

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF NORDIC SKIING IN VICTORIA

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As with most things in life, to understand and know the background of an organisation or sport, one must first look at the people involved.

As I look back, there is no doubt that Wangaratta Ski Club, of which I have been a member for nearly 25 years, has had a great influence on my coming to the sport and the Nordic discipline which I followed keenly in the '60s and '70s. Wangaratta Ski Club celebrated its 50 years as a Club in 1980 and from the beginning was a touring Club. The cross-country event was held whilst the Club was at Little Feathertop and when it moved to Mt. St. Bernard, commenced the official Club Langlauf (cross-country event) in 1948 and the Club Jump started 5 years later.

There is no doubt that Wangaratta Ski Club kept Nordic interest at a high level between the years 1945 - 1970 in Victoria. I can well recall the remarks from downhill skiers as we made our way via resorts out on to the High Plains - "Look at those funny skinny skis!" they would call. I am sure they had no idea how popular they would become in later years.

News of the sport which came back with our first cross-country Olympians in 1952, Cedric Sloan (Vic.) and Bruce Haslingden (N.S.W.) had the effect of whetting our appetites for cross-country, but also made us feel fairly despondent about the lack of facilities in Australia.

A second and major stimulus came from Euporean immigrants to our snowfields, particularly in New South Wales. On the Wangaratta Ski Club scene, Jack Coletti, a Roumanian, had a great deal to do with influencing Bruce Osbourne, a well known club member, to take up cross-country. Bruce, who was a teacher at the Wangaratta High School, became very keen on the sport and influenced many others to take it up and race competitively, which he did until his death in 1981.

The story goes that training at snow level was so limited that they took to skiing on frosty paddocks at Greta, south-east of Wangaratta.

As competition developed in the Club, so the Club began to take on planning and running of State and National cross-country events in Victoria. I can often recall the cry "The boys from Wang will be there!" And so they were. They cut the trails, took the entries, ran the race and many of them competed.

In the mid '50s interest gathered and again it was through a number of cross-country identities including Dick Walpole, originally from Myrtleford Ski Club, and a former Olympian, Charlie Derrick, a tall gentle farmer who sadly lost his life attempting to break the Bogong - Hotham cross-country record, Peter Carter and others.

There was great interest in interstate teams during the '50s and '60s. From 1961 - 1966 Wangaratta provided half the Victorian field in the Victorian Championships.

In 1959 in the absence of an official organisation, a number of north-eastern skiers ran an invitation in "Schuss", calling all those interested to join training sessions that winter. The call was not well supported, but Wangaratta Ski Club kept its own events going.

After returning from the 1960 Olympics in the U.S.A., Dick Walpole talked frankly about the gap between his own and world performances and went on to propose specific plans for action to begin to look at the shortcomings in our lack of knowledge on the technical side of cross-country skiing, particularly for training for cross-country competition.

Dick had an evangelistic streak about his cross-country message and this impressed me and I made the change from downhill skiing which I loved very much and began to take up cross-country with Charlie Derrick and the Wangaratta team. During the 1960s, Wangaratta Ski Club travelled regularly to New South Wales to compete in cross-country races and jumps. There we met some of the New South Wales' greats, Kore Grunnsund, Otto Pinkis, Robbie Kilpenen.

The highlight in the race calendar in those early years, as is the case today, was the Paddy Pallin cross-country classic at Perisher. This started in 1965 and the first race was one of the longest, 50 kilometres. It is now 30 kilometres. We also met up with another great, Ross Martin, who went on to represent Australia in cross-country skiing at the Olympics. Again, after his return, Ross went out of his way to assist budding cross-country racers with guidance and advice.

In 1970, a new group of racers came through, including Bob Cranage from the Upper Murray Ski Club, who was and is a tireless cross-country racer and a particularly talented trainer of junior cross-country and biathlon. Bob had much to do with the formation in 1971 - 2 of the Telemark Nordic Ski Club which was the first open Nordic Ski Club in Victoria. Shortly after that, Birkenbinder Nordic Ski Club was formed at Mt. Beauty and this was followed by the formation of Melbourne Nordic Ski Club. Numbers grew and so did the publicity and information available to the public.

Much publicity surrounded the tragic death of Charles Derrick. He was a great champion in his time and a marvellous advocate for the sport. I feel he was a catalyst for many people joining the sport and always went out of his way to help them experience the thrill of cross-country whether it was for a casual run on the High Plains or training for a State Championship. He set challenge after challenge for himself and died making a bid for the record for a run from Bogong to Hotham in 1965 and bad weather set in towards the end of the trip. If the saying "only the good die young" applies to all, I feel it applies to Charlie Derrick.

I can well remember being lost on the High Plains at the back of Falls Creek in the 1962 Victorian Cross Country Championship in appalling weather. It was a very important warning to me that good trails with regular markings and information was essential if the sport was to remain safe. As well as good facilities, education was urgently required. We had to make a start. It was about at that time that we commenced the job of researching, collating and putting together the Trails Manual and this I will come to shortly.

It is possibly not understood well, but up until the mid 1970s there was little, if any, cross country skiing represented on the Victorian Ski Association Executive. Downhill or Alpine Skiing was the go and the administrative side was generally made up from those skiers. As I have said before, Wangaratta Ski Club ran cross-country races and jumps in Victoria for the V.S.A., but had very little to do with the input and direction or the V.S.A. Frankly, the V.S.A. was not open in its love of cross-country skiing and it took some persistence by many individuals to crack this situation.

One such person was Peter Bailey, yet another Wangaratta Ski Club member who through persistence and logic and a tremendous ability to get on with people, worked his way through to the committee and then went on to represent the Nordic side of skiing and to become vice-president of the Victorian Ski Association. It was said of Peter that he had a silver tongue and this was certainly true when it came to dealing with bureaucrats and Ministers.

