

Cross-Country Skating: How it Started



Few sports have changed as rapidly and dramatically as did cross-country skiing in the 1980s. For more than a hundred years cross-country competitors had universally raced with the ancient diagonal stride, alternately kicking and gliding. In retrospect, it was remarkable that no one saw how much faster a skier could move if he propelled himself by skating with his skis, in the manner of an ice skater. America's Bill Koch first observed the skate step at a Swedish marathon, then applied it to win the 1982

World Cup of Cross Country skiing. Immediately the sport was engulfed in controversy over the new technique. Within five years, World Championship and Olympic cross-country skiing was utterly transformed. Now there were as many medals for Freestyle, in which skating is permitted, as would be awarded for Classic, in which skating was prohibited. And in three more years, the freestyle revolution was so powerful that it led to the Pursuit competition, with a totally new way of starting racers and climaxing in a telegenic finish. No one was better situated to observe the revolution than Bengt Erik Bengtsson, Chief of the Nordic Office of the Swiss-based International Ski Federation (FIS) from 1984 to 2004.

The use of a skating technique to ski across snow is hardly new. In the 1930s, when bindings were adaptable to both downhill and cross-country, skiers commonly skated across flat areas, in the style of an ice skater. For a long time cross-country ski racers skated in order to take advantage of terrain or to combat poor wax, although it was difficult to do over grooved tracks and in a narrow corridor.

In the 1960s, participants in the relatively new sport of ski orienteering – I was one of them – commonly skated. In orienteering we use a map and compass to travel between designated points as fast as possible. The shortest route isn't necessarily the fastest -- for example, if it's a bushwhack. If a road is available, the competitor can switch from traditional kick and glide skiing to

propelling himself like an ice skater, going from ski to ski. Some participants even mounted thin steel edges on their skis to get a better bite on the hard snow and go faster.

The Finnish skier Pauli Siitonen was a top competitor in ski orienteering, and when he turned to marathon or Loppet racing in the 1970s he brought the technique of skating to it. But with a difference. Now, in soft snow, Siitonen would leave one ski in the track, and propel himself with the other ski, pushing off repeatedly as primitive hunters had done centuries earlier using the short Andor ski.

Other marathon skiers soon followed Siitonen. They caught the attention of America's Bill Koch when he was participating in a 1980 Swedish marathon on flat terrain following a river. The race pitted classic World Cup skiers competed against marathon or Loppet skiers. The distance-racers by now were commonly skating. A light bulb went off in Koch's head. Why not apply skating to standard 15, 30 and 50 kilometer FIS-sanctioned races?

At the 1982 World Ski Championships in Oslo, I was responsible for the split timing. Early in the 30-kilometer race we had a leader, Thomas Eriksson. In one special part of the track he lost so much time to Koch that we thought there was a timing error. We did not know why, but obviously it was due to Koch skating. Eriksson was the gold medalist. Koch not only won the bronze, he went

on to skate his way to victory in the season-long World Cup of cross-country skiing.

By now, the skating technique -- sometimes leaving a ski in the track, more often double-skating (called the V2 skate)-- was spreading through the sport. Officials, especially the Norwegians, were concerned that traditional cross-country racing was going to be corrupted. They wanted to ban skating entirely wherever prepared tracks existed. The ban did not happen, but at the 1983 FIS Congress the

following rules were imposed:

- No skating in the first 100 meters after the start.
- No skating within 200 meters of the finish.
- No skating in the relay race 200 meters before and after the racer exchange.

Not coincidentally, the starting and finishing areas are where TV cameras and photographers are primarily located, so that the ban on skating ensured that the corrupting new technique would be less visibly public.

The issue of skating engendered bitter division within the world of Nordic skiing. On the one hand, Sweden's Bengt Herman Nilsson, the chairman of the prestigious FIS Cross-Country Committee, welcomed the new technique. "The skating step has come to stay," he wrote in a 1983

report. "It is even beautiful when three to four skiers in a row race with forceful skating steps - they remind me of exotic butterflies fluttering in the wind."

