

SKIING FOR ALL IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA



In 1968 when the first race was held, fifty two participants crossed the finishing line. Last year the number was almost 5,500. Held on the last Sunday in January, the "Jizerské Hory Mountains 50km race" has become the most popular cross-country skiing event in Czechoslovakia.

The preparations for this competition begin in the summer. It is then that the route for the course is chosen - a different one each time. It is marked out through the protected region of Jizerské Hory in North Bohemia, and the organizers from the

Lokomotiva Liberec sports club must always adapt their plans to fit in with the demands of the foresters and environmentalists. Because of this, there are no plans for a large increase in the number of participants in future, even though interest

among skiers continues to grow from year to year. In addition to this, organizing the event poses a number of problems. Indeed, accommodating five thousand people at once and providing transport to get them to the starting point in time is no easy task. And what with the unpredictable weather...

Over recent years the winter has often made fun of the organizers. In 1988, for the first time in its history, the competition did not take place, since it is impossible to ski without snow. Last year, again, the situation was tense, but this time the organizers did not give in to the eccentricities of the climate. In order to prepare the courses they brought in snow from other areas - nearly 4,500 cubic metres of it. Vaclav Foff, the technical director of the race was satisfied. The two courses, 20km for the women and 50 km for the men were ready in time.

"It's always on the Saturday that I'm most scared, even though I've been the director for fifteen years. It's always possible to find something else that needs doing, and we go on working even into the night, if it is only to eliminate the last few flaws spotted by the FIS technical delegate. On the day of the competition, we just have to wait and see how everything will turn out."

Perhaps Vaclav Foff should not be taken entirely at his word, since during the "50 km" he is possibly the busiest director in Czechoslovakia. He gets up at 4.30 a.m. and, barely one hour later, the first instructions are being relayed by loudspeaker to the fifty-five or so people who are helping with the organization: thirty members of the organizing committee itself, judges, commissioners in charge of supervising the courses, the members of the actual sports club responsible for registering the competitors, the radio communications technicians and all those who ensure that the race goes smoothly, including the staff at the refreshment points. This is a more important role than one might imagine : last year a huge quantity of food was prepared for the participants: 15,000 litres of tea,

800 kg of sausages, 720 kg of oranges, 372 kg of bread, 40 kg of salt, 139 kg of mustard, 580 kg of sugar, 12,000 croissants and 3,100 litres of soup.

On the list of competitors one finds the well-known names of skiers, climbers and other athletes from Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, or simply the names of amateurs who want to pit themselves against friends or merely endeavour to beat their personal best. In the same way, work colleagues or schoolchildren compete with one another.

Tonda Bily, a train driver but also an enthusiastic amateur skier, is one of those who could not now imagine the last Sunday in January without the fifty kilometre race. "It's not easy to take part in such a ski marathon. You can't just turn up at the start and begin the race. You need to be fit beforehand. In my case, I did a lot of running and cycling in the summer and autumn. I'd like to beat my own record. Obviously everything depends on the weather conditions and the quality of the snow. This year, I'd like my wife to take part in the race as well. But first she wants to have a practice before the competition 'In the Tracks of the Jizerské Hory Mountains 50 km' - a race held the Sunday after. Even my two sons could take part in the event."

The "Jizerské Hory Mountains 50km race" is also called the "1970 Peru expedition memorial race". This is a tribute to the memory of the Czechoslovakian climbers who were killed in 1970 in an avalanche of rocks while climbing the Huascarán in the Andes. Twenty two years ago, these same climbers had organized the race for themselves and some friends as a means of preparing for their trip and getting fit. Little did they know then that they were laying the foundations for one of the most remarkable and popular events in Czechoslovakian skiing.

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50 KM IN THE JIZERSKÉ HORY MOUNTAINS A POPULAR SKI RACE