

Records

Taking the Alps apart

In a sporting world which is accustomed to seeing records broken by hundredths of a second, or by a few centimetres, the achievements of two cross-country skiers in Australia last year are nothing short of astounding.

On September 6, David Hislop shattered the Perisher to Kiandra record, held for 21 years by Finnish skier Robbie Kilpinen. Kilpinen's time for the 80 kilometre journey, set in August 1964, was eight hours eleven minutes; Hislop, skiing solo over some of Australia's wildest terrain, completed the distance in six hours eighteen minutes. What made the achievement even more remarkable was the fact that he had attempted the trip two days earlier, only to get lost after nine hours of skiing.

The same day, United States Olympic skier Audun Endestad completely demolished the famous "Diamond Straitjacket" record, a run from Mountain Creek, near Mt Beauty, to Hotham Heights. Endestad's time of five hours fifty-three minutes slashed a breathtaking four hours twenty-two minutes off the record first set by Victorian Danny Flynn.

Robbie's Record by David Hislop — 1985

Waking up has always been difficult for me. But at 3 am in the freezing loft of Cooma Hut, bed never felt so good. I fumbled for matches to light a candle and my feelings for the history of this trip blaze. My sleepy mind dreams of how Robbie Kilpinen must have done just this twenty-one years ago. It's going to be fun trying to break his elusive record of 8 hours 11 minutes.

Still dreaming I think of the trip and all the people who have tried it. Eighty kilometers across the top of Australia, with no marked trails, no tracks, the possibilities of bad weather or injury, and no people for support. It's been a romantic challenge to many.

There'll be plenty of climbing today — nearly 2000m — and plenty of fast downhill to enjoy. It's a long way, but with fast skis and good snow, the scenery will just fly past. There is tough navigation at places, so on this occasion I'll make sure I know just where I am all the time. The thought of being out there gliding along consumes me. It's going to be fun!

Hey — I shake myself. Stop dreaming — it's time to get up!

With the generator off all is quiet and dark up in Cooma Hut. Clutching my candle, I creep downstairs to fix breakfast, being careful not to wake anyone. I pull the curtains to let the moonshine in, but it's not so bright. Maybe I'll see more on the snow. It's so early I don't feel like eating, so I sit in front of the fire and drink strong black coffee, thinking of what's ahead. Have I got everything?

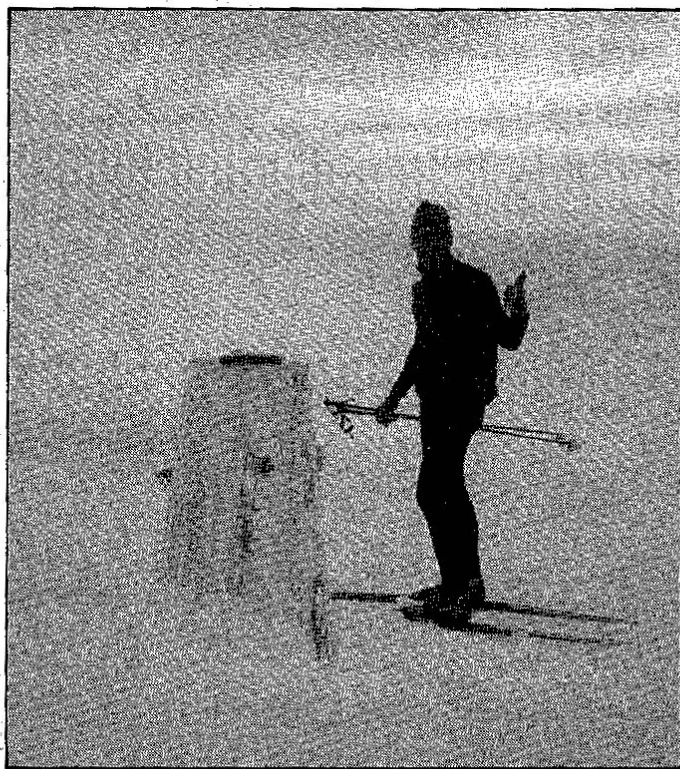
I didn't want to carry much and I've kept the safety equipment to a minimum. I don't like skiing with a pack, so with the help of Mike Edmondson, who I spent the season with at Paddy Pallin Jindabyne, we make a large bum bag. In it I have goretex overpants and a hood for the jacket I'll be wearing. It's Verglas gear, and packs up into a small package. I have a bivia bag together with fire starters and an aluminium water bottle just in case I need a hot drink for a night out. But I hope it won't come to that! I'll carry a spare woolien top and gloves, and for breakages I have some duck tape and twine. For food I have jam sandwiches and raisins.

Usually I don't eat when I'm going hard. But as I'm still hungry from a failed record attempt two days previously, I'll be sure to

eat in an effort to ward off "hitting the wall" - or running out of energy. Drinking plenty of liquids is important, so I'll carry one and a half litres of juice and I'll top that up every couple of hours with orange crystals and stream water.

