

Ski-ing Switzerland

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SKI-ING IN SWITZERLAND

By JOSEPH RENGGLI

The well known Swiss sports journalist and radio commentator Joseph Renggli tells here the history of the winter sports country of Switzerland. In an entertaining and sporting way he solves a riddle: how the "oldest democracy in the world" has made ski-ing into a democratic institution during the last seventy years. Not only are the members of the 750 ski clubs, but also all other Swiss giving concrete proof to the advertising slogan, "Everybody skies in Switzerland".

The Roots are in Glarus

If one were to ask the directors of the tourist offices of the best known Swiss winter sports resorts, from what location did the sport of ski-ing conquer Switzerland, then probably at least six of these directors would claim this honour for their resorts. But they would all do so unjustly. The first ski-ing took place neither in St. Moritz nor Zermatt, neither in Davos nor Grindelwald, neither in Arosa nor Wengen. At the very beginning of the movement stands the small cantonal capital of Glarus at the foot of the Glärnisch, in the eastern part of Switzerland. To be sure, Glarus is never mentioned in the lists of winter sports areas. A person who would want to pass his ski-holiday there nowadays would probably be stared at with as much astonishment as someone who wanted to travel to Alice Springs for "surf-riding". — Nevertheless, completely disregarded, the roots of Swiss ski-ing lay in Glarus. To be specific, a young man named Christoph Iselin lived there. He had read Nansen's description, "On Snowshoes Through Greenland", and was so excited by what he had read that he started immediately to try to fashion a pair of ski-like boards and began to make friends for this new means of locomotion. The activity of this pioneer can be compared with the motion of a growing wave. In Glarus the first ski-club was formed in 1893. Eleven years later the group acted as godfather to the Swiss Ski Association and also organized the first Swiss ski races.

Yearning for Snow

The rapid development of Switzerland to a widely praised winter sports area took place during the second quarter of the twentieth century. And the impetus for this development came from abroad. As it was an Englishman who first climbed our beloved mountain, the Matterhorn, it was also a Britisher who brought us alpine ski-ing. Sir Arnold Lunn, still today a true disciple of his beloved mountains, succeeded in obtaining official recognition of downhill and slalom at an International Ski Association Congress. Since 1929 that signified a practically unceasing run on the Swiss mountains in winter. To these mountains Lunn dedicated the following passage in his book. "Those who were born and have grown up in the mountains take their inheritance of beauty for granted. And those who have never seen the mountains don't know what they must do without. However, a child whose time is divided between London and the Alps must pay for his knowledge of both worlds with moments of bitter doubt and with

months of nagging homesickness for his short weeks in paradise."

Now, since 1930, the Swiss have used their Alps extensively, though for centuries they had maintained a reverent distance from the mountains in order not to get into disfavour with the legendary spirits of the mountains. At last the mountains and the snow began to pay interest. A normal winter brings the Swiss tourist industry more than 700 million francs, the winter hotel bed occupancy has climbed to seven million. Practically on every snow-certain hill which can be made suitable for ski-ing, there is one of the country's 600 mechanised ski-lifts. In two decades the motorization of the mountains has completely changed the character of ski-ing in Switzerland. In the year 1934 it was possible to have a single downhill run on a Sunday afternoon while one first had to walk up the mountain. Now during the same time period it is possible to make at least twenty downhill runs. The answer to the question, why Switzerland, which has the thickest ski-lift net, has only alpine ski-racers and practically no cross country racers, has already been explained.

A Democratic Sport — but without Government Financing

In the same way that during the past two decades the number of descents was increased and the possibilities for trail ski-ing in the remote mountains were expanded, the number of Swiss skiers has also grown. A few years ago there was a slogan, "Everybody skies in Switzerland", making the rounds. It was, like most advertising slogans, a little bit exaggerated, but now it is coming ever closer to reality. More than half a million Swiss are now active skiers. Of this group about one-fifth belong to a winter sports club. The most important organization in this area remains now, as it was previously, the sixty-year-old Swiss Ski Association. As a member of the Fédération Internationale de Ski, it is responsible for looking after national and international racing rules, and also sees to it, together with the Swiss Alpine Club and the Friends of Nature, that in spite of mechanised means of transportation, touring does not die out altogether. They also participate in efforts to achieve well equipped safety patrols on heavily frequented ski-trails. In addition, the Swiss Ski Association owns more than a hundred ski huts located in all mountainous parts of Switzerland. These provide members with inexpensive dormitory style accommodations and guarantee in addition the availability of facilities to prepare food and beverages which the hikers have brought with them. In general the mountain huts of the Swiss Ski Association are primarily in the "Voralpine" (Pre-Alpine) areas and in the Jura while the 41-year older Swiss Alpine Club which is also concerned with ski-ing during the winter concentrates on the higher regions. The Swiss Ski Association undertakes a great deal, it undertakes so much for the 60,000 members of its 750 different clubs that usually they have too little money to support the ski racers. Year after year the problem of financial backing occurs when the Swiss National Ski Team must be sent abroad for a long period of time. For example, only forty-five days before the start of the 1964 Olympic Games in Innsbruck, the Swiss Ski Association did not know where the money for the additional training camps and preliminary races would come from. Government contributions to sport delegations are not given in Switzerland on principle — and that is a good thing — for the Swiss do not like government supported athletics. The money would be helpful, to be sure, but not the orders and requests which would probably

