Jim Tenorio of Menomonie celebrates Saturday in Hayward at the American Birkebeiner finish line. It was his 33rd Birkebeiner and came less than six weeks after he had surgery for cancer.

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Six weeks removed from surgery for cancer, Tenorio finishes Birkie

By Jerry Poling
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Like a lot of skiers, Jim Tenorio wasn't in his best shape heading into the American Birkebeiner.

Tenorio skied only a couple of times on trails with hills the week before last Saturday's event, not nearly enough to prepare for the rolling, 50-kilometer skate course from Cable to Hayward. He also got out a few times on the flat Red Cedar Trail near Menomonie.

Tenorio's lack of training time had little to do, however, with the lack of snow this winter in west-central Wisconsin.
In mid-January, less than six weeks before the race, Tenorio, 59, was lying in Luther Hospital in Eau Claire having an egg-size cancerous tumor removed from one of his kidneys.

That actually turned out to be a good day. "They caught the cancer early enough and removed it all," said Tenorio, of Menomonie.

After seven days in the hospital and two more days of recovery at home, Tenorio didn't know if he could finish the race, but he knew one thing: He was going to try.

"I did not want to miss out on being with so many people with such a passion for the sport," said Tenorio, who competed in 32 of the previous 38 Birkies. "Just to be in Cable and Hayward on race weekend is exciting. To be one of the racers is even better."

With the will of a champion, he lined up for the race that he has been doing for more than half his life.

"I followed my plan to do the race at idle speed and drop out if things did not feel right," said Tenorio, a graphic communications management professor at UW-Stout.

During the first third of the race, the hilliest section, "I felt very tired and thought I might need to consider quitting," he said.

He pushed on to the food stop at 22.3 kilometers and "didn't feel any worse" so he kept going. And going.

An energy gel at a food station about two-thirds of the way into the race gave him a lift, enough to take him to the finish in downtown Hayward. He skied up Main Street and flashed a big smile for his wife, Deb, who had been at his side throughout his recovery.

His time was 6 hours, 10 minutes — much slower than usual, but it might have been his finest day in more than three decades of Birkie racing. "I finished tired but not too sore, and I got up out of bed the next day without a cane so it was a good race," Tenorio said.

He plans to be back next year for the 40th Birkebeiner — with significantly more training.

"I've got to think that cross-country skiing kept me in good condition, which helped me recover from the surgery as I did," Tenorio said. "It's one of the best forms of exercise around."