

SKATING REVOLUTION HOLDS MORE SURPRISES

by Ennis Duling

The Skating Revolution has accelerated through the summer and fall. Variations on the V-skate have multiplied while the marathon skate's usefulness has been questioned. Shorter ski lengths have now been joined by dramatically longer poles. Coaches predict techniques that were winning races at the end of last season now form only a part of an accomplished racer's repertoire, and probably not the most important part.

It is a time of confusion, experimentation, and, for individuals and teams that can adapt and innovate, great opportunity. Dan Simoneau, who shook up the world with a second-place on "hairies" at the '82 Falun World Cup, said, "Someone could be really creative, win a race and be famous forever."

"Skiers should work on different ways of using new and old techniques," said U.S. Ski Team assistant women's coach Torbjorn Karlsen, who led a small contingent of Americans to Austria's Dachstein Glacier this fall. "I don't think you can be a good skier without all techniques."

Coaches and racers are discussing and experimenting with nearly a dozen variations on skating. On some points there seems to be general agreement. On others, a consensus may not be reached until the results of the opening World Cups have been analyzed, if then.

Bruce Likly of the U.S. team captures the feel of cross-country racing in the fall of 1985: "The sport is at a crossroads. There's more change in a matter of weeks than we've ever seen. People are learning the sport all over again."

Marathon Skate. In the past few months knowledgeable coaches have termed the marathon skate — the technique that began the Skating Revolution — everything from "pretty well obsolete" to "history".

Canadian head coach Marty Hall believes the technique will be used from three to 10 percent of the time, usually by racers who are not well enough conditioned to race an entire course with the newer techniques. Karlsen estimates a racer might marathon skate for no more than five minutes in a 15km. And Bill Koch, the man who brought the marathon skate to World Cup racing, said "I don't think there'll be a lot of marathon skating. If there is ample room for other techniques."

One result of the FIS meeting in Annecy, France, early in October was agreement that freestyle World Cup courses should have tracks on both sides of a central rolled area, thus allowing a glide track for marathon skating.

At the same time, training is being done on new marathon skating patterns which allow the technique to be performed without track. The approach is to alternate marathon skate steps: marathon skate left, marathon skate right or two left, two right, or left, right, traditional doublepole.

Doublepole with each V-skate step. This technique, which has been developed since last spring may become central in freestyle racing — if it does not prove too exhausting.

Sue Long, one of two U.S. team racers to train at Dachstein, came back convinced of the technique's importance. "It feels more efficient and smooth," she said. "It's balanced. I can cruise along doing it. You can vary the strides and tempo like in diagonal."

Of the European ski powers, the Norwegians seem to have worked the most on this technique. On Dachstein Karlsen set up a session in which American cameramen videotaped former world champion Oddvar Brae doing this latest step.

The Canadians are also stressing a doublepole on each V-skate, a technique they have named the one-skate. Team '92 coach Jack Sasseville, part of a 22 racer Canadian

presence on Dachstein, said, "This is the most powerful and fastest, but what about the energy costs?"

Work is also being done on doublepoling twice on each V-skate step, and on including a traditional doublepole in the pattern.

All coaches agree that whatever mix of freestyle technique comes to predominate, upper body strength will play an increasing role.

Doublepole every other V-skate step. "After last year it looked like the technique for the upcoming season," said Karlsen. "But I don't think that's the case any longer."

This technique comes in several variations. The slightly staggered pole plant and strong side skate, which predominated at last year's Scandinavian World Cups, has been compared by University of Alaska/Fairbanks coach John Estle to the way Marty Feldman walked in the movie *Young Frankenstein*. It can also be performed with equal pole plants and no strong aids as it was long before the advent of modern cross-country skating.

Sverre Caldwell, coach at the Stratton Mountain School, and his racers have been experimenting with a variation he calls "long-short." One side of the V is shorter, and the racer doublepoles to a long glide on the other leg of the V.

On the Dachstein Glacier, the Swedes, including Gunde Svan, seemed to be doing the most work on the staggered technique. Most coaches believe it will remain useful, especially on steep hills.

Sasseville commented on the effect the Dachstein camp had on all teams. "Everybody had their eyes open. People who were doing one thing when they arrived left able to do all."

Singlepole with every V-skate. Coaches and racers appear to agree the so-called diagonal V-skate is no longer competitive for top racers.

Ski length. Men are favoring 200cm, women 190cm or shorter.

Pole length. Recommendations vary from 5cm to 20cm above traditional length. The rules of thumb are the stronger the racer, the longer the poles; the flatter the course, the longer the poles.

Ski teams will be carrying two or three sets of long poles for each racer.

FIS regulations allow poles up to body height in length. There is speculation that someone, perhaps a woman, might attempt to race with such poles.

U.S. head coach Mike Gallagher commented on the state of cross-country: "Changes are occurring fast and furiously. There are now a tremendous number of skating strides, determined by the ability and the power of the skier and the snow conditions and the terrain." With a laugh he cautioned against any attempt to define winning technique. "You know whatever you write will be out-of-date before it's printed."