

Looking Back

Development of Cross Country Skiing Track-Setting/ Grooming in Australia (late 1960's – 2018)



From this –Mount Buffalo 1974

*Track Setting at Tatra Inn Mt Buffalo in 1974. Man-hauling was the only option. Pictured from left are: Chris Allan from Wangaratta, 1984 Winter Olympian, Chris Pullen (Mansfield) & Greg Healy (Corryong).
(Photo courtesy of Bob Cranage)*



To this – Falls Creek 2018

*Current state of grooming at Falls Creek — Italian made Prinoth BR350 purchased in 2015
(photo courtesy of Geoff Sorenson)*

Introduction

The history covers only the machinery, equipment and the people involved in the development of cross country skiing track-setting/grooming. Trail development was not part of the project. The history indicates the ingenuity of the early Australian developers of equipment to adapt to the varying snow conditions experienced in the Australian snow fields.

Setting of classical ski tracks with a snowmobile did not start overseas until the 1950's. Prior to that tracks were stamped in by a line of skiers.

Paul L'Huillier — Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club
April 2019

1. Mount Buffalo (Victoria) — by Bob Cranage (OAM)

In January 1974, the first Telemark Nordic Ski Club Junior Exchange program with Raelingen Ski Klubb in Norway saw four Australian juniors introduced to groomed tracks at Marikollen.

Rolf Habberstad arranged a special visit for the team to meet *Odd Martinsen* on his farm in Nitterdal where he had his own private skidoo and track cutters.

After the team returned to Australia, *Ron Whitmarsh* and XC skiers in Corryong, the base for TNSC in 1974, built a TNSC track-setter based on the Odd Martinsen model.

This track-setter was used from 1974 to 1978 at Mt Buffalo where the first Victorian Junior XC camps and Junior Championships were held.

Without access to a skidoo, the track-setter was **hailed by junior skiers** (*refer to the cover photo*), usually late in the afternoon, so that the tracks were left to set before night racing around 8.00 pm – 10:00 pm.

In later years with access to a National Park skidoo (*Bob Adams* was the ranger) tracks were set along the Horn Road.

The track-setter was modified with extra width for a skier to ride the setter for additional weight. Also wooden skis were installed on top so the setter could be turned over to make it easier to pull up herringbone hills.

I do not believe the TNSC track setter was ever used at Falls Creek.

The track-setter was mainly used along the Cabramurra /Round Mountain Road where it was towed by a Land Rover utilising a length of timber lashed across the rear of the Land Rover – extending on one side of the vehicle. The track-setter was towed like an outrigger on a canoe, setting a classic track on the left side of the road until the depth of snow became too deep to drive in then returning with a track cut on the right side.



The 'Cranage/ Whitmarsh' track setter

2. Falls Creek (Victoria) — by Peter Carter

In January and February 1975, an Australian XC team was based at Hotel Pellestova, above Lillehammer, Norway. Towards the end of the trip, the subject of track-setting came up and *Ross Martin* suggested we (the team) pay to import one into Australia. This we agreed to do and every member kicked in an agreed amount to pay for it. The question then arose, “Which state would get it”? (or, you might say, “The Texans” or the “Mexicans?”) We solved this by agreeing that we would attempt to persuade Vic XC and NSW XC (and ACT?) to pay for a second track-setter between them.

This happened. I think *Ross* conducted the negotiations. *Ross* certainly persuaded *Sverre Kaaten* to look after the freight costs to get the setters from Norway to Australia. Within each State, I think the setters got carted around a bit from resort to resort initially. *Robin Gibb* (Wangaratta Ski Club on Mt Hotham) already had developed his first track setter by this time having started its development in the late 1960's.



