

Winter sports - yesterday and today

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WINTER SPORTS — YESTERDAY AND TODAY

By the late Lord Brabazon of Tara

When I was a young Member of Parliament, round about 1919, I used to talk to Stanley Baldwin, before he was Prime Minister, as he was at one time a constant and early visitor to St. Moritz, and I was a rather good rider of the Cresta at that time.

I was so interested in the fact that he and his family took the train to Coire in Switzerland, then took the diligence up to Tiefencastel and stayed the night there, and then went on the next day to St. Moritz.

Now why did they do that? Broadly speaking it was the climate of the Engadine — temperature down to nearly zero, no stir of wind at all, and a broiling sun that nearly cooked you. This went on, so he said, for weeks.

I am loth to say it but things are not quite the same to-day. True, of course, we do have the most exquisite days, but it would be rare to have them continuously for weeks. Nor would the place be revitalised by new snow. I suppose like all things climates change gently for some reasons or another, not, I believe, as the result of atomic bombs or radio.

Annual Contest

By no stretch of imagination were there any winter sports compared with the present day. The only thing one could do, of course, was to skate. There were the two styles, the old English rather poker-like style, which has gone out, I regret to say, except in Manchester; and the Continental style, which at that time was looked upon as rather cissy for a man, with its ballet-like postures.

There was curling, and there was bandi, a game rather like hockey on the ice, and lugeing. It is interesting to note that there were two luge runs; one, the great one, at Klosters by Davos, and another built later at St. Moritz. Annually there was a great contest between St. Moritz and Klosters. Klosters eventually closed, but the run at St. Moritz went on, eventually to become the great Cresta.

It started as a snow run, just a track in 1884. Now it is an ice track from top to bottom, and a very specialised form of amusement. It is interesting to note that when to-day you get your colours on the Cresta (a very great honour), it means that you have been chosen as one of the eight to compete against the now hypothetical team from Klosters.

As for ski-ing, what must not be forgotten is that whereas in my day you started at seven o'clock in the morning, climbed solidly until one, had lunch and then ski-ed down, now you can go up practically any slope by one of the electrical devices, which ascend in every direction where there is any ski-ing at all. An old fogey might condemn that, but I do not: I think your energies should be concentrated on ski-ing and not climbing up, which is, I always thought, the most unenjoyable form of amusement.

I think I have indulged in every form of winter sport, from curling to bandi, hockey on the ice, even ski-jumping, in fact everything except the Bob Run. I have always taken the view that if I steer the Bob I am not entitled to take any risk with anybody sitting at the back, just as I would not want anybody to take a risk with me sitting at the back, so that my activities down a run have been confined to the Cresta. You go down by yourself, and you alone are responsible for your own troubles.

You are not risking your life (it is not as dangerous as that) but you are certainly indulging in a very advanced form of technique which may land you in some difficulty if you have a bad fall, but otherwise it is comparatively safe. And there is one curious thing about it — once you have done it you always want to go down again.

Always refreshing

The technique and talk between riders is always very refreshing, as you walk up, or used to walk up in the old days, with perfect strangers. You discuss how you took this bank, and how you ought to have come off that bank, in a technical way which was very attractive, and is so to-day.

Far from it being neglected now through lack of people who might be thought to prefer ski-ing, it has appealed more and more to the British than to anybody else, although of course we have a lot of other nationalities going down. It has become so popular now that at the peak of the season you find almost a hundred splendid English youth (in my opinion the salt of the earth) and others, all wanting to have a run down this great track.

Girls' Skill

What has always struck me in recent years is the astonishing skill of the girls in ski-ing. Admittedly I think modern ski equipment has made it easier. Skis are shorter and have metal edges, and the bindings to the boots are much better. A curious thing, however, is that most people now whizz down polished slopes rather than hunt for virgin snow as we were taught to do.

When ski-ing first started when I was at St. Moritz, girls tried to ski in skirts down to their ankles. The skirts became shorter — to the knee. This seemed to be better, but after a fall it left an awkwardly situated wad of snow to melt slowly — very unpleasant, I am told. After the adoption of breeches of the most appalling appearance, came the very baggy trousers, finally to be superseded by the modern very smart stretch ski-type, used by both sexes, with a band below the foot. This revealed to the world that a woman is a biped. This has led to woman's after-ski kit, which must be seen to be believed, but it is a clear indication that all winter sports do not take place out of doors.

(By courtesy "St. Moritz Courier".)