



TYNESIDE LOIPERS

The NorthEast's Specialist
Cross Country Ski club

Newsletter
May 2011



Website: www.tynesideloipers.org.uk

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Club Events - see pp. 20-21

Thurs 19 th May	End of Season meet - Jesmond
Sunday 12 th June	Introduction to orienteering - Ashington
Thursday 23 rd June	Hay meadows walk - Allendale
13 th or 14 th July	All day bike ride
2nd/3rd July	Snow Sport England roller-ski weekend - Hetton Lyons
27 th /28 th August	Snow Sport England roller-ski weekend - Hetton Lyons

Keith Walker (Chair)

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From the editor

In this issue of the newsletter, Loipers enthuse about their winter trips in Scotland, Norway, Canada, Switzerland and Finland. Colin Blackburn introduces us to ski-orienteeing; he started by aiming high - his introduction to ski-O was the World Masters. Alasdair and Heather were pleased with their racing results. Paramjeet is back home after riding his bike from Newcastle to Delhi (unfortunately, because of lack of space, his full story had to be held over until the next issue). Finally, come and join us for our varied summer programme - and ideas and expressions of interest for next winter's trips are welcomed.

Ski touring

The Wapta Traverse: Hut to Hut in the Canadian Rockies

The Alpine Club of Canada has about 25 huts in the Rocky Mountains but the distances and terrain mean that hut-to-hut touring is often not practical. However there is one system of four huts which allow a tour to be made along the Wapta Glacier to the north of Lake Louise. The tour is known as the "Wapta Traverse". Three years ago, Alan and I, with three friends, set out to do the "Wapta Traverse" starting from Mistaya Lodge just over the Great Divide from the glacier. Although the traverse itself is not technically difficult, there is one day which needs good weather as it involves skiing up a crevassed glacier to get over a 10,000 ft pass. Unfortunately after 36 hours in a storm at the Balfour Hut, we had to retreat and leave the traverse uncompleted.

This year another opportunity arose to do the traverse and three of us from the original group were joined by four others. The intent had been to use the same guide, Andrew Langsford, who had taken us on our previous attempt. He had made all the bookings and arrangements for food etc but sadly (unbeknown to us) he had cancer and a month before the trip his condition deteriorated and he died. He had however arranged an alternative guide for us. This was Merrie-Beth who had been an assistant guide on our visit to Mistaya three years earlier but was now a fully qualified winter guide.

Due to a mix up over dates, three of us flew out to Canada on Thursday, arriving in Lake Louise at about nine in the evening to start the tour the very next morning! But everything was arranged and all we had to do was pick up our allocation of food and fit it into our packs. The huts all have cooking facilities with gas but you have to supply your own food and your own sleeping bags.

There are four huts in the system (one can be easily bypassed) but we had decided to take our time and spend 2 nights in one of the huts to increase our chances of completing the tour.

The tour starts at Peyto Lake. There is nothing there, just a parking space on the Icefields Highway. So having parked one vehicle at the finish of the traverse we drove to Peyto Lake, parked the car, unloaded our skis and packs and set off carefully (falling over with a pack on is not fun) down a tricky little trail through the forest to the lake. Next came an easy but quite long ski up the lake to where the climbing began. Initially it was quite easy but eventually we came to a rocky ridge with most of the snow blown away and this required taking the skis off, putting them on our packs and walking up the ridge for perhaps half an hour. Since our packs also carried our food for 6 days this was probably the most difficult part of the tour. Eventually we came to the top and were relieved to be able to enjoy a short ski down to the start of the glacier before climbing up to the Peyto hut at 8200 ft. The 10 km and 2200 feet of ascent had taken us seven hours.

Next morning we set off to Bow Hut, a fairly easy ski up the glacier with a relatively steep drop down to 7700 feet at the end. The weather was good so on the way we decided to ascend Mount Rhonda. To make things easier we dug a hole in the snow and cached all our food and sleeping bags so as to have light packs for the ascent. We did not go to the very summit, just up onto the top plateau. We then skied down to pick up our stuff and on towards Bow Hut for the night. But with another significant descent to the hut, we again cached some food to be picked up next morning.

Next morning we were up at five in the hope of ascending Mt Gordon on the way to our next hut. But the weather did not look so good and visibility was limited. Nevertheless we set off early and climbed the slope above Bow Hut then, leaving our packs at the top, we skied down for the fun of it. Up again to pick up our packs (and the food we had cached the previous evening) we skied on towards the next col and with improving weather conditions we cached our food and sleeping bags yet again and turned to ascend Mt Gordon. Eventually we were skiing along in the sunshine up onto the 10,000 ft top plateau of Mt Gordon. We had an interesting ski to get to the plateau since it involved a 200 metre traverse along a ridge only 2 ft wide. Although the drop either side was quite steep, it was not vertical and was only soft snow. A fall would have been embarrassing but not dangerous, but it would have been hard work getting back up through the deep soft snow. On the way back down we dropped off the ridge after a hundred metres and enjoyed a ski down in the sunshine before once again retrieving our gear and climbing up to the col at 9500ft. It was then a gentle ski down to the Balfour hut at 8100 ft.

