

Juha Mieto

Memories of nordic racing's big man—and the closest individual race in cross-country history. **BY BOB WOODWARD**

If ever there was an international cross-country ski racer who captured the imagination of avid fans—as well as those who see the sport once every four years during the Olympics—it was Finland's Juha Iisakki Mieto. Six feet, six inches tall and weighing 220 pounds with broad shoulders and full beard, in his racing heyday, "Jussi" came across as a mix of Paul Bunyan and a pro football tight end. He towered over his competitors, skied fast, and, to borrow a horse-racing term, was known as a great "mudder" who plowed through sloppy track conditions as if everything was perfect.

Well-known worldwide because of his size and looks, at home Mieto was revered for being a simple "country boy," as a Helsinki newspaper reporter told me during the Lake Placid Olympics in 1980. "In his case, one with the dry sense of rural humor that Finns love."

Indeed, watching Mieto work the Finnish press post-race was always a treat. He'd leave them in stitches and hustling back to the press center to file a story full of his latest quips.

He was also somewhat of a prankster. One year at the Finnish National Championships in Lahti, he had horribly slow skis and finished dead last in the 50-kilometer event. After crossing the finish line he walked into the locker room with his skis and stood fully clothed—skis still on—under a hot shower.

There was also his penchant for gamesmanship. Witness the 1979 Pre-Olympics in Lake Placid when, with temperatures hovering around minus-15 degrees Fahrenheit, Mieto arrived at the start line for the 30-kilometer race without gloves, hat or long underwear under his thin Lycra racing suit. The message to other competitors was clear: I'm tougher than you'll ever be.

Funny, tough, and a winner, from the early 1970s through the late 1980s, Mieto was a force to be reckoned



Above: The fierce face of the 6-foot, 6-inch skiing Finn. Right: In the 1980 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, Mieto started the last lap of the 50km distance race in ninth place. As he passed his coach, shown here chasing him, he muttered that he was "going up now." He poured on speed and finished with a silver medal.

BOB WOODWARD



with. He won the prestigious Holmenkollen 15-kilometer event a record five times.

But it's his Olympic and World Championship résumé that says it all. It began with his fourth-place finish in the 15km at the 1972 Sapporo Games, a mere 0.06 seconds from medaling and a foreshadowing of another close, and famous, finish in his future.

The 1974 Worlds in Falun, Sweden, saw Mieto take silver in the 30 kilometer race. At the 1976 Olympics in Seefeld, he took a fourth in the 30km and was part of the gold-medal-winning relay team. In the 1978 Worlds in Lahti, Finland, he took third in the 15 kilometer and was part of the second-place relay team. Then came the Lake Placid Games, the men's 15 kilometer and Mieto's place in Olympic cross-country ski racing lore.

The weather was clear and cool and the course fast on race day. Mieto skied exceptionally well, crossing the finish line in the fastest time with only two competitors left on course. The first of the two, Norway's Ove Aunli, finished just seconds behind Mieto and moved into the silver medal position.

Now there was only one skier left, Sweden's Thomas Wassberg. A kilometer from the finish, a walkie-talkie report had him just seconds behind Mieto. Wassberg

(continued on page 14)



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Clockwise from top left: Mieto (left) and triple-gold medalist Nickolay Zimyatov at the finish of the 1980 Olympic 50km race; today, Mieto is a popular Finnish media favorite who served one term in Parliament; author Bob Woodward with Mieto in Lahti, Finland in 1979.

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then put on an amazing surge and crossed the finish line completely spent.

His time wasn't immediately flashed up onto the scoreboard. But when it came up, it was shocking: Wassberg had taken the gold by 0.01 seconds. On seeing the time, Mieto slumped over momentarily, then rallied himself and went to congratulate Wassberg. The closest individual race in cross-country history—then

or now—was over and would prompt the FIS to abandon timing to the one-hundredth of a second in favor of tenths of a second for all future sanctioned races.

That evening at the Finlandia hospitality house in the heart of Lake Placid, Mieto stood among some teammates, friends and members of the press and reportedly raised a glass in toast to the podium trio, saying: "Well, at least we beat the Soviets."

Yet all was not lost. In the Games' final event, the 50 kilometer, Mieto started slowly. One-third of the way through the race's final 7.5-kilometer loop, he was in ninth place as he skied up a long climb to a flat feed zone. Passing through the zone, he muttered a few words to his coaches and skied away.

After he skied out of sight, I asked one of the coaches what Mieto had said. "Jussi says he's going up now," he replied. And he did, moving up to take the silver medal, behind the Games' triple-gold-medal winner, Soviet racer Nickolay Zimyatov.

A year prior to the Lake Placid Games, I had a chance to interview Mieto in Lahti during the Finnish National Ski Championships. We met at a resort hotel popular with families out for Sunday brunch. Mieto

was ensconced in a large suite, a flight of stairs up from the main lobby. When I walked into his rooms, he was having a light breakfast before donning his race suit in preparation for the 50-kilometer final race.

We talked for an hour, and the one thing I remember most was his comment on why he loved orienteering during the off-season. "When I go to the meets, I'm just another average guy, out for a day of running through the woods."

His need for some personal space was driven home when left his suite to catch a ride to the stadium. We'd barely come to the head of the staircase when people came streaming into the lobby from every corner of the hotel. Mieto moved gently through the adoring crowd, taking extra time to talk with young children. A cheer of "Jussi, Jussi, Jussi, Sisu Suomi"—be courageous, Finnish man!—went up as he got into a waiting van and departed.

The big man skied through the 1988 Calgary Games, where his number of races dwindled. He was getting older, and he never quite got the hang of the skate technique. But he got the hang of being a folk hero. "Jussi remains a print and electronic media favorite in Finland," says Ahvo Taipale of Finn-Sisu Sport in St. Paul, Minnesota. "He gets interviewed often, on almost any topic. Finns simply love the man." Enough to get him elected to Parliament once, but not enough for a second term.

For most casual cross-country ski racing observers, Mieto's legacy will always be the great 15 kilometer race videos. Several are currently on YouTube, including the Lake Placid 15k finish (to see it, go to: <http://www.olympicgameswinners.com/moments?id=6>). However, for Finns, simply being self-effacing, honest, humorous, a heroic battler and consummate sportsman is enough.

I remember meeting a Finnish track and field team masseuse at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea and talking with him about various great Finnish athletes. When I mentioned Mieto, the masseuse smiled warmly and said, "Ah, Jussi." Ah, indeed. ❄️