

THE LOPPET CUP

World-class skiing comes to town

By RACHEL BLOUNT, JAKE STEINBERG, C.J. SINNER and STEVE ZIMMERMAN • Star Tribune staff

Few World Cup skiers are familiar with the cross-country courses at Theodore Wirth Park in Minneapolis. Zak Ketterson knows every inch of them, going back to his days on the ski teams at Bloomington Jefferson High School and Loppet Nordic Racing. A member of the U.S. national team, Ketterson is in his third season of World Cup competition and has raced in SuperTour events — the circuit just below the World Cup — at Theodore Wirth. The Minneapolis resident shared his thoughts on the courses for this weekend's sprint and 10-kilometer races and how they will challenge the world's best skiers.

The sprint course

When: Saturday • Women's qualification 10 a.m., final 12:30 p.m.; men's qualification 10:30 a.m., final 1 p.m.
Format: One lap, 1,304 meters completed in three to four minutes. Racers start in 15-second intervals in three preliminary rounds. Top 30 advance to five quarterfinal heats, with top two in each heat and two next-fastest advancing to semifinals. Top two in each semifinal and two next-fastest reach the finals.

Overview

The course has two really good hills in it. The first one is a little more gradual, so I don't think you'll see that much moving and shaking. The main feature of the course is that second hill. It has a pretty steep grade, and it's pretty wide. I think that's where you're going to see a lot of skiers trying to get to the front or vying for position. From the top of that hill, it's basically just a ripping downhill into that short finish. Unless you pull off a miracle, it's generally pretty hard to make much of a pass from the top of that hill into the finish. That second hill is going to be a really, really vital part of the sprint in the heats.

Difficulty

One of the unique things is, it has a high-speed finish, where you basically come off of a downhill straight into the finish. That will be really interesting. At some venues, you have this really long finishing stretch, where a lot of movement can happen. But with this one, there's not that much room in the finish to pass or be passed. It's going to be interesting to see how skiers position themselves. They might need to think about that earlier, because they know there's not a long finish they can rely on to pass people.

Bottom line

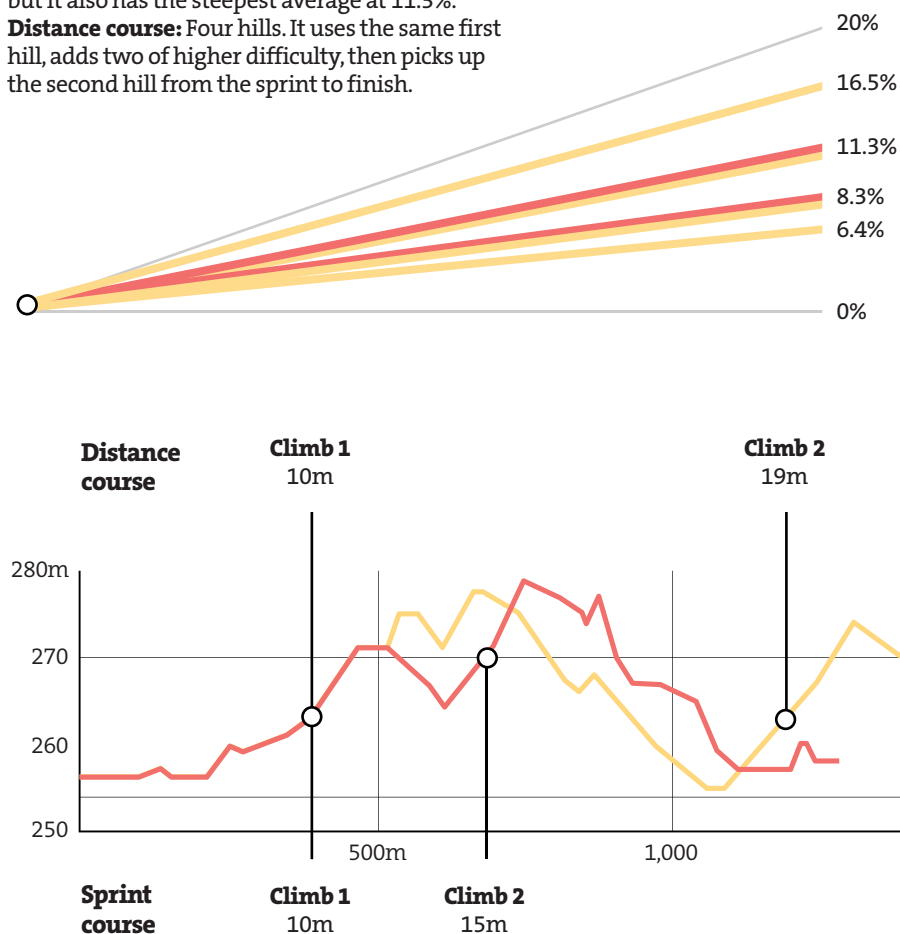
On the sprint course, that second hill is really going to test people's climbing abilities. In the heats, when we're skiing in groups of six, I think you're going to want to be close to the front at the top of that hill.

