

A Brief History of Cross Country Ski Racing in Australia

Part 1

1975 and earlier

by Ross Martin

Nordic skiing has a long history in Australia. In 1861, local newspaper reports tell of skiing as a sport in the goldmining township of Kiandra, NSW.

In the early 1930's George Arlberg and Reg Gelling skied from the old Hotel Kosciusko to Kiandra in just on 18 hours. Ken Breakspear was a celebrated cross country skier with some remarkable performances.

Cross country, or "langlauf" as it was then called, played a big part in the Australian ski scene. Trips, both competitive and non-competitive, to the "Summit" were frequently attempted.

Sverre Kaaten, a stalwart in the Nordic sport, was a remarkable performer in both jumping and cross country.

In 1952, Australia was represented at the Winter Olympics in Oslo by Bruce Haslingden and Cedric Sloane. Our team travelled to Norway by ship!

The Nordics had a revival of interest in the early 1950's with the arrival of the Selmer Company complete with a large number of Norwegians for a Snowy Mountain Authority contract at Guthega.

Dick Walpole and Hal Nerdal represented Australia at the 1960 Olympics in Squaw Valley. Following this, the manager's report somewhat scathingly suggested *that Nordic competitors should in future be excluded from Australian teams, and it also questioned whether Nordic competitions should be held in Australia at all.*

This sparked the re-birth. Dick Walpole contributed a wealth of knowledge to Australia and was instrumental in the development of many younger racers. Tragically, one of his proteges, Noel White, died at an early age in a welding accident.

Kore Grunnsund, infuriated by the 1960 team manager's report and suggestions, returned to the sport and was a driving force for many years.

To attract attention to the sport, Kore Grunnsund, Otto Pinkas and Robbie Kilpinen made many attempts at the K-K (Kosciusko to Kiandra) record. The time gradually was reduced to Kilpinen's 8 hrs 11 mins (Perisher to Kiandra) on August 21, 1964, which stood for many years. David Hislop, NSW now holds this record at 6 hours 18 mins, achieved in 1985.

In Victoria in 1964, Jeff Renkin, John Brown and Charlie Derrick set a similar record from the foot of Bogong to Hotham - 13 hrs 15 minutes.

1965 saw Nordics receive an enormous boost with the first Paddy Pallin Classic (50km, 5 starters). The "Paddy Pallin" is now in its 25th year and has played a major part in the development of Nordics. John Morgan and Paddy Pallin made enormous contributions to the sport. John Morgan in particular worked for many years - often single handed - as Chairman of the NSW Nordic Committee and was the architect of many of the facilities (such as trails) that exist today.

In September 1965, Charles Derrick attempted the Bogong - Hotham record. He perished less than a mile from its completion. Charlie's motives in attempting the record were to bring attention to his sport. His tragic death has deeply committed a number of people to the sport and the Charles Derrick Memorial Race is a major race with deep significance today. Traditionally held on the first Saturday in September it is organised by the Wangaratta Ski Club. The record for the first solo winter X-C ski was established by Danny Flynn on August 31, 1975 at 10 hours 15 minutes.

In November 1966, Ross Martin and Len Harrison went to Norway. They met Mike Brady who introduced them to the NJAAL Club, whose coach was Erik Olsen and secretary and top racer (also a qualified coach) was Hilmar Viberg. All three have had a long association with Australian skiers and skiing.

In 1967, three Norwegian racers - Mikkel Dobloug, Markus Svendsen and Dag Jensvold - came to Australia. The visit gave Australian racing a big boost. Mike Brady came the same winter and commenced the first foundations of coaching that is continuing today.

None of these visits would have been possible without the very generous support of various organisations, Sverre Kaaten, Kurt Lance, Paddy Pallin and several others. Mike Brady made a large personal contribution himself. Sverre, Kurt and Paddy have dug deep into their pockets on many occasions and Nordic racers and tourers today should appreciate these contributions and the effect on our sport today.

Ross Martin represented Australia at the 1968 Grenoble Olympics, training under Erik Olsen and receiving considerable help in Norway from Mike Brady and Hilmar Viberg and the NJAAL Club.

In 1968, Mike Brady returned to Australia. Apart from coaching and lecturing, Mike wrote and directed a Audio-visual program using Australian racers. This A-V program has since been widely used overseas, particularly in the United States.

By 1969, the number of Nordic skiers, both recreational and racing, had grown considerably. In 1970 Australia was represented at the World Championships in Strbske Pleso, Czechoslovakia by Denis Vanzella, Barry Marshall and Ross Martin. Manager was John Morgan and Steve Andersen, team doctor.

In 1971, a large number of Japanese racers competed in Australia. This season also saw two top Norwegians Kaare Berg and Paal Schetne competing. Once again, Sverre Kaaten and his friends footed most of the bill.

No Australians competed in the 1972 Sapporo Olympics, for reasons well understood by followers of Australian National Sporting attitudes. "If you cannot win - hide in shame." (Quote from the "Australian National Dog Handbook" by J. Dingo).

In **1972** Bob and Norma Cranage founded the Telemark N.S.C. This specialist Nordic Ski Club was to be the foundation of many Nordic initiatives in Victoria, e.g. development of junior racing, overseas junior teams, school programs, training squads, formation of new clubs (Birkebeiner N.S.C./Melbourne N.S.C.), trails etc.

In **1974**, Australia was well represented overseas and the knowledge and contributions made by team members (racers and non-racers) since then have been largely responsible for the enormous growth being seen today.

Doug Thorne managed the World Championship team in Falun which consisted of Jim Box, Lauri Jortikka, Barry Marshall and Danny Flynn. Erik Olsen was coach. Carl Bongers managed the "B Team" of Ken Baxter, Mick Morath, David Elvin and Mike Edmondson. Bob and Norma Cranage managed the Junior team of Peter Whitmarsh, Greg Healy, Sally Ann Cornell and Regina Collins. The junior team trained in Raelingen, which was Chris Hellerud's hometown, and Rolf Habberstad was coach.

The **1974-75** season saw two more teams in Norway. Peter Carter managed the Senior team of Jim Box, Lauri Jortikka, Gerry van der Ploeg, John James, Ken Baxter, Ross Martin and David Elvin. Jan Berry managed the junior team which again went to Raelingen. It was Rae Bolton, Keith Jephcott, Chris and Brenda Allan. Erik Olsen coached the seniors, and Rolf Habberstad the juniors.

In **1972** Doug Thorne was appointed the first ASF Nordic Director. Doug's contribution to the sport as a whole has been phenomenal.

It was the first time Nordics had national direction, and the avoidance of interstate problems was largely due to Doug Thorne's work.

With the development of recreational cross country skiing in recent years, it was apparent to some people that a separate committee within the skiing association was needed. In **1974** David Biggs was the prime mover in establishing a Touring Committee for the NSWSA which has done tremendous work in producing maps of touring trails, touring literature and in promoting the interests of the touring skier. **1975** saw the formation of a separate Ski Touring Association in Victoria (S.T.A.V.) with similar aims to the Touring Committee of the NSWSA.

In **1975**, Mike Brady, Erik Olsen, Hilmar Viberg, Rolf Habberstad (with wife Marit and son Gunner) all from Norway visited Australia to conduct a coach course and run coach and racer clinics.