

Bulkley Valley Biathlon Program Overview

Program Goals

Our first priority is safety, and our second priority is fun. We try to provide an environment where athletes of all ages and abilities can participate and develop their skills with a great group of people. Many athletes will choose to compete, because it is challenging and enjoyable. Others will participate locally or for recreation; all are welcome.

Athlete Development:

Kids can join biathlon as early as eight years of age. The BV Biathlon program offers a "Spring into Biathlon" program every year that targets kids aged 8, 9, or 10. The program runs for three weekends in late March and April. This is a great way for kids to try out the sport and see if they like it.

The regular biathlon program targets kids aged ten and up. Generally, athletes enter the program when they are ten, as this is the age when they are able to manage the rigours of cold weather, and the mental focus required for the sport. Until age ten, we encourage kids who are interested in biathlon to take the spring program and focus on their skiing skills for the rest of the year.

Biathlon has specific categories based on age:

- Age 9/10 Athletes shoot on a rest and use "standing" or larger targets. This is a really fun age because it is generally easy to hit the larger targets.
- Age 11/12 Athletes shoot on a rest, and use "prone" or smaller targets. This is much harder and the transition from big targets to small targets can be mentally challenging and frustrating for some athletes. This is a character building phase!
- Age 13/14 Athletes shoot using a "sling" and use "prone" targets. This ramps up the complexity even more. However Athletes generally are more capable of processing complex skills at this age. Generally advanced skill development at this age requires more practice (dry firing at home).
- Age 15/16 Athletes shoot both standing and prone, but do not carry their rifles. Ski distances are much longer so physical conditioning becomes critical to success. Shooting standing is fun, but adds another layer of complexity, so more regular practice is needed.
- Age 17/18 Just like you see in the Olympics.

Biathlon and skiing

In our club, the biathlon and ski programs are integrated into a single "Athlete Development Program". When you join the biathlon program, the athlete is signing up for development of their shooting skills. In general, the athlete is expected to also join the cross country program that is most suited for them. There is no ski coaching as part of biathlon so athletes who don't ski will ultimately be missing a very important half of the sport.

The practice schedules for the two programs are designed to complement each other. When you join biathlon, essentially you ski Saturday mornings and then shoot after lunch. This makes for a fun, but sometimes long day, especially for the little ones.

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Coach development

Biathlon is a very "coach intensive" sport. Ideally, the ratio of athletes to coaches is about four or five to one. That means that our program is limited in size by the number of coaches, and we need to recruit new coaches on an ongoing basis. The good news is that coaching biathlon is fun! The club provides support to parents who are willing to become biathlon coaches. Based on interest, we sponsor an introductory coaching course that prepares coaches for "bears" level athletes (age ten and under). A parent who has taken bears coaching can learn to coach at the "spring bears" program or can become a coach assistant in the regular program until you are ready for more.

In addition, there are more advanced coaching courses available throughout the province each year and the club can cover costs of coaches who wish to attend.

The BV Biathlon club also provides incentives to parents who wish to coach;

- We provide one or more "coaches rifles" that you can borrow at no cost so you can learn the skills yourself;
- The club tries to sponsor regular coaching "workshops" where we bring in coaches for fun day or weekend sessions where we get to learn. These are free to coaches!
- Most importantly, we have a great coach team. We support each other, and have a lot of fun

If you are interested in becoming a coach please approach one of the coaches for more information.

Parent involvement

Biathlon does require significant parental involvement. In addition to the coaching role (above), biathlon parents need to actively support their athletes.

The Athlete Development Program requires parents and athletes to contribute to the facilities that we use so frequently. Each family is assigned ticket booth duties on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the season. This is usually 3 to 5 mornings or afternoons per season. Ticket booth duty is a way for the Athlete Development Program to raise funds to defray coaching and other program costs. In addition, each athlete is assigned a short "cleanup" chore, with a buddy through the season. Most families find these duties are easy to fit into their schedule (you can actually ski for your ticket booth duty), but it is important for the club that these are fulfilled.

Rifle management

Parents must have a valid Firearms Licence so you can safely transport the rifle to and from the range. If you don't have one, you can take the course over a weekend. Some parents have successfully studied the manual and challenged the course. You also need to pay attention to the rifle as it is an expensive tool and requires care. With your athlete, you need to be sure it is properly cleaned and stored after each practice. You also need to take ownership of how the rifle is working. There is a separate rifle policy that spells out requirements for rifles more clearly.

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During practice, rifles need to be moved on and off the range. Generally athletes age 12 and up can manage their own rifles, and don't need a parent present. Younger athletes will need a parent to help during practice; a single parent can move rifles for more than one athlete, so you can swap with another parent and slip away for a ski.

Set up and clean up

Every practice, the range must be "opened" and "closed". This includes putting out shooting mats, putting up paper targets, and sometimes a lot of shovelling. On some days, this takes 20 minutes for two people. When we have big dump of snow, it can take double or triple that time. This is a key area where parents are expected to help out. This means you need to be prepared to be at the range a half hour before and after practice. The coaches are often busy doing other projects and can't be expected to also open and close the range!

Work bees

We usually have a work bee every year to clean things up, get firewood, etc.

Gear

Biathlon can be expensive. The club rents entry level rifles that suit athletes up to about age 12. If an athlete wishes to go further, rifles can be purchased for anywhere from \$1500 to \$4000. Used rifles are hard to find because the sport has grown in popularity in the past decade. The good news is, rifles retain their value really well, so if the athlete retires from the sport you can usually sell the rifle for a good price.

A typical practice will use 1 to 2 boxes of ammunition at a cost of \$5 to \$7 per box. The more you use, the more the kids smile!

Competitions

There is a BC Cup series of races that usually includes three races held throughout BC. These races are really fun, and there is always a group of Bulkley Valley biathletes at every race. Usually one race is held in northern BC (Prince George, Burns Lake, Smithers or Vanderhoof) and we try to encourage the entire team to compete there. There are often smaller regional races held either in the north that are also really fun.

The emphasis on these competitions is to have fun and do your best. Some kids will strive to be on the BC team and maybe go to nationals. However a lot of our athletes just compete to challenge themselves and improve.