10k so really just had to start fast and hold on to as hard a pace as possible," he added. "The splits were close so I knew I had to push it. I was feeling confident when we were close at the top of the last hill as I love downhill and have a good sprint. I didn't really realize just how close it was until the after I finished though."

Sandau wrote in an email that he was happy to finishing in the top four considering how close it was, but always wants the win, especially considering how close he was behind Kennedy.

"I've been teasing him all winter about nicking him in the distance races so he served up a nice rebuttal today," Sandau wrote. "... I went off the line hard knowing there wasn't room for mistakes and a lot of places to give up time. I was getting splits off Russell near the end that he was leading so I tried to claw back some time in the last few climbing sections but was just shy of enough."

"It's a really good course for [Russell] and I knew with his consistency in skate races he was going to be one of the bigger threats out there," Sandau added. "Plus he's pretty good when he clips into a pair of alpine skis so the downhill were probably pretty easy for him, compared to me who felt like a tourist out for the first ski of the year at times."

Somppi in third described his race as "solid."

"The fitness is as good as it's going to get at this point," he wrote. "Now, it is all about finding the right mix of recovery and intensity to be primed and full of energy when the Tour starts."

Shields finished fourth, 9.7 seconds back, to stay in mathematical contention. To take the title, Shields would need at least a win and a second in the final two races.

"I started pretty hard, got tired and had a rough middle section," Shields wrote. "I was still getting good splits going into the last 4km so I was able to find some juice to finish off and still have a respectable split for the last lap."

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**Bob Thompson** (NDC Thunder Bay) won the men's 1.4 k classic sprint on Saturday, retaking the sprint series lead and the automatic STC start from Julien Locke (Black Jack), who was in Romania for U23 World Championships this week. Thompson needed the win to eclipse Locke in the sprint standings, taking the series 250 points to Locke's 245.

Also in the sprint final, **Patrick Stewart-Jones** (AWCA) placed second and Shields finished third. Sandau went out in the quarterfinals, having achieved his training goals.

"Very happy that I was able to win when I needed to," Thompson wrote in an email. "To win the NorAm sprint spot for the Tour of Canada I had to win to get enough points. Patrick was in the same position so I knew we would both be giving our all to lock the spot down. Was great that I was feeling really strong and had my best qualifier of the year as well."

Thompson qualified second behind Skinouk's **Simon Lapointe**, who went on to place sixth in the final.

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Bob Thompson (NDC Thunder Bay) racing to second in the men's classic sprint qualifier at Western Canadian Championships in Prince George, B.C. He went on to win the men's final. (Photo: Sally Connon)



Evan Palmer-Charrette (NDC Thunder Bay) outlasted teammate Andy Shields (I) and Patrick Stewart-Jones (AWCA) for the win in the men's 20 k classic mass start on Sunday, Feb. 21, at Western Canadian Championships in Prince George, B.C. (Photo: Sally Connon)

On Sunday, **Evan Palmer-Charrette** (NDC Thunder Bay) won a four-way race for first in the 20 k classic mass start. Shields finished second, 0.111 seconds back, and Stewart-Jones was third (+0.525). Somppi lost his balance in the final straight and finished fourth, 1.24 seconds behind Palmer-Charrette. **David Palmer** (Black Jack) was dropped during the final lap to take fifth, 13.9 seconds out of first.

"I am quite happy with my race Sunday but overall the weekend was a bit disappointing," Palmer-Charrette wrote. "The 10km skate on Friday is what I would pick as my strongest event and I really struggled that day. I had the race I wanted to on Sunday and am looking forward to next season!"

"The race on Sunday was a lot of fun, skiing at the front with my team-mates..." Somppi wrote. "Tactically, I put myself in a great position to win. I led the final climbs, pushing the pace, and crested the final downhill in second, right behind Evan. Unfortunately I hit a patch of ice on the final downhill corner and stumbled, nearly crashing. Instead of using the draft and coming up beside Evan in the finish to contend for the win, I was double poling early in the finish stretch, trying to regain my speed.

"I feel a little gyped after this weekend, to finish 3rd and 4th when I was only 2.5 seconds from winning one day and 1 second from winning the other day," Somppi, last year's NorAm winner, added. "I'm hoping my luck will turn in the Tour."

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