The original track setter imported from Norway in 1975

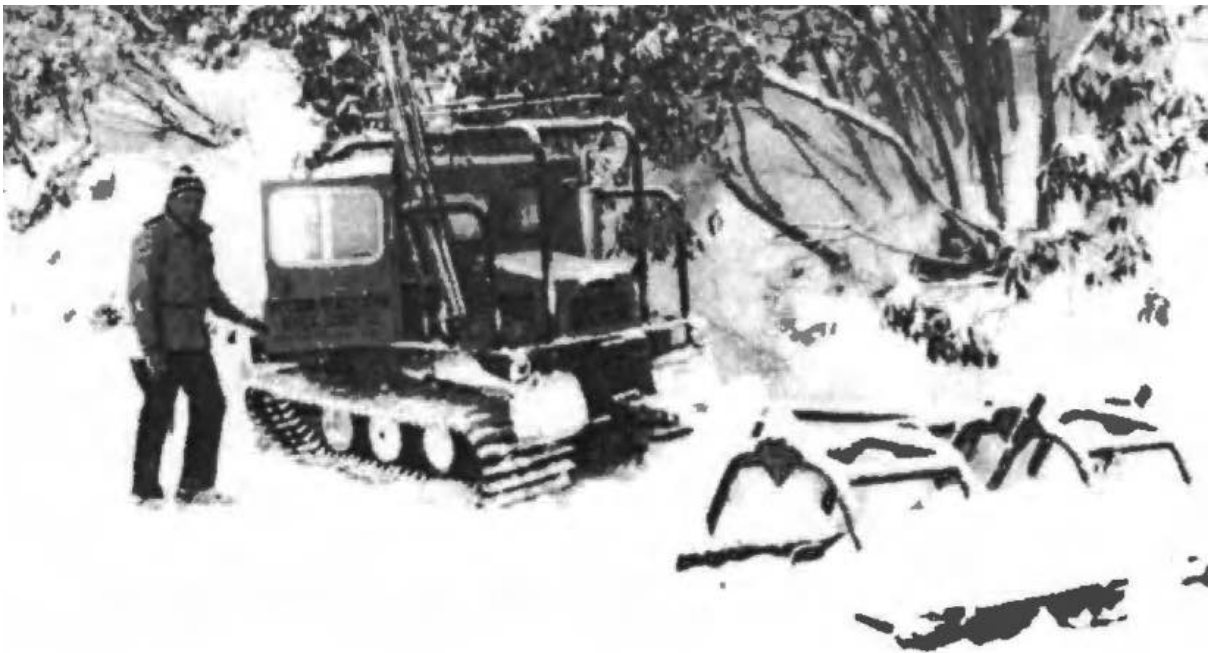


Depending on snow conditions the track setter needed to be weighted to make the cut. Neil Burbidge sitting - Falls Creek Nordic Bowl.

1982 Bombardier Bombi (Falls Creek)



From left: John Friedrichs (National Safety Council) and John Aitken (VSA XCC Chairman) at the handover of the Bombardier Bombi and Skidoo (not pictured) at Windy Corner Falls Creek in 1982.



Pictured is Lauri Jortikka next to the Bombi and the track setting equipment which was manufactured by David de Gama (Melbourne Nordic Ski Club). The equipment had no hydraulic system and so, with the grooming equipment attached, the Bombi could only drive forward and could not reverse. The grooming equipment created a lot of drag and made the Bombi very difficult to turn unless snow was firm.

Track setting was done by volunteers arranged by VSA XCC; namely Lauri Jortikka, Keith Jephcott, Richard Rodd, David de Gama and Paul L'Huillier.



Above: Setting the 1980 Australian Birkebeiner course. In front is the single-ski VSA Bombardier skidoo (driver Paul L'Huillier) pulling the trailer that carried the drink station supplies and course flags that were being placed by Alex Chapman. The second skidoo (being driven by Jack Heberle) pulled the track setter and skier (Gerry van der Ploeg) to smooth out the 25 km of classical track. Photo location Edmondsons Hut.



Three Swiss made Rolba groomers were purchased by the Alpine Resorts Commission (ARC) in 1990. One was allocated to each of Falls Creek, Mt Hotham & Lake Mountain.



Pictured in 2006 is Ross Forrest, Falls Creek groomer 2003-2014 with the resort's Kässbohrer (PistenBully) purchased in 2000

Additional Falls Creek information

- The Rolba, pictured below, was purchased in 1990
- 1990 & 91 — Darren Sutherland groomer
- 1990 to 1999 — Paul Northey, groomer
- Kassbohrer (PistenBully) purchased around 2000
- 1994 to 2002 — Peter Hertzog, groomer
- 2003 to 2014 — Ross Forrest and Paul Upton, groomers
- 2015 the Prinoth BR350 was purchased
- 2015 to today — Geoff Sorenson and his team of groomers.



*Paul Northey and the Rolba - Falls Creek groomer 1990-99. Paul groomed the early Kanagaroo Hoppet courses.
Photo taken on the top of Mt McKay*



*The **Ginzugroomer**. This was purchased by the Falls Creek Resort to be used in marginal snow conditions when the large Kässbohrer (PistenBully) or Prinoth BR350 could not be used. It could be towed by a snowmobile.*

3. Lake Mountain (Victoria) — by Andrew Paul and Andrew Hall

Andrew Paul remembers:

I am not really sure about early days but there was a twin track Bombardier with a Swiss Bachler track-setter and also an old 170 Kässbohrer (PistenBully) during the late 1980's until the ARC purchased the Rolbas in 1990 for all the resorts (and at the same time introduced trail head fees).