This was where, two years earlier, Alan and I had spent a day in the hut, playing mountain hut scrabble and contract whist, hoping for an improvement in the weather (we eventually had to ski back past the Bow Hut and out onto the Icefields highway). But this time we had allowed an extra two nights here to increase our chance of success.

The next morning did not look very promising but we set out nonetheless, with the understanding that we might have to turn back. Eventually we had climbed up to the decision point and were relieved to see that Merrie-Beth was getting out the ropes which meant we would be continuing on. We had two ropes with four of us on each rope (since I was on the second rope it was really just a matter of following on). The weather was not bad but the visibility was limited. It must at times have been hard work for Merrie-Beth since not only did she have a heavier pack than us 'clients' but she also did all the trail breaking and she is only about 5ft 4. It is standard for Canadian guides to do the trail breaking; besides, if you are roped up, you can't change over. So we made our way under the seracs and through the crevasses up to the pass at 10,000 ft. Occasionally the mist would lift and we could look around but most of the time visibility was limited to 20 to 40 meters. After the pass the weather improved and the ski down to the Scott Duncan hut at 9100ft was very gentle.

There was one problem with the hut – the loo had had its door blown off. One of our party informed us that due to the wind this made sitting there somewhat uncomfortable. But by next morning the wind had gone and the open view was quite enjoyable. The next day was sunny and since we had a day to spare we were able to go for a ski with light packs. It was an easy day and we skied up to a nearby top which gave us great views of the mountains all around and we could look back to the previous hut. The ski down was a nice slope with good snow, so with light packs we could try some telemark turns. In fact it was so good we skinned back up again for a second run before heading back to the hut.

The final day was another fine day and we enjoyed a descent of almost 5000 ft down to the road. What skis were we using? Three of us were on telemark skis, three on alpine touring skis and one on an old pair of Tua Cirques (nordic touring skis) on which a previous owner had done the traverse about ten years earlier.

Greg Buick

Norway: Tafjordfjella - The Meltdown

Loipers - Alan Mitcham, Keith Walker, Heather Dickinson, Greg Buick , John Starbuck , Charlie Fisher, Graham Harkness

We were sitting in Oslo airport waiting for our flight home when Heather looked at me with an impish twinkle in her eye and said "as the newcomer you can write up the trip for the newsletter", I believe that I had little choice. So here is a Norway first timer's view from an excellent Loipers' trip with great company. The weather was unusually warm so the snow was plentiful but horrible and plans were changed to make best use of the area. This almost proved to be the undoing of Heather and myself as we were heading out earlier than the others. We were not aware that an early meltdown had started!

Keith was the star, pulling out item after item of food treats from a huge rucksack in total defiance of Allan's exhortation to travel light, but we were all pleased he did.

Charlie appeared to be de facto cook but Keith provided a couple of super meals before Charlie arrived. Also I was delighted to meet up with John Starbuck again after a gap 17 years.

Logistics worked well and six of us arrived at a road end near Bjorli at three o'clock in the afternoon with the prospect of a 15k ski to the Pyttbua hut. We were all pleased to see the hut that night, especially me! The wet heavy snow set the pattern for the week.

Thursday 14 April: Six skiers headed for Hogtunga (1912 m) about 5km from the hut. Keith and Graham were nursing blisters, which also set a pattern for the week so we backed off just below the summit steep section and were joined by Heather. Alan, Greg and John went onto the summit. **Lesson** - it takes longer than you think to wear in new boots for a long tour, take lots of plasters. That evening we had an excellent meal with cake from Keith's bag then an enthusiastic young Norwegian (the only other resident) and I were introduced to contract whist and a strange game called "Pink".

Friday 15 April: We took a route suggested by Alan up a small combe and after a bit of weaving around rock outcrops and frozen waterfalls we reached a col overlooking Tordsvatnet (a lake). It was a pleasant but difficult wet ski down to the lake. We were skiing down the lake with no particular objective until someone spotted the Torsbu hut in the distance, a place we were definitely not going to visit. Alan, Keith and Greg decided to have lunch at Torsbu, (pity they found that they had had no key when they got there). Heather, John and Graham picked up a sticked route (*Ed.: Winter routes between Norwegian ski huts are marked by birch branches planted in the snow every 20m. or so*) back to Pyttbua. That night Charlie arrived from Bjorli having added a long walk up the road to the 15km ski, whereas we had taken a taxi. We were also joined by two more very pleasant Norwegians, one tall with considerable girth and sporting a sheath knife on his belt - but he was fine.