The climbs

The major inclines on the Wirth Park courses are classified B-level climbs by the FIS, which have a partial total climb between 10 and 29 meters with an average gradient between 6% and 14%.

Sprint course: Two hills. The first has a gradual 8.3% average slope. The second, used in both races, is the shortest, but it also has the steepest average at 11.3%.

Distance course: Four hills. It uses the same first hill, adds two of higher difficulty, then picks up the second hill from the sprint to finish.



The distance course

When: Sunday • Men's 10k individual start 10:30 a.m.; women's 10k individual start 12:45 p.m.
Format: Three laps complete the 10k. Racers start at 30-second intervals, unlike the mass start at other World Cup races. Skiers in the "red group" — the top 15 skiers as ranked going into the race — start at one-minute intervals from each other.

Overview

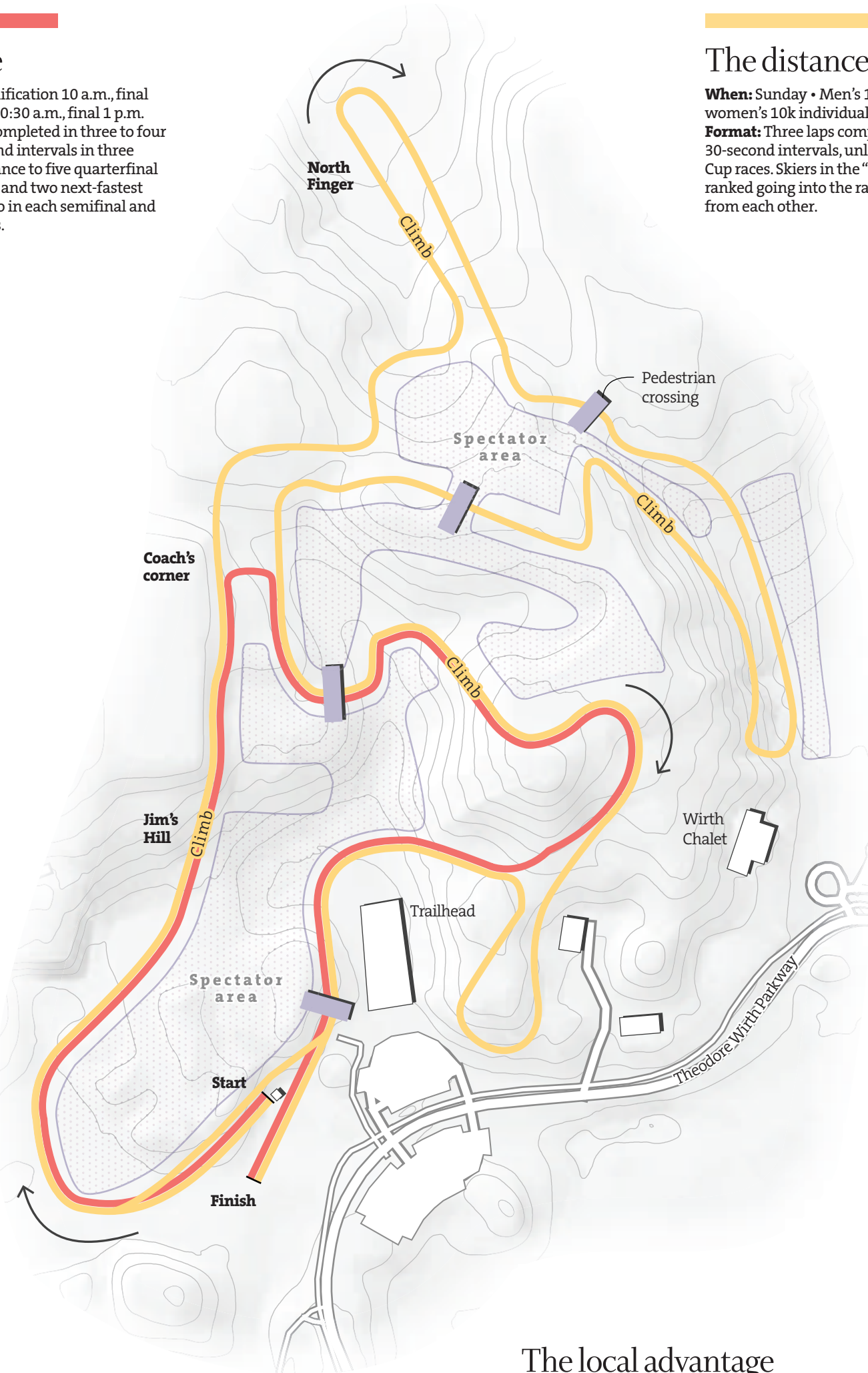
The 10k race is an interval start. One skier goes out every 30 seconds, and the fastest time wins. That means you have to ski a really high pace the entire time, and you won't have any help from skiing behind anyone. I think the snow is going to be so fast, and the course isn't as hilly, so that will lend itself to skiers who are really comfortable with high speeds and can work a lot of the downhills and corners. Jessie Diggins is so good at that. I think it's the type of course that really plays into her strengths.

Difficulty

You would think that the flatter the course is, the easier it is. The distance course at Wirth is less hilly compared with some of the ones we see in Europe, but because of how high-speed it is, you have to work the entire time. I think it ends up being just as hard as anything else.

Bottom line