In front of the fire I go over my plan yet again. My maps are ready in plastic cases. The first 20 or 30 km will be in the dark so I won't use a map there. I'll pass two huts and will leave messages with people in them. Most importantly, I've let people know exactly where I intend going, and at what time they are to start looking for me if something goes wrong. I don't want a memorial race or a commemorative hut named after me so I'm covering myself. It's the record I'm after - but not at all costs!

At 4.00 am I check outside. There is a cold front coming and it's due later in the day. The few clouds blowing in front of the moon scare me. For one thing it's slow to ski in the dark. But what about safety. In the first hour I'll have to cross the notorious "Rolling Grounds". If the weather closes in up there it's terrible - especially in the dark - so I hurry back inside



David Hislop, on top of the world.

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for some more coffee and contemplate my moves.

This was the last of the moon and the snow was melting rapidly. To-day would be my last chance for the season and you don't get too many opportunities over the years. I can't afford to let my mind wander this time. I'll just think about going fast and enjoy the trip - after all, that's what it's all about. But I can't help myself. I plan my schedule on six and a half hours. One can only hope!

The clouds are lifting and it's going to be a hot day. That doesn't look good for fast skiing towards Kiandra, but that can't be helped now. At 4.46 am I leave, with someone to check the time and give me words of encouragement. It's clear, not too bright, and fast skiing.

It's downhill from the start and I cross Guthega Dam after 15 minutes. It's going to be fast to-day! In my rush to leave I hadn't checked where North was, so climbing up to Guthega Trig I look for the Southern Cross. The sky's so clear to-night it's wonderful, and far from being lonely I find the trip across the Rolling Grounds fantastic. However, in my exuberance I drop off the Rolling Grounds

too quickly down into White's River Hut. I kick myself, as in the first hour I've already lost five minutes through a navigation mistake. Definitely not a good start. But to make the most of my misfortune I head straight up to Gungahon Pass.

It's a longer climb than I'd planned, but the sun is rising as I reach the top and the view is just fantastic. My spirits are high and I stop kicking myself for that stupid mistake, telling myself that it's all worked out for the better, as I point my skis down a beautifully fast 3k downhill run.

Memories of Robbie keep flashing through my mind. He'd described the snow here as "horribly, horribly fast". That imagery seems apt as I fly down the hill completely out of control. The snow is icy and fast, perfect for a speed attempt. But in the valley it's still dark. Hitting some hore frost, I end up on my bum, collecting ice as I spin down the hill.

After 200 meters I manage to stop, but the ice tumbles on, sending echoes across the valley. It's such an incredible sound in the silence, I don't even swear as I pick myself up.

The next 10 km are very fast on the rolling

terrain. There are good gentle downhills on which to drink and read the map while still skiing along. I'm careful to check the map and I spot an easier route round one major hill. This gives me a 2 km run downhill through the trees. I'm just in control, swerving between the trunks on some really fast G.S. type turns. It's so much fun searching all the time for speed. Then it's flat and suddenly I reach Cessjacks Hut. I can't believe it as I look at the time. Two and three-quarter hours and I'm half way there. It's early morning and very still, but no-one hears my hoots of joy!

I remember the first time I was here. It was in 1977 and my uncles, R. Mountstephens and J. Farquhar, had asked me to join them on a four day trip from Guthega to Kiandra. I had been excited by the invitation, but very apprehensive as I could hardly ski. And to go such a long way in only four days seemed beyond me. But the trip was to commemorate 50 years since the first crossing by Dr. Schlink and his party so I couldn't miss it.

We actually left one week before the historic date, as my uncles assured me that there'd be too many groups attempting it the

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following weekend. Here at Cessjacks we met Kore Grunnsund, who welcomed us at his hut with tales of his many crossings. I was impressed. But then he shocked me by telling of the legendary Robbie Kilpinen who in 1964 skied to Cessjacks in three and a quarter hours on his second trip. To me that was almost unbelievable, and I vowed there and then to learn how to ski. I never dreamt then that I'd ever have the ability to attempt such a feat.

There was no time to reminisce now.

There was tough navigation onto Coots Racecourse and then I lost time trying to ski as far as possible on snow drifts out onto Happy Jack's Plains. It was frustratingly slow here. I'd have to stop continuously to run across grassy sections. There was still some frost, so I tried grass skiing - with mixed success. The skis would glide well at speed, but then they would grab and I'd be catapulted forward. It was like jumping off an express train - but with skis on! I found it a lot of fun, but very tiring, and I am sure it would have made an hilarious spectacle. Finally my shins became so tired from this, I picked up my skis and ran. There was 5 km of running to Happy Jacks River, and

more beyond.

The river here was 5-8m wide and at places 3-4m deep, and very fast flowing. There was a footbridge, but as it was a couple of kilometers upstream, it would take some time to get to it. I examined a bend in the river and saw a good possibility. I thought I could jump across the deep part and land in knee deep water. I decided not to waste time removing my shoes - three steps should see me over - and if I ran there'd be no time to get them wet.

