

Skiing and the Olympic Games

by Sigge Bergman,

honorary member of the FIS



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peace. It is also widely held that the Games have served to publicise sport in general and skiing in particular.

"It all started with skating"

The history of the Olympic Winter Games dates from well before 1924, when the first events were held in the French resort town of Chamonix. The first references to winter events are associated with the 1894 Olympic Congress in Paris which decided to include skating on the list of "desirable Olympic events".

At the 1908 Olympic Games in London figure skating made its debut. The success of this event inspired the Italians to take up, at the 1911 IOC Congress, the matter of winter sport in connection with the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm. The IOC member in Sweden, General Balck, showed no interest however ; he feared that the Nordic Games for winter sports events, programmed for 1913, would come to play second fiddle.

The matter of Olympic Winter Games was again discussed by the IOC in 1914 and most surprisingly received support from Norway, perhaps thanks to the success the Holmenkollen ski competitions had enjoyed from their inception in 1892. Also among the supporters of the Winter Games were Austria, Canada, Germany and Switzerland. Agreement was reached regarding the inclusion of skiing, skating and ice hockey. The First World War, however, temporarily halted all Olympic plans.

When finally the world fire was put out, Antwerp issued invitations to the Summer Games in 1920. As the city also had an ice palace at its disposal, figure skating was included on the programme, and, for the first time, ice hockey. Both were successful, which provided further arguments for the supporters of special Winter Games.

I am very happy to comply with the wishes of the Editor of the "Olympic Review" to provide a few lines under the above heading, all the more so as I have had the great privilege of attending in different capacities 10 of the 13 Olympic Winter Games, beginning in 1936 at Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

My aim is not to talk about the 13 individual Winter Games, space being limited, but I shall dwell briefly on the institution of the Winter Games and the great progress realised by skiing throughout the world, as a result of its inclusion on the programme.

Let me only say here that the 13 Winter Games staged between 1924 and 1989 have been tremendous sports festivals, filled with beauty, drama, excitement, joy and fraternisation contributing to the establishment of

All opposition to such a separate event was done away with at the 1921 IOC Congress in Lausanne, where a proposal by the IOC member in France, the Marquis de Polignac, was adopted, implying that “in all countries, where Olympic Games are organised and where possible, Winter Games should also be organised, which are to be under the protection of the IOC”.

At the 1923 Session in Rome, the organisers of the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad to be held the following year in Paris, presented a proposal for an “international winter sports week”, to take place in 1924 at Chamonix. And thus on 24th January 1924, the 294 competitors from 17 countries gathered in the French Alps for the first winter sports week.

The first Olympic skiing competitions were also organised, acting as a stimulus and an inspiration for the entire sport. Here, indeed, skiing had its big chance to present itself and its message to the rest of the sports world. From the very modest beginnings in Chamonix, where 102 skiers from 12 countries competed in four events (18 and 50 km, jumping and Nordic combination) skiing has more and more secured its position on the Olympic programme.

Skiing enjoyed such great success at this event that later that year also in Chamonix, the International Ski Federation (FIS) was founded. There was much lively discussion and a diversity of opinion at this skiing Congress, southern countries showing more enthusiasm than those in the north. The Swiss delegate Weber was one of the big supporters with his statement : “No sport has as much the right to be included in the Olympic Games as does skiing.” But the Nordic skiing nations were doubtful and the matter was tabled until the 1926 FIS Congress.

Olympic medal splendour

The international winter sports week in Chamonix received Olympic status first at the 1925 IOC Congress in Prague where a “magna charta” was adopted, confirming the birth of the Olympic Winter Games. The competitions in Chamonix one year before were given the numerical order of 1.

The 1926 skiing Congress in Lahti (FIN) did not reach total agreement, in spite of the

The following table shows the number of countries and participants in skiing events at all 13 Olympic Winter Games.

	Participants	Countries	Events
1924 Chamonix (FRA)	102	12	4
1928 St-Moritz (SUI)	163	16	4
1932 Lake Placid (USA)	93	12	4
1936 Garmisch-Partenkirchen (FRG)	301	27	7
1948 St-Moritz (SUI)	356	25	11
1952 Oslo (NOR)	346	29	12
1966 Cortina d'Ampezzo (ITA)	406	29	14
1960 Squaw Valley (USA)	339	27	14
1964 Innsbruck (AUT)	approx. 400	35	16
1968 Grenoble (FRA)	664	37	16
1972 Sapporo (JPN)	460	31	16
1976 Innsbruck (AUT)	562	34	16
1980 Lake Placid (USA)	not available	34	16

At the XIIIth Winter Games in Lake Placid a new chapter in Olympic skiing was written when athletes from the People's Republic of China, a new member of both the IOC and the FIS took part in the skiing events.