It's going to be about how people ski on the downhills, flats and turns. Often when skiers think of a course, they fixate on the big uphill. But on a course like this, where there are no massive, distinguishing uphills, you need to be conscious and thinking of every inch of the course. Over the course of 10k, all of those little points are going to add up. On a hillier course, it doesn't matter as much, because often the person who wins is the one who skis up the hills the fastest. On a course like this, you need to be super conscious the entire time.



The local advantage

Will it help to be familiar with the courses?

Yes. We do some courses where you're basically skiing up a hill for 10 minutes straight, and it comes down to who's the fittest and can get to the top of the hill the fastest. On a course like this, where you don't have one nightmarish hill, it's more about the whole package. It will reward skiers who approach it well.

How do Wirth courses compare with other World Cup venues?

This year, with low snow, it's going to be pretty much all artificial snow. When you combine that with a little warmer weather, that can often lead to super, super fast snow. Like wicked fast. The courses are also a little less hilly. With that combination of being a little flatter and that really fast artificial snow, I think it's going to be a much faster snow and faster course than we've seen a lot this year. It's going to be really fun, probably much higher speeds than at a lot of other World Cups.

The big test

The third major climb on the distance course is part of the LaSquadra Loop and begins at the 1,623-meter mark. It is the longest that racers will face on Sunday at more than 250 meters and includes a brief but significant 16.5%-grade incline before entry into the bigger climb.