Saturday 16 April: It was not a great day so we set off to follow the sticks to Veltdalshytta. We skinned up the first steep section but after that there was a lot of swapping of skins and re-waxing for the wet snow during which Heather and I fell behind crossing a broad wind-scoured col. I had never encountered anything like it, fresh snow patches lying on wet porridge and I could do nothing but broad snow ploughs. **Lesson** – practice off piste porridge skiing in Scotland.

Veltdalshytta was palatial, a modern lodge sleeping 60 or more, equipped with two kitchens and an automated, renewable, electrical supply for lights and fire alarm; and all ours. We settled into the smaller two bed rooms most comfortably. The two Norwegians from Pyttbua followed us in and later a cheery team with man-hauled pulks and a also a dog sled arrived. Scottish lamb, Carlsberg beer and Aqua Vita were on their menu.

Sunday 17 April: It rained so some, including me, festered and tended battered feet in luxury, others went out in the rain. The Norwegians headed home via the route from the Torsbu hut.

Monday 18 April: The Monday forecast was for the weather to improve but Monday morning provided a solid wall of mist. Alan, Greg, Charlie and Heather decided that there was good touring to be had from Torsbu - the hut that we were definitely not going to visit - and that they would move there; Keith, John and Graham stayed on at Veldtshytta.

After a lot of discussion Heather and I had decided to use the easy (!) exit from Torsbu using a sticked route. There was also a bridge marked "all year" on our new maps, but "summer only" on Alan's. Only experienced John pointed out the difficulty the river might pose but several people had just gone that way, including a dog team; however we badly underestimated the rate of meltdown. **Lesson** - don't trust Norwegian maps and listen to world travelers.

The afternoon cleared beautifully so Keith and Graham skied over to look at two fascinating 1944 huts used by commandoes in WW2 and still fully equipped. One of them was barely visible, built into a rock overhang from packaging materials and right on the lakeside.

Tuesday 19 April: Monday night was colder and on Tuesday Keith and Graham had a wonderful tour to Torsbu and then out from the hut. Meanwhile Charlie, Greg, Alan and Heather had long enjoyable tour of larger mountains (Blåhøe, 1959m.) to the east of Torsbu where they had stayed. John accompanied Keith and Graham part-way then cut off to climb Karitinden (1982m), the highest point near to Veldtshytta.

Wednesday 20 April: This was the day for all but Heather and Graham to return to Veldtshytta and rejoin John. Heather very sensibly advised that we should check the crossing we needed to use to get out the next day if we were to catch or flight on Friday. This was good advice but not encouraging. The bridge appeared to be intact but seen closer had no platform and was unusable; the walkway had indeed been removed for the winter. As the snow bridge was now rapidly melting slush and the depth of water well beyond the 1.3m of my ski pole, the only hope of going that way was a good night frost and an alpine start. We had a long, but seemingly safe, second option in case the crossing was impassable. That alternative route also carried a risk of a river crossing on a bridge with a very long hard return to Torsbu if we could not find it. On the other hand it did follow a well marked summer footpath to Billingen and the bridge was shown on the map as "all year" so we were reasonably confident. The other options would have caused us to miss our return flight and also possibly set off a search. We had also found some bits of old rope at Torsbu to use as a crude, but sound, safety line; this we took with us.

Thursday 21 April, 05:00: We were disappointed that it clearly had continued to thaw during the night. We did investigate the river extensively but when I lost my footing and got a cold scary wallow in watery slush for my troubles, retreat was the preferred option. We had no choice other than to go back up and try Langedalen, the alternative route. Thankfully the higher snow was good, there were no surprises in the terrain and at the end - sure enough - we found a good bridge across a deep

ravine. The bridge was a struggle to reach in the deep melting snow but eventually we were down with 2hrs to spare for the wonderful, warm bus and we were still on schedule for flying home.

The rest of the party had planned to return to Veltdalshytta to rejoin John, possibly taking in Karitinden on the way. From there the intention was to follow sticks to Danskehutta about 17km away and tour some steeper mountains from there. Their exit was a half-day ski- without river wallowing - to Grotli. What happened to them this tale does not tell.

What did I learn? Well a lot about wax and cable bindings. I will always carry a warm sleeping bag for myself, as many people seem to, for emergency bivouacs. A lot of people, including us, had planned our trip around Easter holidays but weather patterns are not now as reliable as they were, so late April is not guaranteed to give decent skiing and the Norwegian mountains are most definitely not the place to be when a several meter thick layer of snow starts to melt! At this time of year the condition of the snow can change very dramatically in the space of a day.

Norwegian maps are good but the detail is not always accurate, especially regarding status of bridges, so plan exit routes to avoid major river crossings if at all possible, and do not deviate from your exit plan whatever other route changes you may decide to try.

The huts are nothing short of amazing and the people we met were without exception warm, friendly and jovial. A great trip, rubbish skiing, or was it this skier, a bit of an epic what more could you ask for?

