



A Look at the History of Skating

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DISCLAIMER: This is my best recollection. Some of these facts may not be facts! Skating in (and outside of) races, of course, has been with us for a long, long time. The "mixed pair" of skis (one short and one long) shows that skating has been used for centuries. I think most of us who raced back in the 70s and 80s should remember using what is now called "V2-alternate" in relays in the "scramble zone" where there were no tracks for about 100m while the course went from maybe 20 or 30 tracks down to 2 or 3.

However, if the discussion is aimed at the recent history of competitive skating, I've seen a lot of grains of truth, but not the whole story. I won't claim to be the authority, but most of what follows has been drawn from US Team coaches and athletes who witnessed the "skating revolution" 1st hand. Forthwith:

Late 1970's or 1980

In a race on a river in Sweden, Bill Koch sees Bjorn Risby (I think it was) marathon skating past him. This is his first exposure to the technique. Being the creative genius that he is, he started trying to figure out how to make this work for him.

1980-81 season

Bill Koch does a 50km time trial on a lake in southern Vermont, marathon skating the entire distance in under 2:00 (1:59:47) — an unheard of time 15 years ago, but not enough to win the World Championships or World Cup 50km now!

1980-81 Season

Marathon skating is widely used on the World Cup circuit, although not to the degree that it would be the next season. I attended the World Cup final in Whitehorse that winter, and made my first stab at marathon skating. Five or six strokes and my support leg was toast! How can anyone do this for a whole race? World Cup overall is won by Alexander Zavjalov (SOV) who says skating is "for women and children." Low PC quotient there.

1981-1982 Season

Koch uses the marathon skate technique to a degree unheard of prior to this season. Wins five(?) individual World Cup races on his way to the World Cup title (WC Final in Castelrotto/Kastelruth, ITA — Koch wins individual (I think) and USA wins men's relay. Koch also won a bronze medal in the 30km at the FIS World Championships in Oslo — doing quite a bit of skating, I imagine.

1982-1983 Season

Continued development. Koch gets 3rd in the World Cup overall. Little known fact: in the penultimate World Cup race in Anchorage, Tim Caldwell has his best-ever World Cup finish, placing second (to a young buck named Gunde Svan in his first year as a senior, I believe). This second place may have cost Kochie (who I believe placed third) the overall World Cup title. Svan wins World Cup overall, I believe.

A friend of mine actually has super-8 film of Koch diagonal skating up a hill in the National Championships 15km or 30km which was held in conjunction with the World Cup event in Anchorage.

1983-1984 Season

Lots of marathon skating at the Olympics, but no real breakthrough until the spring races in Northern Scandinavia. That's

when skiers first decided to really go for it and forego the kick wax. The story I heard was that Ove Aunli of Norway (who had been disqualified for skating at the Olympics, ruining Norway's best, or 2nd-best Olympic result-5th) was the one who first took the plunge and won the race.

Just prior to that, at the penultimate World Cup race in Fairbanks, AK, there was lots and lots of marathon skating on all terrain. Winning time for the 15km was 36:16 (Svan) for a course that was actually 16.5km. Konrad Hallenbarter of Switzerland did some "out of the track" skating.

1984-1985 Season

This was when it really happened. The first (and only) "skating" World Championships. At the coaches and team leaders' meeting prior to the competitions, the question of skating was brought up to TD Gerhard Grimmer of East Germany. He said "There are no rules against skating, so unless we all agree that there will be no skating, there will be no restrictions." He then took a role for purposes of asking if people would agree or not agree to limit the competition to classic only. The first nation on the role was **Australia** (editor: John Aitken was the manager at this meeting), and they said "no restrictions." End of discussion, over the vehement protests of the Norwegians and Soviets.

All races were skating, although if you have the opportunity to see some of the videos from Seefeld, you'd have a hard time recognizing a lot of what they were doing as skating. Talk about bad technique!

My favourite story from that season: I was coaching at UA Fairbanks. We were racing at the UVM Carnival at Stowe, Vermont. Mike Gallagher (USST Head Coach at the time), just returned from Europe was in attendance. At that time in the US, the diagonal skate was the apex of technique. As I was watching the race alongside Mike he said: "Over in Europe, they're double poling rather than single-poling." That was after all my skiers had passed by at the end of their first lap. So when they came by second lap I said: "Double-pole while you skate!" Which they did. Learned V1 on the fly! That's how fast technique was evolving.

The rest of the season the World Cup organizers did everything they could to eliminate skating: berms, fences, etc. Needless to say, these met with universal disdain from the athletes. I believe it was this season that Wassberg used the "tape on the bottom of the skis" routine at Holmenkollen in Oslo. He waxed the tape, then with about 5 mostly-downhill km to ski, he stopped, flipped up his skis, ripped the tape off, and hammered on home, winning the race.

I believe it was at the end of that season that the current rules about splitting skating and classic races 50-50 emerged in their earliest form. Skating technique has evolved tremendously from that time, but it was pretty exciting while it was all happening. Hope this sheds a little light on the recent history. I welcome any corrections to errors I may have made in this re-telling.

Taken with thanks from John Downing's USA Cross Country Ski World Web site <http://www.weblab.com/xcski/>