

# South Dakota National Guard

## Public Affairs Office

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## SD National Guard biathlon team chases the perfect race

By Sgt. Mark VanGerpen  
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CAMP RIPLEY, Minn. – The South Dakota National Guard biathlon team comes together once a year to race in the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships.

They come for the fun and the challenge, and the 2016 competition, held Feb. 28 – March 3, offered plenty of both at Camp Ripley, Minnesota.

“If you’re going to race in a biathlon, you have to like suffering a little bit,” said Maj. Mike Flanery, relaxing after the first race of the competition.

It was only the first day of racing, but by then most teams had already had their share of suffering. Warm temperatures and sunshine had taken a toll on the 12.5 km course, turning the already thin snow into a mix of slush and mud that barely held up under the skis of more than 100 competitors from 30 states.

The 10-person South Dakota team all said the same things about the course. Gaining speed was difficult. Maintaining it was next to impossible. And a low but unpredictable wind blew just strongly enough to make accurately firing a small .22-caliber rifle maddening.

For those not racing, the unseasonably warm weather may have felt like an early spring. Chief Warrant Officer 3 Andrew Busse, a lifetime skier who grew up skiing Terry Peak, described it as “the worst conditions imaginable.”

But despite the trail conditions, the opportunity was there – the opportunity to ski better than last year, to come in with the best time on the team, to hit every target at the range.

“It’s an acquired taste, but once you get used to it you start chasing the perfect game,” Flanery said.

The perfect game is an elusive achievement in the biathlon, he added. The combination of rifle marksmanship and cross-country skiing requires a potent mix of endurance and skill, a unique challenge compared to other sports.

“It’s a very humbling sport,” said Chief Warrant Officer 2 David Mack, of Spearfish, who works in timber removal and helps out with a friend’s startup personal training business. “I’ve always been good at sports, but I have to work for this. It’s not something that just comes naturally.”

The challenge of the biathlon attracts both avid skiers and novices to the South Dakota team.

Pfc. Jordan Theisen, a native of Kenai, Alaska, is attending Black Hills State University on a running scholarship. He runs a sub-five-minute mile and knows how to ski, but never competed in a biathlon before.

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He was looking for a set of skis to use for winter free skiing when Lt. Col. Wyatt Hansen found him. Hansen, a 26-year veteran of the biathlon team who also serves as its captain, convinced Theisen to join the team without much difficulty.

“It’s good cross training,” Theisen said. “Running and skiing are both endurance sports, but they’re total opposites. You get so much more exhausted skiing that running almost feels easy afterward.”

More than just running, Hansen said the biathlon is good real-world training for Soldiers who want to improve their overall fitness and their skill with a rifle.

“It’s made me a better marksman,” Hansen said. “After this, you can jump on the M4 (rifle) and you’ll qualify expert.”

“You’re not only promoting marksmanship,” Mack added. “You’re shooting, and then you’re going out and skiing. That adds a whole different spectrum to it.”

There was an air of friendly competition among the 10-person South Dakota team at the competition. Few of them were satisfied with their performance in the first race, but there was still a little bragging and a few good-natured jokes afterward.

Warrant Officer Rylan Eddington suffered a little more than the others on the second day of the races. Having come in last among the non-novice skiers on the team, he was relegated to the bright blue, one-piece, spandex ski suit from the early 1990s.

It was an eyesore of a uniform, but he wore it with good humor, which was par for the course among the South Dakota team.

Even a sudden downturn in temperature that turned the slushy course into an icy mess on the second day didn’t damper the team’s spirits. They raced with the same good attitude, cheered each other on, and enjoyed the same camaraderie as the day before.

Poor trail conditions or not, the team had come to ski, and they did so with enthusiasm. After all, a new day presented a new opportunity to ski the perfect round.

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High resolution photos are available at [www.flickr.com/photos/southdakotationalguard](http://www.flickr.com/photos/southdakotationalguard)



**160228-Z-LN227-353:** Chief Warrant Officer 2 David Mack, of Spearfish, S.D., aims downrange at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 28, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. South Dakota’s biathlon team competes in the championship every year. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)

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**160228-Z-LN227-373:** Spc. Leslie Wangeman, of Spearfish, S.D., skis a penalty loop at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 28, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. South Dakota took 10 competitors to the championship this year. Wangeman was the only female on the team. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)



**160228-Z-LN227-522:** Lt. Col. Wyatt Hansen, of Spearfish, S.D., fires a practice shot after the first race of the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 28, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. South Dakota's biathlon team competes in the championship every year. Hansen has been with the team since 1990. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)



**160229-Z-LN227-658:** Four competitors begin the first loop of a 12-km race at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 29, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. The competition is held in either Minnesota or Vermont every year and has attracted teams from up to 30 states. South Dakota took a 10-person team - its largest ever - to the competition this year. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)



**160229-Z-LN227-774:** Chief Warrant Officer 3 Andrew Busse, of Rapid City, S.D., leaves the firing range at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 29, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. Busse has competed on South Dakota's biathlon team for the past eight years. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)



**160228-Z-LN227-550:** Lt. Col. Wyatt Hansen, left, and Chief Warrant Officer 3 Andrew Busse polish and wax their skis after the first day of races at the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 28, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. Both avid skiers from the Black Hills region, Hansen and Busse have been competing on South Dakota's biathlon team for 26 and eight years, respectively. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)



**160229-Z-LN227-877:** The Army National Guard hosted the Chief of the National Guard Bureau Biathlon Championships, Feb. 28 - March 3, 2016, in Camp Ripley, Minn. More than 100 skiers competed in the championship this year. South Dakota's biathlon team brought 10 skiers to the races - its largest team ever. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Mark VanGerpen/Released)

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