Graham Harkness

As the group divided near the end of the trip, we have two more reports, covering the days that Graham missed:

Whilst Graham and Keith went to Torsbu, John went solo up Karitinden - skied to within 300m distance/20 metre height of summit, then left skis and continued on foot (with left boot sole flopping half off) up 25 degree sun-crust and heavily rime covered rocks.

Journey to Danskehytta was poor vis weather, warm temps causing deep wet porridge, plus some light precipitation in a cloudless evening which provided an initially superb surface for all but John to ski to summit of Storefjellet (John just skied part way due a collection of minor problems), but porridge on the way back due to high temps.

Very cold night meant the descent from Danskehytta was difficult due to having to contend with the now frozen deep ruts left behind by people in the previous day's porridge. Final run down piste to Grotli was a highlight - at last some sense of control of skinny skis could be gained on the smooth and consistent surface! (John and Keith went down the sticked route which seemed to involve a lot more uphill on no-grip ice than free runs downhill - not at all like the map contours), others went over a top before descending.

Maybe it was a little late in the season for our Norway trip. We had to contend with some difficult snow conditions due to crazy warm weather and reduced snowfall over the early winter.

Conditions were much better above about 1700m. We skied several high peaks – Hog Tunga 1912m, Blåhøe 1959m, Storefjellet 1820m, and Helleggi 1668m. And remarkably we even got good snow (and sunshine) on a couple of days even below 1400m – the afternoon we went the 12km from Veltdalshytta to Torsbu was wonderful (just Charlie and Heather and Greg and I).

There were some excellent unstaffed DNT huts, most of them built quite recently. Veltdalshytta was rebuilt and extended in 2008 and the new hut at Torsbu (just outside Tafjordfjella) was very charming and quite comfortable – just big enough for six people, and with indoor toilets! The 25km round trip over the summit of Blåhøe from Torsbu was probably our longest day and very enjoyable, though I don't think it was overly strenuous.

Another very memorable day was from Danskehytta along a snaking undulating ridge to the 1820m top of Storefjellet . It was a bright and sunny day and we had the benefit of a half inch of fresh snow from the previous afternoon which made for excellent skiing both up and down.

On our last morning, we decided on a 0730 start to get the morning bus from Grotтли. Charlie, Greg and I skied up onto Helleggi and were on the top by 8am. Conditions were wonderful – we had great views of our previous day on Storefjellet and great skiing down to rejoin the marked route to Grotтли. Greg and I even managed to ski some telemark turns with our heavy packs once we hit the prepared piste near to the hotel.

We saw plenty of lemmings, several per day, especially on our last two days at Danske. We heard that this was a 'lemmen year', when there is a sudden population explosion. They are round brown and black balls of fur, very cute and often running across the surface of the snow like clockwork toys.

One of the good things about staying in the huts is the people you meet along the way. Two of the Norwegians at Veltdalshytta were planning to ski all the way to Finse, a considerable distance through Tafjordfjella, Breheimen, Jotunheimen, and Skarvheimen. But then Greg and I bumped into one of them on our last night in Lillehammer – he had dropped out and was getting the bus back home to his wife in Molda. The other guy was carrying on. "He hasn't got a wife" we were told!

Weekend in Scotland (11-14 March)

There were some ominous signs driving up the A9 past Edinburgh... Severe Weather Warning - Heavy Snow. Malcolm and I stopped en route to walk in the Pentland Hills and battled against squalls of snow and sleet with winds strong enough to blow us off the tops.

Eight of us turned up on Friday evening at the self-catering lodge at Feshie Bridge. John was complaining of an unsuccessful day failing to get up some Scottish peak in deep snow – it seemed snow was not going to be in short supply. We finally got the place warmed up, after sorting out the dodgy electrics and the over-sensitive trip switch, and sat down to a delicious and sustaining meal of chilli and rice – thanks Barney, very good indeed!

Saturday morning we drove up to the Cairngorm Ski Hill and skied across to Lurcher's Gully where the snow was excellent. Tim, Barney and Ben made a rash decision to ski from the top of Lurcher's around the tops of the Northern Corries and onto the summit of Cairngorm. The forecast was for increasingly heavy snowfall, low cloud and high winds. With difficult conditions on the top, no doubt they were relieved to finally ski back onto the piste and down to the Day Lodge.

The rest of us - Paul, Malcolm, Helen and I - opted to stay and ski Lurcher's Gully. It was a good decision on my part to use telemark skis – great snow for telemarking. Helen and I coached Paul and Malcolm on Nordic downhill technique – both were on club (touring) skis, which are more difficult to handle. Paul and I went back up for a second run (climbing up with the help of skins) and did a total of about 600m of ascent and descent. We were back by early afternoon and by then the snowfall was considerably heavier and the visibility rather poor.

