

# Amanda Kirkeby



The Coyote—errr, Bobcat—Hat

“You wanta wear a coyote hat?”

Not necessarily a question you usually hear on a Saturday morning, but then again this isn't a usual Saturday, and this isn't the ordinary person asking. We're in a quaint, cozy, crowded cabin that's the Lamoille Valley Fish and Game clubhouse, tucked up into the snowy, wooded foothills surrounding Morrisville, Vermont. Outside, fresh snow glitters in the air in the morning light as the sun rises over the hill. Harland Blodgett, dressed in the frontier wear of a trapper all the way down to his animal skin mukluks on his feet is the one offering such a hat. He himself would wear it, if it weren't for the beautiful, thick black skunk fur hat already sitting atop his head.



Harland Blodgett, with the skunk hat atop his head

“Sure!”

What else would anyone say to a question like that? Especially on today, the day of the Lamoille Valley primitive biathlon. “What is the Primitive Biathlon?” you ask? Ah, the primitive biathlon. An epic race of sorts that consists of snowshoeing around a course through the woods on wooden snowshoes and stoppin’ at four stations to shoot muzzleloading rifles at metal targets. This is my first ever primitive biathlon, and after going around the 1.5 mile course for an untimed run, or “woods walk,” and a chaotic second run, in which I lost my scorecard—each runner carries a paper with their racer number on it around the course to keep track of how many targets he or she hits—only 100 ft from the start, didn’t realize until I got to the first shooting station (about a  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile from the start), and had to backtrack all the way looking for it. Then, when I finally got to shooting, I hit only 1 out of 9 targets. After a run like that, I was fired up for another time around the course—you can go around the course for a maximum of four times, this would be number 3. Most people only do one, but a few do two. Hardly any do 3 or more, except for Danielle, whom you will get a description of later.

Anyway, I head out to the red truck, as Harland directed and there it is, crouching in the backseat, ready to pounce into action: the coyote hat. Well, actually it's a bobcat hat, from the look of its tufted ears and bobtail. Coyote or bobcat, the second I put it on my head, I'm transported back in time and I'm ol' Bright Eyes, out on the Wild Frontier. With a flintlock in one hand, my powder bag slung across my back, and wooden snowshoes strapped to my feet, I bound off the starting line and off into the woods.

While ol' Bright Eyes is out on the course, I reckon I got some explaining to do. My dear reader, how many questions must be piling up in that there head of yours! Well, we better start at the beginning:



Mike Karch at the first Biathlon

Way back in the days of Ol' Bright Eyes' youth, there was a man in her town named Mike Karch. Now, Mike Karch was no ordinary man, no. With the grip of grizzly bear, eyes of an eagle, and true grit tougher than the skin of a crocodile, he had a sureness that sets the howling winds at ease. But underneath all that stony faced grit, a heart of gold, pure gold and compassion for all living. They say he once ran all the way up a mountain in Nepal, immediately following an earthquake in one of the most dangerous areas, to rescue an injured local, carrying him back down the mountain on his back. It's also said that he has received not one, but two letters of commendation from the President of the United States. An orthopedic surgeon by trade, he was recruited by the US National Nordic Combined team as a traveling doctor. With the team he went far and wide, but there is one place that stuck in his heart like a long lost lover: Norway.

It was there that he discovered greatness: a sport that could bring people of all backgrounds, all beliefs together into a community that radiated warmth and acceptance: the Biathlon. Sport of all sports, the ultimate combination of finesse and fitness, the Biathlon is a competition of Nordic skiing and marksmanship. Graceful, smooth strides on skate skis punctuated by the sharp, quick shots of deadly accuracy with a .22 caliber rifle at targets 50m down-range. They say the sport originated as a way to train the Norwegian army, creating soldiers that could outski, outshoot any army, any time, snow or shine. From this combination rose the sport that now enraptured Mike Karch. The people of the biathlon had a connection unlike anything he had seen before, and he wanted to bring that connection back to the states. No sooner had he returned to his home in the tiny little town of Mammoth Lakes, California had he gotten a band of friends and volunteers together to build a shooting range for biathlon. Word spread far and wide, and the day of the first Biathlon, smiling faces poured onto the course. From kids dressed in coonskin caps to skiers who had never before skied to Olympic biathletes, not a single face was not smiling at the end of the race.