accompany such governmental financial contributions. At the last minute it was possible to work out a means of financing Swiss participation in the ski events of the 1964 Olympics. The hotel owners of the leading winter sports Canton of Grisons made a beginning by pledging a contribution of one franc for the National Ski Team for every guest bed in their hotels. And so finally the money to pay for the various training camps was raised.

The Biggest Ski School in the World

When the hotelkeepers and resorts support Swiss ski racers, they do not do it purely for sentimental reasons. Many winter sports areas receive world-wide and for all practical purposes free advertising through their best racers. During the thirties, David Zogg was World Champion and later the racer Roger Staub made the name of Arosa popular on all five continents. Now Staub spends the European summer months in Australia as director of a ski school. Also the worldly, well-known St. Moritz profited in terms of publicity from World Champion Ruedi Rominger and Olympic victor Edy Reinalter. Many of the former aces now direct the large Swiss ski schools. Here they give the younger teachers the benefit of their experience and methods they have tested in thousands of races, thus making possible a course of instruction based on the practices of the best skiers in the world. — The Swiss system is simple and effective. Every year, early in the winter, the leaders of all the 120 Swiss ski schools come together for a five days' refresher course. At this course the level of ski technique is examined, obsolete methods eliminated, new methods practised, and the method unified. After a week the 120 ski-school directors return to their quiet mountain villages which lie deep in snow. They call together their licensed ski teachers, repeat with them the entire programme, passing on their newly acquired knowledge. In this way it is possible to make certain that every guest who takes one of the approximately 1,400,000 half-day lessons given each year in Switzerland, will be receiving instruction according to the same unified Swiss ski technique. The country of the great educator Heinrich Pestalozzi is also proud of its ski schools which use the same method from A (Arosa) to Z (Zermatt). The "stem christie" of the guest from the Grand Hotel Palace in St. Moritz comes from exactly the same school as that of the boarder in the Boarding House Waldrand Mutschellen. And perhaps that is the reason why the alpine ski sport has become so popular in the oldest democracy in the world.

[S.N.T.O.]

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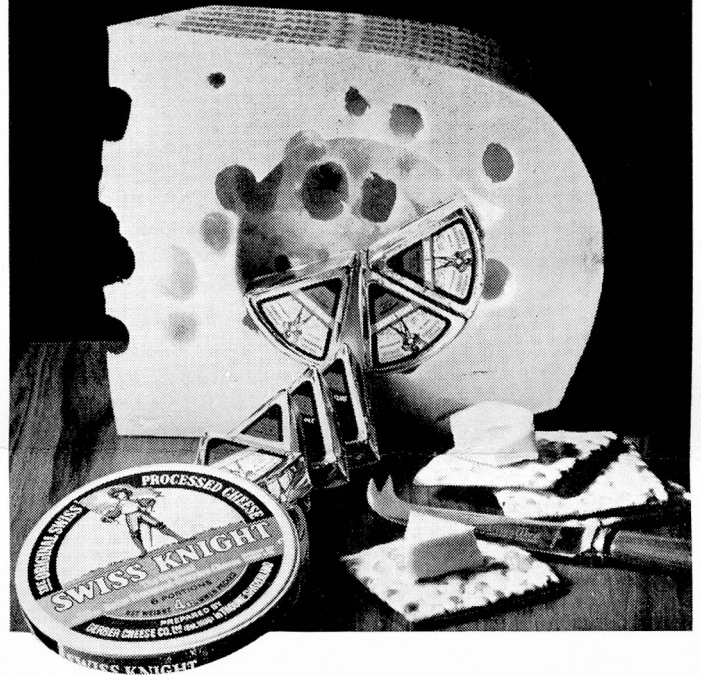
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