Sunday morning... it was still snowing! We skied directly from the lodge, mapping out a route into the forest, north towards Loch an Eilein. The deep soft snow was also rather wet and heavy, so progress was quite slow and tiring (we took over 3 hours to cover only 4 miles). We never did quite make Loch an Eilein and we abandoned the plan to do a circular tour back to the lodge in favour of returning along our ready-made trail. We had our lunch in the shelter of a convenient and well-kept bothy and an hour later we reached a small lochan (Loch Gamhna) about half a mile short of our original intended objective. The route back was very enjoyable with very atmospheric skiing through the forest in falling snow. There are some pictures on Tyneside Loipers Facebook page.

It was a very enjoyable weekend – a nice lodge and a good group. And lots of snow! The weather could have been kinder (perhaps the snow could have arrived a day or two earlier) but we made good use of the weekend. This would make a good venue for another year. Anyone interested – please let me know.

Alan Mitcham

Ski-orienteering

Some time last year, my friend Chris suggested doing some ski-orienteering. As a middling orienteer and a middling cross-country skier I thought a nice low-key event might be worth a try. What I didn't anticipate was that my first ever attempt at the sport would be the World Masters Orienteering Championships (WMOC) in Norway. Yes Norway, where there are some quite good orienteers and some quite good skiers. A few weeks later everything was in place and Chris, two other orienteering friends and I set off for Norway. We met one other Brit at the event making a total of five for team-GB.

WMOC took place on the back of some European championships in Sjusjoen. It was based at the downhill ski centre though we masters were staying in nearby Lillehammer. The organisers had provided us with daily coach transport from our accommodation to the event centre. In Lillehammer itself there were lit trails right outside our apartment and so we even had the chance of an evening ski from our doorstep.

Ski-orienteering maps show the quality of the tracks. A standard orienteering map has additional green tracks marked which give some indication of skiability. Thick solid green show properly pisted loipe. There are then a series of tracks put in specifically for the event: thin solid, dashed and dotted green lines mark increasingly difficult to ski tracks. The trails shown by the dashed lines are skidoo width and only softly pisted. These trails are only limited by the ability of the skidoo driver making them so some of them can be very steep and winding. Tracks marked with a solid black line, small roads, could also be skied if there was enough snow on them, this sometimes gave options to ski through small residential areas. In ski-orienteering you are allowed to ski off-piste if you wish which means that later in the day there may be significant unmapped tracks in some places. You are also allowed to remove your skis and run. This is a completely valid technique that even the top skiers resort to when faced with some hills, both up and down!

Ski-orienteering is a freestyle event and, although most serious skiers skated, a reasonable number, including me, stuck to classic. It's whatever you are most comfortable with - skating is my weaker discipline. On the narrowest trails it is difficult to use a full skating motion so having classic skis can mean less double poling. For me this was a benefit though having shorter skating skis would definitely have been a big advantage for descending and cornering. The one tip I had been given before setting out for Norway was to fit big baskets to my poles to limit the poles sinking into the soft snow when off the main tracks. Unfortunately I had no choice but to set off for Norway with the smallest racing baskets imaginable.

The first event on our four-day schedule was a training event. This was a self-timed event with short, medium and long options. But first we had to collect our map holders. With both hands needed on the poles a ski-O map is usually placed on a rotatable board which is mounted on a chest harness. The organisers had put some

aside for us novices. Once strapped in, the whole thing felt a little strange. I was no longer able to see my ski tips in front of me and I worried a bit about what would happen in the event of a face-plant. We'd all brought Silva clip-on compasses with us which work a treat with the map boards and saves gaffer-taping compasses elsewhere.

Once we'd tested our skis for wax we set off for the training event start. The hairiest bit was getting to the start! The start was at the top of the main Alpine ski slope and the only way up there was to use the chair lift. Having never done downhill skiing this was a new experience for me. Getting into a chair lift holding skis and poles and with a map board sticking out at the front is by no means easy. But we all did get to the top without losing or breaking anything. Once at the top we located the start and set off as a group to tackle the short course. Initially the navigation was difficult as everything was white! After the first control there was a long descent to the second, it was at this point we realised that a thin solid line wasn't as skiable as we first thought it might be. It was also at this point that I realised the value of taking the skis off! We also all found out how disastrous small baskets were when try to use poles for propulsion. Towards the end of the training event we even did a little street-orienteeing as we dropped down through a small housing estate. It was a short but very sharp introduction to what was to come.

On the Friday there was the open sprint event, for me this meant just 2 km and 11 controls. Before the event I had been down to the ski shop in Lillehammer and had rollerski tips with clip-on touring baskets fitted to my poles. It was 13 Norwegian kroner well-spent. For the competitive events, we would be using a touch-free punching system to record each control point. We wore little Velcro wristbands a little like small wrist watches. Holding this within about 60 cm of the kite marking the control point is enough to register with a flashing LED on the wrist strap confirming things. It was thus possible to ski through a control at speed, though I tended to get my wrist closer and was rarely travelling at speed.