US Biathlon Elite team on the start line at the Mammoth Biathlon



One coonskin cap among all the lycra at the first Mammoth Biathlon.



Bright Eyes, eyebrows furrowed as her finger squeezes the trigger

The only solemn expression was the furrowed eyebrows that mustered up all the concentration they could muster to send each bullet flying straight and true, and watch it as it passed right through the center of the target.

But after the race, my friends, after the race. There was a gathering of all gatherings: in a quaint cabin tucked up into the woods, full of tapping feet and happy bellies full of hearty beouf bourguignon and blueberry soup. Awards for the sharpshooters of the day and the fast skiers were a mere glitter amongst the warm glow that filled that cabin that day.

Our very own Bright Eyes was there, a glitter of gold about her neck, her very name gifted to her by her grandfather for her sharp shooting. Over the years, her days of shooting faded into a memory in her quest to find glory in the world of skiing. Following the footsteps of many great skiers before her, she made her way East, to the Land of Ice and New Englanders, where the skiers were swift and the competition was

tough. After two years of toil and defeat, her bright eyes grew dim and weak.

But our story does not end here, my friend. Oh no, for from the darkness emerged a glow, one not too different than that which filled the cabin years ago. She heard from a friend of a long lost sport, one that rang with promise of rediscovery for Bright Eyes. The primitive biathlon, what seemed to her to be the history of biathlon, surrounded by legends much like Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone that inspired her childhood. It was through this friend she met Danielle Rougeau, spry and lean, with intense gray eyes glinting from beneath her coonskin cap and a beautiful hand-carved flintlock resting across her arm. Danielle, whose laugh rings out through the air like the sparks from the flintlock rifle, lighting everything around her with a fire and dynamism that could move mountains.



Harley Grice



Danielle Rougeau, with her coonskin cap

*Pkchakaooooo!*

Taking Bright Eyes under her powerful watch, Danielle brought her to Harley's Place, the home of Elder Harley Grice, who not but four years ago, won the whole biathlon. It was there that Bright Eyes joined Harley's Angels, a group of girls recruited to continue the legacy of primitive biathlon. Feeling the smooth cold wood of the stock pressed against her cheek again, memory came flooding back to her fingers. Memories not just from her early days of biathlon. Memories from even before that, before she was born, to a past life in which she lived on the frontier learning from the ways of Davy Crockett. Even the wooden snowshoes, at first clunky and unfamiliar from her preferred slender skis, transported her back in time, to time of simplistic beauty.

Today, on the day of her first race, another memory stirred within her.



As ol' Bright Eyes ran around the course this third time, the warm glow that had been in that quaint old cabin years ago at her first biathlon, it was here too. It was then that she realized, it's not about the shooting flintlocks; it's not about learning to run on snowshoes; it isn't about finding the history of biathlon; it wasn't even about being in the presence of legends. It was about the community that surrounded such a sport as the biathlon. Shooting flintlocks or modern rifles, snowshoeing or skiing, the essence of biathlon remains the same: it has a way of bringing things together. Unlikely things like marksmanship and endurance, old and young, complex and simple. It was this magic that drew legends like Mike Karch, Danielle Rougeau, and Harley Grice to it like honeybees to sweet nectar. They felt its power to create a community, the power that Bright Eyes did not realize till now. With this realization, a smile crept over her face. There she was, a stranger from the West, running through eastern woods on wooden snowshoes, a flintlock rifle in her hand, and a bobcat hat perched on her head. A hat that reminded her of the kindness of people, beauty of simplicity, and the power of community. Smile beaming, eyes bright, she runs into the last station of the race.



Smile bright, eyes beaming, Bright Eyes at her first primitive biathlon

*Pkchakaoooooting!*

“There it is, finally a hit!” After missing all 8 shots prior, she finally got one.

“The last one’s golden!” exclaims a pair of aged eyes twinkling from behind glasses.

Oh, Bright Eyes will be around again, you betcha!