For much of our time when we have had less than perfect cover we have used snowmobiles dragging different devices (pre Ginzugroomer) or even a single track-setter.

Our main groomer currently is a Prinoth Husky (from 2009), but we do rely on snowmobiles and the Ginzugroomer.

Andrew Hall remembers:

Lake Mountain bought an Alpine single ski snowmobile and a Swiss Bachler single track setter that could break up the old snow and then lay the track. It worked OK if the snow wasn't too hard.

Then in around 1984 we got an old Bombardier Bombi which had a blade and a basic compactor bar. We drove that then set the track with the snowmobile behind. With this set up I thought we had really arrived.

For winter 1986 Lake Mountain bought a PistenBully 170 from Mt Hotham. It had a compactor bar but no tiller, so we still had to set the track behind with the snowmobile. The blade worked well but the compactor bar did not float side to side so we had to widen all the trails during the winter for it to get around. No tiller meant that in hard snow the grooming was still sub par.

I left Lake Mountain in 1988. In 1991 a Swiss Rolba with power tiller and all the gear was purchased.



The 1984-acquired Bombardier Bombi compacting the snow. This was followed up with a snowmobile pulling the Swiss Bachler track setter (see page 11). In later years the Bombi (with track setter attached) followed the PistenBully.



A photo from the late 1990's at Lake Mountain The left snowmobile pulls a 'rut-cutter' with the second snowmobile pulling a 'smoother' that finishes with a bit of a snow-comb effect. Both were home-made devices.



In 1986 a Kässbohrer 170 (PistenBully) was acquired from Mt Hotham. It only had a compactor bar and no tiller. The Bombi or a snowmobile pulling a track setter would follow.

4. Mount Hotham — Victoria (Robin Gibb & Greg O'Donohue)

Research indicates that **Robin Gibb** from the Wangaratta Ski Club (WSC) in Victoria **built the first Australian track-setter**, the Mark I in the late 1960's with his friend *Jeff Rankin*. Further development occurred in the 1970's — the Mark II. More refinements were made in 1978 with the addition of large 'butterfly wings' to direct snow to each side so the snow would not fall back into the cut track – the Mark IIA. Four of these track setters were distributed to Mt Hotham, Falls Creek, Lake Mountain and Perisher Valley.

Wangaratta Ski Club used the track-setter to set the course for their club championships (Dargo Road & Twins Road) and the Charles Derrick Memorial Langlauf race (Loch Spur Mt Hotham).

Prior to Robin developing his track-setter, cross country skiers raced either in tracks stamped in by skiers or on a packed snowmobile track that had no grooves so skis would just slide sideways over the packed snow making balancing difficult.

During this development Wangaratta Ski Club acquired a snowmobile from one of its members (Brian Wood) and sharing it with the Telemark Nordic Ski Club they used it for track-setting through the 1970's. Norm Allan housed and maintained this machine in Wangaratta.

During the 1970's Malcolm Pearce owned the Mt Hotham General Store and operated a XC ski school from that location. Early on lessons would have been conducted on stamped in tracks until a snowmobile and probably a Robin Gibb track-setter was used.



Some of Robin Gibb's prototypes.



The 'Robin Gibb' Mark IIA (side view)



The 'Robin Gibb' Mark IIA (front view)



Left - The Norwegian track-setter (at Falls Creek) brought back in 1975 by Peter Carter & Ross Martin. Right - The 'Robin Gibb' Mark II (back view)



Bob Derrick and Robin Gibb on the job surveying the terrain prior to setting the track for the Charles Derrick Memorial Langlauf race

Greg O'Donohue

Greg has been grooming the Mt Hotham trails since the mid 1980's and has used various pieces of machinery and equipment to do the job.

He started out with snowmobiles before moving on to a Bombi in the mid 1980's. From 1991 to 2004 a Swiss-made Rolba was used, then in 2005 the resort purchased a PistonBully 100 that is still used today.

Pictured are various pieces of equipment that *Greg* has used. He has manufactured some himself and adapted other pieces to suit the situation e.g. roller, harrows and snow cleaner.



Swiss-made Bachler track-setter with renovator, comb for scrubbing out old tracks and trackplate (at rear on this photo) for laying down the new grooves. It was pulled by a snowmobile. This model of track-setter was also used at Lake Mountain.



Harrows for breaking up hard packed snow



Compactor roller for soft and new snow. It was pulled by a Bombi (see page 4)



Pre 1950's tracks were stamped in by a line of skiers

5. Cabramurra (NSW) by Peter Ward (OAM)

Peter Ward's earliest recollection from Cabramurra was around 1978.

"I was there in 1976/77 but I was learning to ski and was not focused on equipment".

