

HISTORY OF CROSS COUNTRY SKIING

BY

KAARE ASKILDT

The word “Ski” comes from the Old Norse “Skid,” meaning a board or a piece of split wood. Archeological finds show that skis have been used in large parts of Siberia and Northern Europe for 5-6000 years.

A Viking rune stone carving discovered in 1930 in a cave at Rødøy in Northern Norway depicts a skier and has been dated back to 5000BC. Skis found in peat bogs in both Norway and Sweden are believed to be from year 400. The Vikings were avid skiers; they had to be, as it was one of the main modes of transportation in Scandinavia in the winter time. They used a long ski for gliding and a short ski for pushing (somewhat like our modern free style technique). They used animal pelts or bees wax for gliding and grip. They only had one pole, which was used to push with. The pole was a multi tool, as it could also be used as a lance, and the flared end was detachable and used as a drinking vessel.

Very little has been written in the Norwegian Sagas about skiing. However, Snorre Sturlason writes in his Saga about the Norse God Ull being the best skier and archer. In the Ragnadråpa Saga from the 9th century, the bard Brage Bodason writes about the Norse Goddess Skade who could ski and use a bow and arrow.

Norway’s King Olav I (better known as Olav Tryggvason ruled Norway 995 – 1000) was described as a fine sportsman both on land and sea. “He skies faster than any other man,” it was stated in the Kings Saga. The Kings Saga tells us that skiing was also mastered by King Harald Hardråde, (ruled Norway 1045 – 1066). The Kings Saga goes on to describe a famous competition where a young man named Heming challenged King Harald. King Harald found himself matched stride for stride by young Heming, who won the race.

In 1206 the Kings Saga describes how the Birkebeiners saved the 2 years old infant Prince Håkon Håkonsson from certain death by the Baglers. Two of the Birkebeiners’ best skiers, Torstein Skjevla and Skjervald Skrukka, skied the little Prince Håkon across two mountain ranges from Lillehammer to safety in Rena. Håkon Håkonsson, (ruled Norway 1217 – 1263) is to date the longest reigning Norwegian monarch in the history of Norway. King Magnus Lagabøte’s (ruled Norway 1263 – 1280) land laws forbade skiers to hunt moose.

A little bit of Norwegian history is necessary to put modern skiing in the proper perspective. Norway came under Danish rule after the collapse of the Kalmar Union. During the seven years war in 1564, the Swedish army skied to Trondheim and occupied the area until the Norwegian army arrived on foot. This is the first recorded history of skis being used by any army. By the way, the Norwegians sent the Swedes packing! The literary elite of Norway wanted

independence and wrote the Norwegian Constitution in 1814, which was proclaimed at Eidsvoll May 17th the same year. The Constitution is based in part on both the French and American Constitutions, but did call for a Monarch as the supreme head of state. The Norwegians were in the process of negotiating their independence from Denmark, however, after the defeat of Napoleon, Norway was ceded to Sweden.

King Karl II of Sweden wanted a Norwegian troop as his King's guard, alongside his Swedish troop. The Norwegian troop brought along their skis, something that the Swedish troop were not using. The Swedish troop equipped themselves with skis as well, so as to be equal to the Norwegians. The very first recorded international skiing competition was held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1816, as a result of a challenge by the Swedish troop. The Norwegians accepted the challenge on the condition that sharp shooting would be part of the challenge. Thus, the very first international skiing competition was indeed a biathlon event, which of course was won by the Norwegians, or so the legend goes. The first officially recorded cross country skiing competition was held in the northern city of Tromsø, Norway in 1843.

The Norwegian elite still wanted independence, and searched all over Norway in an attempt to find a true blue blooded Norwegian of Royal Heritage, but had no luck. Their research showed that Danish Prince Carl was descendant of King Olav Tryggvason, and explorer Fridtjof Nansen was sent to Copenhagen to ask Prince Carl to accept the Norwegian throne. The union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905 and Prince Carl took the name King Håkon VII of Norway.

The army skis were totally flat with an even width from tip to tail. The bindings were sort of a big loop to fit the toes of the boots. It was easy to get in and out of the bindings, but the boots also tended to slip out of the bindings while skiing. The skis were pine tarred to make them waterproof, and animal pelts were usually used for both kick and glide.

The explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1862 – 1930) increased the awareness of skiing with the publication of his book describing his 500-kilometer ski trek crossing the south of Greenland. Fridtjof Nansen was quoted in 1930, saying *skiing is the most national of all our Norwegian sports*.

The first official Nordic Combined (cross country skiing and ski jumping) competition was held at the Holmenkollen ski arena near the capital Christiania (now named Oslo) in 1893, it was to become the first of the annual Holmenkollen Ski Festival.

The pioneer of modern skiing is considered to be Sondre Norheim (1825 – 1897), from the “fylke” (province) of Telemark, Norway. He had developed a new type of ski with a new binding consisting of a toe loop and heel strap. The skis were equally wide at the tip and tail, but with a side cut making them narrower at the waist (middle) where the binding was mounted. The skis were cambered so as to glide only on the shovel at the tip and the tail behind the waist. The skis were much more maneuverable on the downhill than the skis currently in use. From then on, all skis would be made with camber and side cut.

Sondre Norheim wanted to show the rest of Norway his new skis and his new skiing technique. The Swedish King Oscar I (the King on the sardine can, ruled Norway 1844 – 1859), was going to visit Christiania in January 1845. Sondre had requested and gotten permission to make a public skiing demonstration with the King present. Sondre dazzled everyone with his new skis and skiing technique. He made many turns down the hill, and these turns are still being used by today's skiers. The Telemark Turn is named after his home "fylke" (province), and the Stem Christie is named after Christinia (Oslo), the capital of Norway. Sondre also pioneered skiing in the United States of America. He emigrated to North Dakota in 1884, where lived on a small farm. He is considered the "father" of Telemark Skiing.

Scandinavia, especially Norway, were the leading nations in all cross-country skiing competitions up to the late 1960's when Fischer developed a wood ski with a synthetic base. All the ski manufacturers in Norway "poo pooed" the synthetic base, and had a small victory when Norwegian skier Pål Tyldum won the prestigious Holmenkollen 50 km race on wooden skis in 1969, beating out the other Europeans and North American skiers on synthetic base skis. By the way Canadian cross-country skier Pierre Harvey, won the Holmenkollen 50 km in 1988.

Fischer and other German, Austrian and French ski manufacturers continued to improve on their synthetic bases, and the Norwegians soon were "outskied" by the middle European competitors. The manufacturers continued the development of lighter skis, and have now developed super light totally synthetic skis. The cost of switching from wood to synthetic materials caused many of the traditional Norwegian ski manufacturers to close their plants. Today there is only one Norwegian ski manufacturer left in Norway, Madshus Ski Fabrikk A/S.

Cross-country skiing really took off in Canada in the 50's and 60's, when the Father of Canadian cross-country skiing, Hermann Johannsen, also known as "Jack Rabbit Johannsen," started promoting skiing wherever he travelled in Canada. "Jack Rabbit Johannsen," was an engineer by trade, and emigrated to Canada in 1928.

Cross-country skiing for blind and visually impaired was introduced in British Columbia by Annar Jacobsen in 1979, and in Alberta the same year by Lillian Ofstad in Calgary and Kaare Askildt in Edmonton. Ski For Light Canada Inc. a Son's of Norway outreach program dedicated to making cross country skiing available to blind and visually impaired, was incorporated in 1981 with Kaare Askildt serving as the first president.