Cross-country skiing administration had arrived. The problem was to fund facilities. Alpine skiing had downhill tows to fund much of the cost of capital improvements, but as there was no "pay-as-you-go" facility for cross-country trails, it meant working with committees of management, Government departments, ski clubs and other interested parties to commence to develop facilities.

I might add that Peter Bailey capped off a magnificent career in skiing administration by becoming the A.S.F. President in 1983 and thereby being the host president for the F.I.S. International Convention held in Sydney, Australia for the first time that year.

About this time, I got involved in the administration of skiing — I think I was getting too old for serious cross-country racing.

It seemed to me and others much of the work to date had been involved in racing and competition and for all of us here today, I believe this was very good because the progress made in my opinion would not have been so great unless the competition push had occurred. But we had to look at the recreational scene.

A V.S.A. recreational Nordic committee was formed in Victoria. It is interesting to note that the New South Wales Ski Association was also thinking about this area at the same time. David Biggs and others were discussing trails and management of trails with National Parks and finding the same frustrations that were in Victoria about getting the Authorities' support.

David had an idea based around a theory that a prophet is not listened to in his own land. He phoned me in 1979 and told me of his plan to bring Bjarne Mjaaland, Director of Forestry Services at Oslo, to Australia. In my opinion, this single event had the effect of legitimising the sport in the eyes of the Authorities who have the management role of our Alpine areas. He was a *man* and this was a *trip* that really brought cross-country recreational skiing of age in Australia.

He visited most of the Victorian resorts accompanied by Ian Parfitt and went on to meet Government Ministers, Heads of Alpine Land Management Departments, Resort Managers and skiers. He is a fine man and knew his subject and impressed everybody he came in contact with.

After his visit, we sat down and got busy commencing to write an Australian cross-country ski trail manual. In the message from the President of the Victorian Ski Association as a foreword to this manual in 1980, Dr. Rodney Moss summarised the reasons for the need for a manual, including:

- (a) Governments are promoting leisure time activities.
- (b) A desire by more Australians to see and experience the winter snow lands in their native state.
- (c) Cross-country skiing is inherently cheaper than downhill or "Alpine" skiing and so offers a variation of the sport.
- (d) Alpine skiers were becoming disenchanted with long queues at the ski lifts — the current cost of ski lift tickets is also tending to serve as a disincentive to family skiing.
- (e) For others, there is the challenge to endurance and skill of competitive Nordic events, for example cross-country racing (langlauf), jump, and biathlon events.

With John Fay and Ken McFarlane, we set about collating all the available information on planning, construction and maintenance of cross-country ski trails from overseas and adapting it to Australian conditions. Ken McFarlane went on to up-date the manual and deserves much of the credit for its subsequent introduction and application amongst Alpine Resort Managers. Much of the paving the way for the introduction of the manual and its contents owes a lot to Ian Parfitt who I would like to pay particular tribute to in the story of the development of cross-country skiing in this State. Ian has made an enormous contribution, particularly in the communications within and between Departments for what was needed for the public to enjoy the sport.

I must say it wasn't until Ian invited me to join the ARDAC Pole Line Subcommittee that I came to understand Ian's contribution in the area of Pole Line reconstruction, safety and search and rescue, environmental protection, and the development of ideas for new facilities at the resorts. As you know, Ian went on to become the Victorian Ski Association President and again cross-country skiing benefited greatly. I know everyone in this room would agree that we owe a great deal to Ian in bringing us all together for these discussions which I am sure the skiing public in Victoria will gain a great deal from.

I have already mentioned that we owe a great deal for the state of cross-country facilities in this State to the competition side of the sport. It would, therefore, be remiss of me to leave the subject without a word or two about John Aitkin.

John, in my opinion, falls into the category of a "no limits" person. He has become a tireless worker for cross-country administration, facilities and racing in Victoria, particularly over the last decade. He is currently the Skiers Representative on the Falls Creek Committee of Management and has inputted a great deal to make sure that the trails at Falls Creek are now to a standard where this resort will host an International Cross-Country Skiing Carnival in 1985 as part of this State's 150th Birthday Celebration.

John will be shortly setting off overseas to personally invite international racers to attend, however, he tells me that the Carnival will be open to all cross-country skiers to compete in. It will, therefore mark a significant stage which we have reached in the sport in Australia.

Of course, there are many who say that marked trails and facilities are not needed - just leave the mountains the way they are.

There is a need to leave wilderness areas, but the sport, in my opinion, is popular and will become even more so in the near future. It must be safe and family orientated because I believe families and youth, including schools will be the market as downhill skiing becomes too expensive and resorts become too crowded. Safety and education will become paramount plus a high standard of facilities and groomed trails.

CONCLUSION

Looking back over the years, I have derived so much pleasure and friendship from the sport of skiing. These memories and experiences lead me to what we perceived to be an area of need in 1982 when we commenced the Victorian Alpine News, a free tabloid newspaper covering the skiing scene in Victoria. It seems to have been well received and will be a challenge to keep skiers satisfied with basic information on the how, where and what of skiing in this State.

This year the V.S.A. asked us to take on the management of Fall Line and with an excellent editor in Barry White, Fall Line has turned the corner and will respond better, I believe, in the future as Australia's leading full colour skiing magazine for in-depth articles.

But to return to the beginning, I am indebted to the Wangaratta Ski Club for its introduction to me of the sport and particularly of cross-country skiing. It is a great Club with a long tradition. Its isolation certainly makes for greater efforts for its members to ski together, particularly cross-country and to get to know one another better and these are the reasons why I ski.



Frank Wood



Act. C.I. W.Brand

Ian Parfitt