On the other hand, Norwegian traditionalists were opposed to the heretical new technique. Ivar Formo, the 1976 Olympic gold medalist, who succeeded Nilsson as chairman of the FIS Cross-Country Committee, wanted to ban skating as soon as possible, and he had the emphatic support of his fellow Norwegians. A victim of their rule-making, ironically, was a Norwegian, Ove Aunli. At the 1984 Sarajevo Olympic Winter Games, Aunli recorded a time in the 30-kilometer race that made him the bronze medalist, but he was disqualified for skating in a prohibited area.

While skating wasn't allowed in the start and finish areas, it was a free-for-all over the rest of the course, with racers calculating the benefits of waxing to promote kicking, or waxing the entire ski with glide wax for skating. By now, they had mostly abandoned the old Siitonen one-ski-in-the-track technique. The gliding ski was now outside of the track, riding on the snow at a slight angle, while the racer used the other ski for propulsion in a furious repetitive move. It came to be known as V-1. No more kick wax. In a late-season meet at Kiruna, Sweden, near the Arctic Circle, the 30-kilometer winner Ove Aunli, and the winner of the women's 10 km, Anette Boe – both Norwegians – enjoyed decisive victories on skis prepared only with glide wax. . . no kick

wax.

Skating raised all kinds of issues. Would it lead to injuries, such as hip displacement. A Swiss wag called skating "the Sulzer step," after the name of a manufacturer of artificial hip joints.

Did there need to be specialized skis, boots, bindings and poles? Should not limits be placed on shortening ski length and making poles too long? How should tracks be prepared? Since skating speed slows dramatically when temperatures fall below minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit, would not farther north nations be at a disadvantage? What kind of special training was needed, not only in winter, but in summer? What if the radical new technique spread to recreational cross-country skiing?

A whole new situation had emerged, none of it finding favor with the FIS CCC (Cross-Country Committee). The majority on the committee was driven by the fear that skating would kill classic cross-country skiing. They were resolute in wanting to restrict skating as much as possible. One way was to create narrower courses through the forest, necessarily restricting the size of machines to prepare the tracks. "Back to nature," was the battle cry. Another idea to discourage skating was to make sure the uphill were so demanding and steep that the skier could not skate, but must herring-bone. But the preventive method most tested was the erection of nets and snow walls to narrow the track so much that skating

was impossible.

On December 7, 1984, the FIS Council, the supreme governing body of the international ski federation, directed the Cross-Country Committee to test the use of small nets between the tracks, and to set courses in such a way "that the skating step will physically not be applicable on all parts of the course."

Dutifully I purchased netting in order to test the application of the proposed new FIS rule. I still remember when I presented the invoice of five thousand dollars to my boss, FIS Secretary General Gian Franco Kasper. Skeptical, shaking his head, he asked me, "Do you really believe in this?" He sighed and signed the check. A month later I knew that he was right, and I was wrong.

We made our first test in Davos, erecting 12 nets. One was thrown in a river by two athletes whose names were revealed to me just a couple of years ago.

Today, we can laugh about it. The winner of the race, Ove Aunli, made a mockery of the test in another way. In a very steep section, we had not thought it necessary to put netting because no one imagined anyone could skate up such a hill. But the super-strong Aunli did it with the new technique, without grip wax, double-poling and skating.

Ambiguity was in the air when the 1984-85 season opened. In a December World Cup race at Davos, the

wife of Ove Aunli, Berit, said to me, "Mr. Bengtsson, you must take away this skating." She won the ladies' competition on skis with grip wax. Two hours later, at a press conference, she was asked, "How do you like the skating step?" I thought she would say the same as she did to me, but to my great disappointment she answered, "It is okay for me".

The next evening I called a meeting of athletes and coaches. Present were

the two 1984 Olympic gold medalists at Sarajevo -- Thomas Wassberg of Sweden and Nikolai Zimjatov of the Soviet Union. Dan Simoneau of the U.S. took the place of Bill Koch. America's Mike Gallagher was among four coaches at the meeting.

