

Skating, Siitonen and Koch

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The question is often discussed: who invented skating, and when? In Central Europe the advent of skating is often attributed to the great Finnish skier Pauli Siitonen, whilst in North America it is Bill Koch who is looked to as the originator of the new techniques.

In fact, skating has been with us for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The picture below of a Lapp skier from about 1675 shows clearly that he was using skis of uneven length: a short ski for propulsion and a long ski for gliding. Standing on the long ski and pushing on the shorter ski, the skier progressed by means of a single-sided skating step.

Skating remained with us for many years and was in regular use in the earlier part of the 20th Century, when the alpine disciplines were beginning to break away from the traditional nordic events. In 1936 Hallberg and Mueckenbruenn, in their book 'The Complete Book of Skiing' illustrated skating in its double-sided form:

For decades the skating techniques lay forgotten or ignored by racers, but in the 1970s they were reintroduced by Pauli Siitonen, whose contribution to popular racing and to cross-country skiing in general cannot be over-estimated.

Siitonen was a police officer from Helsinki who developed his skiing skills in southern Finland where there is little snow during the winter. He was already a promising skier as a junior, but his first successes came not in cross-country, but in ski-orienteeing, in which he won the bronze medal in the Finnish Championships long distance (25 km) in 1965 and 1966. Tough and relentless, Siitonen trained hard but real success did not come until 1967, when he was already 29 years of age. In 1968 he participated in the World championships in Grenoble, finishing 19th after problems with his waxing.

As he got older, Siitonen's interest turned to ski marathons. During his time as a ski-orienteer, Siitonen had learned to ski using single-sided free technique whilst reading the map and navigating. He started to use the same skiing style whilst touring the world taking part in marathon races. Before long, people were calling the age-old technique the 'Siitonen Step'.

This technique, together with Siitonen's natural ability and training, brought him huge success. His first big win was the Marcialonga in 1972 and the next year he won Vasaloppet. For the next ten years he was rarely off the podium in the major ski marathons, winning the Finlandia-hiihto 5 times, Koenig Ludwig Lauf 6 times and Dolomitenlauf in addition to the two victories mentioned above.

Other skiers began to copy Siitonen and in the early years of the Worldloppet Cup the winners frequently resorted to the Siitonen Step, as here in La Transjurassienne:

Now we must turn to the other side of the Atlantic.

Bill Koch was born in Brattleboro, Vermont, a state noted for its downhill skiers. He originally chose to compete in Nordic Combined, a discipline featuring cross-country skiing and jumping.

When Koch was 16 he tried out for the US Nordic Combined team as well as the Olympic cross-country team, and during the mid-point of both trials, was asked by the ski authorities to choose between them. He chose Nordic Combined but in his final qualifying event he fell, broke a ski and came in sixth, not high enough to make the team.

Koch decided to concentrate on cross-country skiing from then on. Two years later, at the age of eighteen, he became the first American to win a medal in international competition when he finished third in the 15 km event at the European Junior World Championships.

Koch made the US 1976 Olympic team as a cross-country skier and in Innsbruck, Austria, became the first American to win an Olympic medal in cross-country skiing, finishing second in the 30 km race. His time was 1 hr 31 mins 59 secs; the winner Sergiy Savaliev of the USSR finished in 1.30:29. In 1982, Koch became the first American to win a medal in a World Championship cross-country event when he finished third in the 30 km race in Oslo. In the same year he won the overall FIS Cross-Country World Cup title.

After the 1980 Olympics, Koch began working on his endurance, training at longer distances. In 1981 he won the Engadin Skimarathon, employing the same techniques used by Siitonen, now being called the Marathon Skate in North America. He also began to experiment with a 'new' technique borrowed from speed skaters, holding his skis at an angle with the tips outward and pushing off the inside edge. He is said to have been passed by a skier using this technique on a lake in Sweden and he immediately realised its potential. The new technique made his times faster by around 10 percent.

The new skating technique was not immediately accepted by everybody; some officials tried to ban its use and others simply added so much vertical climb to courses that the technique was unusable. Some World Cup competition organisers tried to build up 'Snow Walls' along the classical tracks, but finally FIS, officials and organisers had to accept the evolution. In 1986 Koch's fight to introduce the new skating style was victorious. The World Cup officials decided to allow his skating technique, but to hold separate races for those skiers using the new skating stride and those using the classical diagonal stride.





◀ Pauli Siitonen



PHOTO: TOM KELLY

Thanks to the touristic importance of cross-country skiing, ski resorts were able to prepare better and wider tracks for skating; this was a big help in the evolution of the new techniques, as were the development of more specific skis, poles, boots and bindings and the improvement of teaching practices.

Bill Koch retired temporarily in 1987, but came back to compete for the US in the 1992 Albertville Olympics. He did not medal at those Olympics, but was chosen to carry his national flag during the opening ceremony.

After moving to Ashland, Oregon with his wife Kathy and their two children, Koch returned to Hawaii, where he skis the sand and teaches other skiers, ranging from complete novices to experienced snow skiers, how to sand ski. Always an innovator, he continues to offer sand skiing training camps several times a year.

So who started skating? As we have seen, it has been a long and gradual process of evolution, a process to which a Scandinavian – Pauli Siitonen – and an American – Bill Koch – have surely been the most significant contributors.

Bill Koch





Bill Koch (USA)