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A TALK WITH THE DISCOVERER OF SKI-BOBBING



It is not every day that one has the opportunity of meeting a person who can claim to have changed the quality of life of millions. Perhaps Mr. Rinaldo Jacomelli, the person I have in mind (and a relative of the Jacomellis of "Valchera" celebrity), will not subscribe to this bombastic statement. The fact remains that, by being the first man to take ski-bobbing seriously, his achievement deserves to be appraised as highly as that of, say, Mary Quant. But Mr. Rinaldo Jacomelli, an unassuming, rugged and sun-tanned little man, will probably never reach such peaks of fame—nor does he much want to.

Although ski-bobbing is hardly a decade old, it has spread like a storm over the slopes of every alpine resort and is really tending to become as common and popular as ski-ing. The wide world will never know that this new cry of our holiday civilisation sprang in the mind of an anonymous ski instructor from Montana-Crans.

Mr. Rinaldo Jacomelli, who had been tutoring bumbling resort hoppers into the rudiments of ski-ing for a number of years, was troubled by a very plain evidence—a significant proportion of winter vacationers were unoccupied and bored. Too paunchy or unadventurous to risk strapping on a pair of skis, all they would do, the weather permitting, was to go for short walks on managable snow paths perhaps to read and sunbathe in awaiting the "après-ski-ing" activities of the hotel ballroom. A way should be found, thought Mr. Jacomelli, of keeping holiday-makers busy and of helping them to enjoy themselves actively. Ski-ing had

natural limitations. A middle-aged professional man with no previous experience of ski-ing could not be expected to learn the intricacies of this sport in the short span of a holiday, certainly not well enough to enjoy exercising it. The ideal solution lay in a sport comparable to ski-ing but much easier.

Mr. Jacomelli fell on it when he heard of the isolated efforts by an Austrian, Erik Breiter, in developing snow-bicycles and eventually the original imitations of the modern ski-bob. He went to see him in 1959 and acquired from him the exclusive dealership of these contraptions in his Montana-Crans sportswear shop. Mr. Jacomelli improved Breiter's invention by devising small skis with braking crampons which the ski-bobber could shoe to balance himself and stop.

Throughout the early 60's, Mr. Jacomelli was the only sportswear dealer in the world to rent ski-bobs. But they remained a local curiosity and attracted very few volunteers indeed during the initial years. But somehow the idea caught on. Mr. Jacomelli remembers a party of Frenchmen who rented some ski-bobs just for fun. They came back enthralled in the evening—with the result that all his ski-bobs were snapped by an eager crowd on the following day. This and other similar incidents finally set the ball rolling. The virtues of the ski-bob got to the antennas of "Paris-Match", which devoted a multiple-page colour feature on it, and subsequently of French television. By this time the reputation of ski-bobbing had been firmly grounded. Mr. Jacomelli, who had begun to be pressured by other local (and jealous) sports-article dealers, decided to drop his exclusive agency for Breiter products, and the ski-bob set out on its alpine invasion.

One of Mr. Jacomelli's first and most enthusiastic pupils was the late actor Bourvil, who was fascinated by this new sport and by the ease with which he had been able to master it. Mr. Jacomelli also remembers an enraptured French general who had spoken to General De Gaulle about him and actually kindled the interest of the illustrious statesman in ski-bobbing.

The great advantages of the sport are the ease with which it can be learnt and its relative safety. *Ski-bob fahren und Knochen sparen!* . . . is what the promoters say, and they are right. The only potential dangers may be to the backbone because the seat takes the brunt of the shocks and the bumps, albeit through dampening of a saddle-spring.

Ski-bobbing is now officialised by an International Ski-bobbing Federation and can thus be said to have achieved its majority. It may well become an Olympic discipline within the next ten years. As it is, world championships are organised every two years and the next one will take place in Reno, USA, in March. European championships have also been staged for about five years and Mr. Jacomelli has won the second place in one of them.

Anybody can be familiar with ski-bobbing within a matter of hours. This compares sharply with ski-ing, which requires a full holiday or more to be mastered moderately well. Ski-bobbing may be not quite as exciting and fulfilling as ski-ing, but Mr. Jacomelli who is an expert skier finds that it is nonetheless a very complete sport, which can be developed to high degrees of proficiency. The equipment costs approximately the same as the skier's harness, and, like skis, ski-bobs are the object of constant technical improvements.

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