Simoneau said that the American athletes wanted skating. After all, the Olympics are about "faster, higher and longer. " Soviet coach Venedikt Kamenskij countered by saying that the Olympics are also about offering "an equal chance for all athletes." As skating destroys the tracks for the later starters, they will not have that chance.

During the meeting, Thomas Wassberg passed me a note which, in retrospect, was prophetic. Cross-country, Wassberg wrote, should become two disciplines: a classical one in which the skating step is not allowed, and another one with no restriction and even allowing

specialized equipment. It was an intriguing idea, but ahead of its time.

At the end of the meeting, the entire group, except the U.S.A., wanted a questionnaire sent to the national associations proposing a ban on skating at the upcoming 1985 World Nordic Championships at Seefeld, Austria. There wasn't much time to act. FIS President Marc Hodler decreed that a skating ban at the forthcoming World Championships was only possible if all officials and all national ski associations accepted it.

The day of the captains' meeting came. The question was introduced: "Do you agree to any restrictions concerning the skating step during the upcoming championships?" The voting was carried out in alphabetical order.

Australia? Answer, NO. The question was dead.

Cross-country was back to where it was at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics the year before, except for one significant new equipment rule that had never existed before in cross-country skiing. To eliminate the possibility that skating could be unfairly speeded up by the abbreviating the length of skis, it was ruled that skis could be no shorter than the competitor's height less 10 centimeters. Also, poles could be no longer than the skier's height. In reality, nothing was going to stop the revolution in nordic ski technique. Classic-only cross-country by now had become almost indefensible. Racers

adopted the superior two-ski skating technique. They were abandoning the use of kicker wax, and switching to preparing their skis entirely with glide wax. In the men's 30-kilometer in the '85 World Championships, the best athlete on skis prepared with grip wax was the Russian Vladimir Smirnov, who placed 24th.

"A revolution has swept away the ancient regime," wrote Arnold Kaech, former FIS General Secretary, in *Sport Zuerich*. "A requiem for the cross-country sport should be sung."

An advantage of the 1985 championships at Seefeld was that everyone -- spectators, media and above all, the FIS's own officials -- could now discuss the skating controversy based on actual observation, on something they'd seen for themselves. The FIS Council met in Seefeld, and a group of experts was formed to define the future of cross-country. The immediate outcome was to test more ideas during the rest of the 1985 winter. As before, silliness as well as sanity ruled. Skate-ban zones were tested at a race in the Ural Mountains. In a competition at Falun, Sweden, in order to prevent skating, officials put soldiers with shovels and rakes to work creating virtual tunnels along the track. Angered, U.S. coach Marty Hall threatened to withdraw his team from the race unless the tunnels were removed. They were. The press unjustly blamed the FIS for conducting an idiotic test.

At Lahti, Finland, in another World Cup race, skate-less zones were created. When an Italian racer skated through one, the Finnish coach grabbed him and threw him off the track. In the ladies' relay race, restricted to classical technique, two teams skated from the start, hooted at by spectators. At the jury meeting afterwards, one coach reported no violations, even though he observed them.

At the winter's last competition at the Holmenkollen in Oslo, the course was divided into classic and skating-permitted zones. At the top of a long uphill, Thomas Wassberg stopped and removed from the bottom of his skis duct tape on which he had put grip wax. Now, equipped only with glide wax, he had an advantage over the other competitors.

By the end of the winter of '85, we concluded that none of the methods that we'd tested for limiting the skate step skating was effective. Nor could it be done by limiting the size of machines approved for track-setting.

Meanwhile, the pressure for change was mounting. Ski manufacturers were readying specialized models of skating skis to be introduced on the market. The skis would be shorter than classical cross-country skis. A decisive moment was approaching with the FIS Congress, the summit meeting of the sport of skiing, taking place in Vancouver, British Columbia.

