



Participants of one of the first ski competitions of Tartu in 1912

called the father of modern skiing. Not only was he a technical innovator, but the cambered and waisted ski which he developed has scarcely changed its dimensions to the present day.

The competitions in which Norheim took part, were the forerunners of the Holmenkollen events which continue to the present day. All cross-country races included a downhill section on which a jump, which competitors had to negotiate, was built. The result of the race was based on a combination of the skier's time and style points over the jump. Jumping competitions were not held as 'stand alone' events separate from cross-country until 1883.

There are several claims to have organized the first official ski race and there can be no doubt that ski contests of various kinds would have been held since before Norheim's time. The best claimant to the title may, however, have been a 5 km uphill race which was held at Trondheim in 1843. Forty-one years later Sweden staged the world's first long distance event with the Nordenskiöld Ski Race, measuring 220 km and starting and finishing in Jokkmokk. The Jokkmokk race had arisen as a result of Adolf Nordenskiöld's claims that during his abortive attempt to cross the Greenland ice-cap, two Lapp members of his party had skied a total of 460 km in 57 hours. The disbelief with which this claim was greeted led to the Jokkmokk challenge, won by Lars Tuorda, one of Nordenskiöld's Lapps, in a time of 21 hours 22 minutes, five seconds ahead of his colleague.

By this time skiers on the ice-cap, as well as competitors in races, were using two long poles for propulsion. The origins of the use of two short poles, as used today, are shrouded in mystery, although it is recorded that a racer named Ernst Bjerkaes, used two poles in the Christiania (Oslo) competition in 1887 with some apparent success. In 1892 a new "rat trap" binding was introduced, the forerunner of the bindings used today. Waxes did not appear until later. In early days, skiers would use animal hide stretched over the bases of their skis to prevent them from slipping backwards, particularly when climbing hills. Reindeer, elk or seal skins were most commonly used. The first commercial ski wax to be sold was the Record Tar Wax of Thorvald Hansen, which made its appearance around the turn of the 20th Century. Grip waxes first came on the market in about 1910-12 with klisters wax being patented by Peter Oestbye in 1913. The Swix company first employed high-molecular, synthetic waxes in 1946 and the introduction of polyethylene ski bases in 1974 saw further developments, with separate waxes being developed for glide and grip.

THE ISC AND FIS

In 1910 the International Ski Commission (ISC) was founded in Oslo as a result of collaboration between Norway, Sweden and Czechoslovakia which, in 1903, had formed the world's first national ski association. The ISC continued in being until 1924, when it was subsumed into the newly formed International Ski Federation (FIS) at its inaugural meeting in Chamonix.

Skiing was by now an international sport, reflected in the issue of the first postage stamp dedicated to skiing in 1925, when Hungary produced a stamp showing a skier executing a perfect telemark turn. This was only the forerunner of literally hundreds of postage stamps depicting skiing in all its forms, which have since been issued by nations across the world.

At the first Olympic Winter Games, which were held at Chamonix in 1924, only the Nordic disciplines (Jumping, Nordic Combined, 18 and 50 km Cross-Country and the military patrol race) formed the skiing programme. The British were, however, by now busy skiing in such places as Wengen, Muerren and Grindelwald and can claim to be the real inventors of Alpine skiing as they used the Jungfrau railway for uphill transport before making the return journey by ski. The installation at Davos of the first commercial tow-bar, the invention of Erich Constan of Zurich; the introduction of downhill and slalom races to the Olympic programme at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936; and the development of the first chairlift at Sun Valley, USA, and the breakaway of Alpine skiing was complete.

The founding of the International Ski Federation (FIS) in 1924 brought ski racing under unified control. Until after the Second World War success in cross-country ski racing rested largely with the Scandinavian nations, but the last thirty years of the 20th Century saw a widening of interest and a rise in standards in North America, the Alps and Eastern Europe. Japan too has seen much success in Jumping and Nordic Combined competitions. The former USSR became a major cross-country nation, although their success has been somewhat dissipated by the break-up of their huge territories. Olympic medals – once the sole preserve of Norway, Sweden and Finland – have been won by Germans and Italians, by French, Swiss, Austrians, Poles and Czechs, and by Americans and Canadians.

In the early days after the introduction of Alpine skiing it was fairly commonplace to hold combined events, usually comprising cross-country, jumping, downhill and slalom competitions, but interest dwindled as skiers became increasingly specialised.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

During the Second World War, many nations realized the importance of skiing in winter warfare. The Germans used ski troops in the Caucasus whilst the Russians threw their Siberian ski divisions into the defence of Moscow. The American Tenth Mountain Division, after whom the Tenth Mountain Trail in Colorado is named, played a major role in the Italian campaign (the Italians also having specialist ski regiments) but the most spectacular successes came in Finland, where the Finnish skiers appeared out of the forests to inflict devastation and demoralisation on the Russian supply lines during the Winter War.

BIATHLON

Biathlon became an Olympic event in 1960 at the Squaw Valley, USA, Winter Olympics. In 1978 a major development occurred with the change from large-bore rifles and long ranges to .22 calibre rifles and 50 metre ranges, making biathlon much more of a spectator sport. Traditionally a military, and therefore predominantly a male sport, biathlon opened its doors to women with the first Women's World Championships being held at Chamonix in 1984.