Like foot orienteeing, you start a minute or two apart from other competitors on your age course. As you start, you have to collect your map and then get it into your map holder within 60 seconds: no mean feat with poles strapped on while balancing on skis. At the start I deferred to the other skiers and paused at the kite marking the location of the start. Even with this cautious start I still messed up the first control. My mind was trying to do traditional orienteeing. It wasn't until the third control that I got my head around the technique of simply remembering a sequence of turns at junctions: first left, second right, right fork... then breaking each route down into manageable chunks. The compass became largely irrelevant. The pole baskets worked a treat although my skiing ability was sorely tested on some of the hills. Forty-five minutes later I was done, over three times longer than the winning time on my course. Most of the Brits finished last or next, showing how little chance we get to practice and compete.

The weekend brought the masters event proper: Saturday was the long-distance event, which for me meant 10 km, while Sunday would be the middle-distance at 6.7

km for my course. On both days our bus up to Sjusjoen was early enough for us to see the other competitions, a chance to see fast young skiers at work. Some of the top skiers were fitted with GPS trackers, these tracks were then shown live on a large screen mixed with some action from the forest at some key controls. It was great to see the route choices - and the mistakes. It was also great to see how seriously the sport is taken by the Nordic countries, the Russians and the Swiss.

For the long-distance event I had two map exchanges. This is partly because the maps sizes are limited by the map holders but also to facilitate looping back without making the map too complex to read. My long course stated 400m of climb and it turned out that almost all of this was in the first part of the course in a couple of killer long legs. Of course with hindsight I could have made the hill easier and even run part of the leg on roads. At the time though I failed to see this option and so this leg really took it out of me. With a late start and a limited amount of time to finish before our bus back to Lillehammer, I decided to retire after the second map exchange. However, getting to that exchange was an adventure as I decided to follow an off-piste track that was certainly going where I wanted to go. What I hadn't appreciated was how difficult it was to ski between mature pine trees, I clearly had less ability than whoever made the tracks ahead of me. Luckily I survived to ski another day. All the other Brits finished successfully but none of them troubled the leaders.

On the final day I was determined to finish the middle-distance race to make some amends for the previous day. The middle-distance race reused some of the sprint area and I was getting to know some of the controls quite well. What I still wasn't doing effectively was thinking ahead. Too often I kept close to the straight line between two controls rather than looking for the longer routes that avoided the hills. In ski-O these short sharp hills really test your ability to both climb and descend on narrow tracks. Finding longer flatter routes is clearly key if, like me, one's skiing ability is limited. At one point I discovered exactly what a dotted track was like due to a slight navigation error. As I decided on the dotted track to get me back on my line I saw two hazard warning signs just before the hill plunged away from me. Needless to say I took my skis off and jogged down what turned out to be a very steep hill with sharp bends and sizable trees. I did finish the race this time though I was still very much last. The rest of the team bubbled around the bottom places in their classes and our combined times weren't going to get any of us near the podium.

Overall I had a great time (the weather was fabulous), I learnt an awful lot and I met some great people. I'd recommend ski-O to anyone who has even the most rudimentary orienteering technique: it will certainly test your skiing. I'll definitely be looking to find a competition somewhere next season, maybe a smaller one next time.

Colin Blackburn

Track ski-ing

Snow Sport England (SSE) on-snow week at Kvitåvatn

I first went on the late-season training week organised by Snow Sport England in 2010. I enjoyed it so much I decided to do it again this year. I enjoyed it so much this year I'll certainly try to get out to Norway again next year. The idea of a training week might put some people off but don't let it deter you from thinking about this as one of your weeks on snow for next year or beyond.

So what's it all about? Well, the training bit is about developing your technique rather than aiming to become a super fit athlete. So as long as you are not a complete beginner you can sign up, pay up and get better. There was certainly a wide mix of people from mid-twenties to mid-seventies, from athletic to not-so-athletic. The week caters for track skiing and Telemark. People opt for one or the other but there are opportunities to dabble in both if that's your bent. I stuck to track skiing for the whole week so that's what the rest of this piece will be about.

The week takes place in Kvitåvatn near Rjukan in Norway, this is the heart of Telemark country but there is also a fantastic network of groomed cross-country trails. Most of the tracks are pisted for classic and skating and there's a good mix of grades for testing uphill and downhill techniques. The trails are also stunningly beautiful. There are some great views, not least the very striking mountain Gausta. You get a view of the usually cloud-topped Gausta from pretty much everywhere, even your bedroom if you are on the right side of the building!

The accommodation, Kvitåvatnfjellstoge, is a hostel owned by a Danish orienteering club, though it was originally set up by the British. Although it is a hostel you can choose to share basic rooms with up to 3 other people or stay in a single en suite room. The accommodation is full-board with lunches being made up from the large breakfast buffet. The food is plentiful and delicious, even if you are an awkward vegetarian like me. There is always coffee and juice on tap and cake will often appear at that crucial mid-afternoon coffee break! They sell beer and wine at Norwegian prices but they also tolerate people bringing their own duty-free as long as they are discreet. Finally, there's an associated ski hire and repair shop if you need it.