When the FIS held its Congress in Vancouver in the

summer of 1985, a record number of people showed up at the Cross-Country Committee meeting. The forces opposed to skating included Norway, the Soviet Union and Finland. Nations favoring the new technique included the U.S., Canada and Italy. Germany's Helmut Weinbuch, influential chairman of the Nordic Combined Committee, was in favor of skating in short distance races and the relay. Out of the meeting emerged a proposal to be presented to the Congress. The most radical proposal was that half of the World Cup races over the season be in classical technique and half in freestyle, and the same for Junior World Championships. The format for other international competitions would be at the discretion of the national associations in the host countries.

I had never before taken a stand in the discussion but now I asked for the floor and declared my opinion. We don't have enough experience. Before proceeding, the most important thing to do, I said, is to formulate rules for the two techniques, and see how they work in practice.

A Working Group was formed under the chairmanship of 1968 Olympic champion Odd Martinsen of Norway. By April 1986 it delivered a framework for the future acceptable not only to the FIS Council, but also to the entire cross-country world. Biathlon and Nordic Combined moved swiftly. The two sports chose freestyle for their competitions.

A major problem remained, however. How to police the

classical competitions so that the racers didn't cheat by skating? One faction thought the classics would be self-policing. The athletes themselves would act as police, reporting incidents of racers breaking out of the kick and stride to skate. Swiss journalist Toni Noetzli, on the other hand, wrote in the influential *Sport Zurich* that self-policing would never work. The winner will not necessarily be the best athlete, but the one who escaped observation and did not get caught skating. As a result of track police, there will be protests, disqualifications and endless appeals. "It will be the death of cross-country skiing," wrote Noetzli. Even to this day, America's Bill Koch agrees. "For the first time, cross-country skiing became a judged event, the woods filled with police looking for skating violations. The very nature of cross-country skiing changed."

Koch's and Noetzli's worst fears of an entanglement of jury decisions, however, were not realized. The 1985-86 competitive World Cup season produced no major protests. Satisfied with the progress, the FIS Council in May, 1986, took formal action. After 63 years of World Championship and Olympic cross-country skiing, the FIS voted for revolution. It officially divided the sport into classic and freestyle disciplines.

For the 1987 FIS World Nordic Championships at Oberstdorf, Germany, and for the 1988 Olympic Winter Games at Calgary, Canada, the men's 15 and 30 kilometer races would be classic, no-skating races; the

50 kilometer and the relay (four men each racing 10-kilometers) would be freestyle, with unlimited skating allowed. The women's 5 and 10 kilometer races would be classic; the 20 kilometer and the relay (four women each racing 5 kilometers)

For those who wondered how different nations would perform in the freshly transformed sport, surprise was in store. At the 1987 World Championships, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) did not participate at all in the classic races. The East Germans believed that classic cross-country was finished as a discipline. With their focus entirely on freestyle, wearing tight-fitting, streamlined suits, both men and women were expected to dominate the 50-kilometer and relay races. But the East Germans failed miserably, and the top coach was fired.

Italy too had been unenthusiastic about the continuance of races in which skating was prohibited. Yet to everyone's astonishment the Italian cross-country racer Marco Alberello won the gold medal in the 15-kilometer classic at Oberstdorf. As a result, Italy came around to favor both classic as well as freestyle. And so did the rest of the world.

The sport of cross-country was uprooted, shaken, renewed. The Nordic Combined and Biathlon adopted skating. Recreational skiers took it up. Nordic fashion switched from classic knickers to sleek, tight-fitting pants

and jackets that suited the faster speeds and dynamic athleticism of skating.

Nor was the rapid change followed by a pause. The spontaneous success, together with the FIS's desire to discourage specialization in classic or freestyle, inspired the idea of combining the two in one competition, which led to the 1990 introduction of the Pursuit. The finish order of one establishes the start order for a second race. The leader from the first race or from a jumping competition becomes the hare chased. The Pursuit result is a tumultuous finish, appealing to spectators and television.

Nordic skiing has been changed forever. The decision-making, in the end, was wise. I am happy to have been involved in re-invention of what is now the world's most dynamic sport.

Author Bengt Erik Bengtsson, retired, lives today in his native Sweden. His job at the FIS is now divided into cross-country, jumping and Nordic combined. Special thanks to Bill Koch and ISHA editorial board member John Fry for their contribution to the editing.