

## **THE RISE OF THE SLOPES**

**Maria Loftus**

1982 saw the unusual phenomenon of a British skier, Konrad Bartelski, emerging as almost a household name. The venue for his triumph, Val Gardena, where he came second in the Men's Downhill, may seem a far cry from the terraces of Wembley, the setting for what has historically been our mass sport. However, with television assuming a central role in providing spectator sport and giving attention to a wider range of sporting interests plus increased cooperation between the networks on a world scale, there is now greater coverage of the events of world class skiing. Saturday sports programmes through the winter generally include live skiing transmissions and at tea time on Sunday you can tune in to watch highlights from the three disciplines of Alpine sports, Slalom, Giant Slalom and Downhill Racing. As a result skiing as a spectator sport is growing in popularity. The latest survey carried out by the British Market Research Bureau<sup>1</sup> shows that 30.5% of adults questioned liked to watch it on television which

<sup>1</sup> Target Group Index

compares favourably with the number for football (38.7%).

If the popular BBC2 programme *Ski Sunday* has done much to promote skiing then the standard of commentary, which has improved over the years, has also helped. Even the most confirmed critic would be hard pushed to describe David Vine as uninformed.

Given increased exposure it is not difficult to see why, according to this survey, skiing now has the edge on golf, swimming and cricket. Essentially it provides all the elements of a compelling spectacle: speed and danger combined with dramatic action. John Samuel, the sports editor of *The Guardian*, recently described one of skiing's most famous races, The Mahnenkamm Downhill, as 'not simply one of the great events of ski racing', but 'one of the classic occasions of world sport'.

Although watching sport continues to be a very popular pastime, there has been a swing away from the passive spectator lifestyle in favour of active participation. More people have been prepared to try out a wider range of sporting activities and allocate a greater proportion of their income to these.

This may help to explain the growth of skiing as a recreational activity. The number of people in Britain taking skiing holidays has grown considerably and an estimated 16m people in the UK now describe themselves as skiers. With the recession curtailing holidays and the rest of the winter holiday market static, a number of tour operators have switched to skiing as an area of expansion.

To understand the attractions of a skiing holiday we should be aware of the revolution that has occurred in the pattern of leisure during the last decade. To large sections of the population concentrated in our cities, activities like skiing which involve movement, the acquisition of physical skills and the overcoming of natural obstacles have a strong and growing appeal. Set as it is in beautiful natural surroundings, skiing can provide a release from the tensions of modern living. Moreover, people have come to regard physical activity as an essential ingredient of a healthy life and to perceive recreation as having the potential for achievement of personal goals.

This then provides part of the background to the steady increase in the number of people in the UK taking Alpine skiing holidays over the last few years. No firm figures exist, but it can be estimated that in 1950 it was 20,000 in 1960 70,000, in 1970 120,000 and this season about 450,000 (of whom 150,000 will be in school groups which is now an important part of the market).



Our own domestic industry has seen a similar expansion. The four Scottish ski resorts now attract between them 50,000 visitors a year which does not include the large numbers of Scots who regularly ski. Glenshee alone has the capacity to handle 9,000 an hour and has recently invested in a snow making machine. If skiing on artificial snow seems contrived, skiers in this country are also prepared to ski on plastic, much to the amusement of the French. We have more dry slopes than any other country in the world, nearly 90 sited throughout the UK and in 1980-81 alone two million hours of individual skiing took place on them.

The growing numbers of people now taking to their skis — particularly in the Alps — reflects a widening of the social constituency from which skiers are drawn. Though skiing, and Alpine skiing in particular, is not a cheap sport and thus remains more accessible to higher income groups, it can certainly no longer be said to be the exclusive playground of the rich or jet set.

Growth in the British ski market has been paralleled by the expansion of skiing in Western and Eastern Europe, N America and Japan. But its development in the Alps — as the main centre of skiing in Europe — is of particular interest. In addition to an expanding holiday trade, the cult of the long weekend has played an important role. Throughout the season, Friday nights see the Gare de Lyons in Paris packed with skiers boarding overnight trains to the Alps and also a major exodus of motorists from large cities such as Milan and Munich to the many resorts all within driving distance.

The development of Alpine skiing has required large sums of money, much of which has come from private ski entrepre-

neurs. But generally governments and local councils have been no less eager to lend their support, seeing the potential for the economic development of areas which otherwise are remote, depressed and depopulating. Thus the last decade or so has witnessed the higher reaches of the mountains of the Alps being opened up by vast networks of lifts, whilst the quantity and quality of pistes to be skied has been extended by the armies of Ratrac machines beating down tons of snow.

Those with an interest in conservation may have watched these Alpine developments with apprehension. However, there seems to have been little of the active opposition from environmentalists so strong in the States and recently so effective in Scotland, where the Secretary of State has turned down a request for the development of Lurcher Gully in the Cairngorms. Part of the reason for this (though by no means the only one) may be a degree of co-operation between ski interests and conservationists. In the French resort of Meribel, for example, a recently installed complex of gondola lifts involved pylons being flown in at considerable expense by helicopter to avoid tractors and heavy lorries ripping up the valley.

Skiing has now arrived as one of Europe's most popular sports. Obviously the opportunities for the English and Welsh are more restricted than for most people in continental Europe or Scotland. Nevertheless, even in these countries there has been a big increase. Hopefully over the next decade further expansion will widen the social constituency of skiers even further as the relative price of skiing falls and the appetite of a new generation is whetted through school ski holidays.