

Volkssporting: German Roots, American Legacy

Charlene Ape-Traub

Howard University

“Volkssport” is a German word which literally translated means people’s sports and includes walking, bicycling, swimming and cross country skiing. Volkssports are family-oriented, noncompetitive activities that began in Germany. During the 1960’s central Europeans became dissatisfied with the emphasis on competitive running events. The push to win led many unfit individuals to run in races without proper conditioning. Age categories existed along with obligatory times (10 kilometers in 50 minutes) such that untrained persons could hardly fulfill them. Medal awards to the top finishers in each age and distance category encouraged people to over-stress themselves, hoping to win an award (*The American Wanderer*, 1981). After some years of frequent injuries and some deaths due to cardiovascular collapse, something needed to be done to encourage healthful participation in sports.

Representatives from Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Austria founded the Internationaler Volkssportverband (IVV) on January 14, 1968. The city of Lindau, Germany on the beautiful Bodensee was the location for this joint cooperation that now includes over 20 countries. The IVV, International Federation of People’s Sports in English, “would sponsor events of a noncompetitive nature that would be open to one and all. . . young and old alike to participate at their own pace and pleasure” (*The American Wanderer*, 1978). In the ensuing years, Germany became the country with the most participants and events and as such has contributed substantially to the growth of the IVV and volkssports today.

It is appropriate then that the American involvement with volkssporting began with German influence. Thirteen years after the first volksmarch (people’s walk) in Germany, the first American volksmarch (walkfest) was held in 1976 in Fredericksburg, a small Texas town with strong German roots nestled in the hill country. The “founding father” of volkssporting in the U.S. is Rev. Mr. Kenn Knopp, a Catholic deacon from Fredericksburg. Kenn heard about volkssports from his Aunt and Uncle, whom he visited in 1975 while in Germany researching his genealogy. He was not able to take part in a walkfest, the most popular volkssport event, but he did write to the IVV for information on putting on an event. Kenn felt that this would be an ideal activity in his German hometown of Fredericksburg as part of the Bicentennial festivities. The 230 walkers at the first USA volksmarch on June 12 and 13, 1976 proved him right. He became National Coordinator of International People’s Sports (IPS), later called the American Volkssport Association, and editor of *The American Wanderer*, the newspaper of volkssporting in the USA.

Rev. Mr. Knopp was instrumental in promoting volkssporting. His second volksmarch in

Fredericksburg (1977) had 840 walkers. Second and third clubs were organized in Dayton, Ohio, and Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Those responsible for these clubs were members of the Armed Forces who first discovered volkssporting while in Europe. Ohio conducted the first swim event in 1978, Texas the first bike event in 1978, and Colorado the first cross country ski event in 1980. This year over 500 clubs and 40,000 men, women and children have enjoyed the pleasure of volkssporting in the USA, and over 14 million in the world. There is no more wholesome way to explore the natural and man-made world than to walk, bike, or ski over its terrain.