Ed Hole would use the *Snowy Mountains Authority's* tracked vehicles (Porsche Snowtrack) for the major events, e.g. Cabramurra Tour and the 1977 National Championships. I'm not sure if they had tillers and mats but they would have pulled one of the red track-setters we had at Cabramurra at the time.

Most of the track-setting was done with a skidoo and sled and either *Peter Smyth*, *Ed Hole* or *I* would set the tracks for the next day's skiing. The Cabramurra Ski Club purchased a Bombardier wide-track skidoo in the late 1970's. I think at least one of the track-setters is still around, at either Cabramurra or Charlotte Pass.

One of the ski club members modified the base of the track-setter so it would work better in firm conditions but mostly we would have someone sitting on the track-setter for a good finish.

The major progression I can remember was when *Ian Parfitt* (VSA XC Committee) dropped in to Cabramurra - he was developing Lake Mountain in its early stage and he had photos of the aluminium model track-setter that we still use at Perisher today.

I spent some time with *Ed Hole* and we talked about the early years in Cabramurra. The machine that *Ed* used to tow the track-setters was the *Porsche Snowtrack* machine. *Ed* was given permission from the SMA Commissioner to do whatever was necessary to improve the trails at Cabramurra.

The Porsche had a steering wheel instead of the track levers which meant he could do gradual turns around the corners instead of the jerky straight line turns of the Bombardier. There were no hydraulics on the track-setters, they were simply towed behind the machine.

There was some discussion in the design phase - have the tracks wider apart for good downhill balance or normal width for diagonal stride (*normal was decided on*). The Porsche was driven around the trail to pack the track, then driven around again, mostly with two track-setters to set the trail. There was no tiller and no combing on the Porsche.

The track-setters were made in the workshop at Cabramurra by the welder at the time, *Ron Robins*. The first track-setters had a cutting action with a hole for the snow to escape as the track was being cut. The variation to this was a space for heavy concrete blocks to press the track rather than cut. The skidoo grooming started in the late 1970's although the track packing with the Porsche was still used for the race events.

Prior to the track-setters being made, *Ed* said they used to track-set themselves, by physically skiing in the track.

Peter Ward (OAM)

Bob Cranage has added to Peter's recollections.

"I believe that in the winter of 1975 *Rolf*, *Marit* and *Gunnar Habberstad*, who were from Norway and guests of the Telemark Nordic Ski Club, met *Ed Hole* at Cabramurra, and through Ed's work with Snowy Mountains Authority they constructed a similar track-setter that was used regularly for XC skiing at Cabramurra and Kiandra. Ed became one of the first regular groomers in Australia".

6. Perisher Valley (NSW) by Ken Baxter

Ken Baxter has provided the following information from the early days at Perisher Valley.

“I first raced there in 1972 and I can recall that a track-setter was used to prepare the classical track pulled by a snowmobile. I think the track-setter was made by *Robbie Kilpinen* (or it could have been one donated by *Robin Gibb* from the Wangaratta Ski Club – *editor*). Later ones were made by Ian Graham and some others”.

Below is a rough chronology of who operated the equipment and what that equipment was:

- 1972 — Kore Grunnsund
- 1973 — Kore Grunnsund & Robbie Kilpinen
- 1974 — Robbie Kilpinen & Ken Baxter
- 1975 — Ken Baxter
- 1976 — Chris Randall
- 1977 — Ken Baxter using a Twin Track Bombardier Alpine Skidoo.
- 1978, 1979 & 1980 — Various volunteers including Ken Baxter and Ian Graham, using the twin track Bombardier Alpine skidoo and small Porshe Snowcat.
- 1981 — Around this time track-setting was done by Peter Hart and Ken French using slope grooming machines. Later grooming was done by the Perisher Resort and recently by Hans Oversnow – all sub-contractors to the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service.

Note — Around 1977-78 the NSW Nordic XC Committee ceased to function and the track-setting and running of races was done by the NSW & ACT Nordic Race Club using volunteers.

Peter Ward's comments re Perisher Valley - *Tim Edmondson* was a contract groomer in the early 1980's, with a skidoo and sled. At some time *Jonathon Whittaker* also had a contract. *Peter Hart* and *Ken French* didn't start their contract until the late 1980's or early 1990's.

A Thank You

I would like to thank the following people who contributed to this project namely: Bob Cranage, Andrew Paul, Andrew Hall, Greg O'Donohue, Peter Ward, Nick Derrick, Paul Northey, Geoff Sorenson, Ken Baxter, Ross Forrest, Peter Carter, Robin Gibb, Bob Derrick, Richard Rodd, David de Gama and Ed Hole.