As if the food and location weren't enough the training is superb. The three coaches Mike Dixon, Alan Eason and Patrick Winterton are probably the most experienced three coaches in Britain. Mike is a six-times Olympian, Alan is one of the best British racers and Patrick has undertaken all sorts of extreme adventures. They are also all thoroughly likeable. Over the course of the week you get a couple of days with each coach which I found a very good way to get slightly different takes on things. Each has their own coaching style and that mix is really beneficial.

Most mornings are spent doing various drills to build technique usually followed by a short trip out to apply some of those skills. The afternoons are optional and will include short tours, some fun races and, this year, some ski-orienteeing. There's also a chance to take an SSE Nordic proficiency award if you wish. One particularly useful session this year was given by one of the Telemark coaches on the downhill nursery slopes. We had a good ninety minutes learning downhill techniques on skinny skis. It was also great fun.

This year the snow was fairly poor (last year was excellent) but even so there were still plenty of trails available and, if anything, the changeable conditions - icy in the morning, slushy in the afternoon - made for some very good training. The days usually alternated between skate and classic but the conditions would often dictate the choice of technique by whichever coach you had that day.

The evenings included films, talks and quizzes and demonstrations on waxing by Alan, who works as a wax technician for some international ski teams. There is something happening to fill every minute if you wish but none of it is compulsory. Some people took a day out to go down to see the museum in Rjukan, all about the real Heroes of Telemark. Some just went to Rjukan to go shopping.

The weekends, with some fun fancy dress races, with all sorts of foul play going on, always seem to do very well! This is followed by a party on the last evening to mop up all the remaining duty-free.

As I said at the start, I think this is such a great week that I'll be back next year if I get a chance. I'd recommend to anyone who wants a fun week on snow but a week where they finish somewhat better than they started.

Colin Blackburn

Yllas, Finland - looking forward to 2012

Excellent weather conditions made for another great skiing week during March in Finland. Temperatures ranging from -26°C at night to -7°C during the day with light early morning snow showers on two days ensured almost perfect track skiing. Those who ventured off track also reported good conditions. During the week beginning March 13th, when I was there, there were also groups from the London Regional Nordic Ski Club and the Yorkshire Dales Cross Country Ski Club, many of whom I knew.

Most agreed that they would be coming back to Yllas on the equivalent week next year, i.e. the week beginning March 11th, so when I returned home I booked with Inghams for that week. However during the second week in April I received a letter from them to say that 'due to the disappointing advance level of bookings' they have decided to cancel the service from Manchester to Kittila after the outbound flight on February 19th, but that flights will still be available from Gatwick after that date. A quick trawl through the Internet seems to indicate the flight has been cancelled after that date and it is not just Inghams cancelling their bookings.

I have rebooked from Gatwick as there is a good service with Flybe from Newcastle to Gatwick, however due to the late arrival back from Kittila on March 18th at 21.55 it will be necessary to stay overnight at Gatwick.

It seems strange that Inghams should be cancelling holidays from Manchester 10 months before they take place – perhaps they just did not want to use Manchester at all after Feb 19th.

Frank Cauley

Racing

World Masters in Canada



Cross-country skiing in Canada was given a boost last year by the Vancouver Olympics. This year, on a smaller stage, 22 countries represented by about 1200 skiers met in early March at Sovereign Lake near Vernon, BC to compete in the World Masters Cup in Cross-Country skiing. This was the ski area, 200miles east of Vancouver, in the foothills of the Rockies, where many of the top Olympic teams came to train in the run

up to their event and it soon became clear to us why. At a mile high, Sovereign Lake, and its neighbouring village and ski resort Silver Star, offer many kilometres of immaculately groomed trails to tempt you to explore the area and challenge your skiing skills. Some people stayed 20km and 600m lower down the hill in the town of Vernon, but six of the GB team of nine stayed in the Pinnacles in Silver Star, an apartment building handily placed at the edge of the piste so we could ski to the trail system proper with comparative ease.

Most of us arrived a week before the Opening Ceremony to get to know the area and get used to the altitude. The Aussies had come two weeks before that and had had to endure temperatures in the low -20s; by the time Wendy McRae and I arrived it had warmed up to -10 and was snowing. This snow continued off and on so the trails were replenished with light powder snow almost daily – fantastic.

A special Masters' deal was the trail pass which allowed us onto both areas and with a bonus of being able to use the “Alpine Meadows” ski lift which would take you above 1800m and to the start of several back area trails offering curving downhill runs either to Sovereign Lake or back round to Silver Star. One of our highlights was on the rest day, skiing through 3 inches of soft powder on a firm base to

Paradise – I kid you not. Even the less skilled among us relished the descent and the hot chocolate and clam chowder in the warm and cosy Paradise Camp were an added bonus.