Chamonix : the 1924 Winter Games.

fact that the IOC had already decided on Olympic Winter Games. The Olympic idea won, but the mighty, all too traditional and conservative skiing authorities in the Nordic countries voted against ! The countries which saved the Olympic Winter Games, are well worth mentioning : Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland Romania and Switzerland, the majority was thus safe.

It did not take long before the Nordic countries as well enthusiastically took up the Olympic idea. The Games in St. Moritz and Lake Placid were enormously successful for the skiers from Finland, Norway and Sweden and thus contributed vastly to the development of skiing in the Nordic countries.

A milestone

A milestone in the Olympic history of skiing was reached at the 1936 Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, when Alpine skiing was given a place on the competition programme. The importance of the Alpine events is demonstrated by the dramatic increase in the number of skiing competitors registered since their inclusion on the programme.

Now, there is hardly a ski official or a competitor who does not dream of attending Olympic competitions. In fact, it may be said that skiing today is the very cornerstone of the Winter Games, in the same way that

athletics is the major event of the Summer Games.

Of late, world cup events have drawn tremendous interest all over the world, but the Olympic conception binds and the splendour of the Olympic medal overshadows everything else.

The programme from 4 to 16 events

It is of interest to study the development of the Olympic skiing programme over the years.

The first programme from 1924 with four events remained unchanged up until 1936 when the Nordic disciplines were augmented with a relay race of 4 × 10 km for men. Two Alpine events, a combined downhill-slalom, were also added in 1936, though medals were only awarded in the combined event.

In 1948 at St. Moritz, medals were given both in downhill and slalom, men and women, as in the Alpine combination.

At the 1952 Winter Games in Oslo, the ladies entered the battlefield in the Nordic programme with 10 km. cross-country. In the Alpine events, giant slalom was introduced for men and women. In return, the FIS agreed not to distribute medals in the Alpine combination.

Four years later in Cortina, two new events were introduced : men's 30 km and ladies'

3 x 5 km relay, and at the 1964 Games in Innsbruck still two more events, the women's 5 km and the 70 m. jump, were accepted. The programme featured at Innsbruck, consisting of 16 events, is still in force today.

The FIS now hopes that the women's 20 km competition, which is included in the FIS world championships, will also be placed on the Olympic programme. It is possible that the 1981 FIS Congress will abandon its present Alpine 3-combination for the classic combination of downhill and slalom. If so, the FIS would like to have this event as well included on the Olympic programme.

As long as new skiing events may be accepted in the programme of the Winter Games without the total number of competitors having to be increased, the IOC should find it possible to meet with the wishes of the skiers. Uncontrolled growth is alien to the Winter Games !

Collaboration IOC-FIS

In the new valid FIS "Rules for the organisation of World Skiing Championships" is to be found a confirmation of the excellent relationship existing between the IOC and the FIS. It says there : "When Olympic Winter Games are held, these shall be considered also as World Skiing Championships, provided that the same rules of qualification apply."

Such has not always been the case. When the Olympic Alpine competitions were inaugurated 44 years ago, the IOC did not permit skiing teachers of the tourist resorts to participate. They were regarded as non-amateurs in the Olympic sense of the word. The FIS protested in vain and felt a moral obligation to organise its own Alpine world championships in Innsbruck shortly after the Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

The strained relations between the IOC and the FIS from 1936 were not of long duration. The FIS had very much to lose and concern over ensuring the development of Olympic skiing prevailed. But this was not always such an easy matter. At the time when commercialism began to gain an increasingly strong grip on Alpine skiing the President of the IOC, Avery Brundage, severely attacked the entire Winter Games. He called

Alpine skiing "a poisonous tumour to be immediately operated on", he brought his mallet down on a decision to exclude the Austrian national hero Karl Schranz from Olympic participation in Sapporo, and at the IOC Session that same year in Munich he thundered in his opening statement : "A serious mistake was made when the Olympic Winter Games were founded. May they receive an honourable funeral in Denver".

As we all know there was no Denver and no funeral. Mr. Brundage's successor as President, Lord Killanin, introduced a new era of reconciliation, tolerance and collaboration with the skiing people. There was a general wish to overcome difficulties, avoid misunderstandings and work for a common goal : to keep and strengthen the Olympic movement also when it comes to winter sports. And I dare maintain that when it comes to the Olympic winter sports, skiing plays a principal part. The present close connection between the IOC and the FIS cannot be better, seeing that the FIS President also has a seat on the IOC.

The Olympic movement is currently being buffeted by political events. I feel persuaded that the entire world of skiing joins with the IOC in the defence of the Olympic Games. The five rings must not be torn apart. The Olympic fire must not be extinguished. It shall be lit again, summer and winter, every fourth year, when the IOC calls the sports youth of the world to an Olympic gathering characterised by joy and peaceful comradeship transcending all national boundaries. For the future !

S.B.