So, with a mighty leap, I found I'd miscalculated. It was nearly waist deep and after four steps, very, very cold. For the next four kilometers, I marvelled at how well my boots held water!

There was still more running, and then at Brod's Hut I found some snow. In the shade of Arsenic Ridge the snow cover was still good, but by now - 9.15 am - it was thawing fast. At Table Top Mountain after five hours I was still half an hour ahead of schedule, but I couldn't afford the mistake of two days ago, so I kept checking the map.

As I pass Mt. Selwyn I see some people for the first time. Being aware of safety I yell

out, "I left Perisher at quarter to five this morning." Their reply of "Oh sure!" makes me chuckle.

Finally I'm on the ridge above Kiandra. There's no snow and the ground's too rocky for grass skiing. Again I pick up the skis and sprint. I'm a bit concerned about having a witness for the finish. Some cars are coming, so I desperately try to flag them down. They speed on and I'm filled with anger - what if something had been wrong on the mountain? I sprint up the middle of the road to the Kiandra Works Depot looking for the telephone. I can't find my money quickly enough. I'm really hot and sweaty now and puffing like a mad thing. I pound on the window to attract the caretaker. "Quick" I yell and he rushes over sensing something critical. What a funny look he gives me when all I can blurt out is, "Have you got the time?"

Six hours and eighteen minutes, and some of the best skiing of my life. I'm delirious with joy as Lance asks me in for a drink.

It was a long drive back to Jindabyne and, as I was hitching it took longer than the ski over. As soon as I got back I rang Robbie. I'd wanted to be the first to break the "bad"



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news - but the bush telegraph was faster than I thought and spoilt my surprise. So it was a congratulatory Robbie who greeted me with, "I thought you'd get it this year." On hearing of my wet feet he told me of the trouble he'd had at Happy Jack's River. There was plenty of snow in '64 but no snow bridges were left - he'd had awful trouble climbing the one and a half meter snow wall out of the river!

Although we may never again have such a good snow cover as Robbie had, he did use wooden skis, which are considerably slower than today's. While I had slow, wet snow, he collapsed from lack of water in the heat towards the end and was lucky to regain consciousness before getting too cold. The time he would otherwise have made is hard to judge.

Far from being unhappy that his record was gone, Robbie was glad that some more people are attempting the crossing. I commented that his eight hours target had been a bit too daunting a task for most. Now the target is tougher, but I'm sure it won't stand nearly as long as Robbie's record. I just hope, like him, that a few more will attempt what I see as the best cross country trip in Australia.

The Diamond Straitjacket – (The Alpine Crossing)

According to cross-country folk-lore in Victoria, you have to be crazy to attempt some of the long distance journeys across the southern alps and high plains. You need, they say, to be put in a straitjacket.

So it was that the Hotham to Big River journey became known as the Silver Straitjacket, and the trip from the top of Bogong to Hotham as the Gold Straitjacket. The climb from Mountain Creek up the Staircase to Mt Bogong, and then across the High Plains to Hotham, was an even greater test, and deserved a Diamond Straitjacket. In 1965, the journey claimed the life of Victorian Cross-country Champion Charlie Derrick in his first attempt to establish a time for the distance.

Writing in the Australian Ski Yearbook after Danny Flynn successfully made the first crossing, Wendy Cross summed up the nature of the Diamond Straitjacket.

"Danny Flynn knows what adventuring is all about. He is one of that unique breed of men, who set out to achieve the impossible, pitting human strength and endurance against the awesome odds in favour of Nature. And none knows better than Danny how very much the odds swing in Nature's favour when the contest is waged in winter, on Australia's wind-swept Alps. Yet Danny took up the challenge...and won.

The run from Mountain Creek to Hotham Heights has held a morbid fascination for Australian cross-country skiers since 1965, when Victoria's langlauf champion, Charlie Derrick, tried to set an inaugural record. Charlie was caught by bad weather after he'd passed the half-way mark, and instead of taking shelter in one of the huts along the route, pushed on and was overcome by hypothermia at the top of Mt Loch - just an easy downhill run from Hotham Heights Hotel, where his friends waited, unaware of his fate. During the next 10 years, no-one else dared to follow in Charlie Derrick's ski-tracks. No-one, that is, except Danny Flynn."

Another ten years on, Endestad's time over the distance is a remarkable effort.

After the long haul up to the Bogong Summit Hut, the Straitjacket route runs past Cleve Cole Hut and down to the Big River, up past Mt Nelse and around the back of the Rocky Valley Dam, then down again to Dibbins Hut before the final climb up to Derrick Hut, below Mt Loch, and a relatively easy ski along Loch Spur to the road and in to Hotham.

Setting out with three companions, including Swiss skier Christina Brugger, Endestad reached Hotham Heights in less than six hours, leaving the others far behind. Even so, Brugger's time of seven hours twelve minutes was also an outstanding performance, and sets a standard that Australian women may find hard to attain.

Map courtesy of Algona