Regular Loipers readers will know the Masters format by now, three races over a week, either classic or free technique, starting with medium length, 30km for me, 10km a day or two later and finishing with a long race, 45km for under 60 men and 30k or 15k for women and the older men. I've tended to struggle to complete all three of my races but I had been fairly diligent in my training up to the event and I also reaped the benefit of the Kvitavattn training weeks and Hetton Lyons roller ski weekends over the past few years so I was quite confident of success this time. That fortnight or so of good snow before Christmas must also have been good for me since I quickly got my ski legs as the team went out each day together scouting the trails and practising the more tricky downhill. I even had the energy to go out and enjoy the downhill slopes in the evening, not lovely technique on my track skis but lovely snow. It was only on our last day that I saw a couple of people telemarking – but then the slopes were pretty quiet most days so that's a recommendation for Silver Star if you don't like queuing for lifts.

The organisers had learnt from previous Masters to keep the opening ceremony quite short – hanging around at -15C is not too pleasant! The Silver Star High Street was ideal, compact and sheltered, and covered in a metre of packed snow. The procession stayed close to the enthusiastic audience of local people and when the teams had done their bit behind their countries flag it was only a short distance between the tent serving mulled wine and the stage where the welcome speeches were much shorter than usual (repeated in three languages). We were treated also to the local children singing native Canadian songs and an elaborate hula hoop dance based on First Nation stories.

The start and finish area are rather key parts of the success of the event. Whereas Falun in Sweden last year had a permanent stadium this left the spectators a bit far from the action – and it was hard on the competitors with a stiff climb for the first 300m. Sovereign Lake was much more user-friendly, a flatter takeaway from the start lanes and a relatively intimate finish allowing supporters to welcome their athletes vocally as they finished. We also had a remarkable commentator who had tremendous stamina, keeping going with interesting and informative commentary for hours at a time. The area was also blessed with a permanent clubhouse which welcomed all-comers. The friendly volunteers served excellent pannini, veggie chilli and enormous cookies to tired skiers and was a meeting point for many of the smaller teams such as the Dutch, Australians and ourselves. There was a cosy marquee adjacent which served as race office, ski shop, restaurant and also as an excellent showcase for local crafts people. At some Masters it can be difficult to connect with the local way of life and since we were largely self-contained in Silver Star it was good to get a view of the wider picture of how people made a living in that area and the culture. You may have heard of Okanagan as a fruit growing area – hard to believe with metres of snow lying around – but it is also now well-known

for its good wines – of which we tasted several, although, being good, not the night before a race!

And so the racing started. Getting the right ski preparation is always a bit of a worry but luckily conditions stayed a bit more stable than is traditional for the Master World Cup. Usually the temperature ranges from -20 to +5 over the week with at least one of the longer classic races at around the dreaded zero. It wasn't all a doddle this year but at least any waxing mistakes we made weren't that drastic. I'd chosen to race 30k and 45K in freestyle, i.e. skating, and 10k in classic to limit any problems. This paid off since I started well in the 30km and had several skiers around me for the race. This makes a change as I am often dropped off the back and only see other skiers later on when the leaders of the next group whizz past. So it seemed my training had worked well and although I slowed a bit on the second 15km lap I was able to overhaul a couple of my class and even summoned up a sprint finish as I tried to shake off an American who'd been tailing me the last few km. I wasn't quite fast enough – so must remember to do more fast-twitch muscle training in future. (A subject for a future article, I think, based on a very interesting talk we went to at Silver Star one evening). However I still managed to beat 18 in my class, a good reason why I'm looking pleased with myself in the photo.

Others in the team did well too, even Paul Moonen, our adopted Dutch member of the team who'd arrived only a full day before. Later in the week fortunes were more mixed but I continued to ski pretty well for me and achieved a PB in percentage behind the winner's time in the 10km Classic, again spurred on by having fellow competitors around me, trading places at different parts of the course where perhaps one's wax was performing better or worse on that part of the track. One of them was a guy I'd first skied with about 10 or 12 years before and we keep meeting each other at the Masters. He usually is faster than me but this time I got ahead in the last km and stretched my lead by the finish.

The longest races are kept until the last couple of days. One year the classic races are first, the next the freestyle so that no style is favoured in terms of having more rest days from year to year. This time, having chosen the free technique race and agreeing to be in the Relay team (finishing a creditable fourth behind Russia, Canada and the USA) I had no rest day but nevertheless must have done something right as I managed to keep up a steady pace for the three laps and even beat my 30km time by nearly 5mins on the way to another PB. I think doing some long cycle rides, extensive hill-walking and some 1.5 to 2hour roller ski sessions in the month before made a big difference from previous years.

So a two week holiday skiing in marvellous snow, great tracks and convivial company came to an end with promises to see new friends in Oberwiesenthal next year or Asiago the next. Sovereign Lake is a great place to ski so maybe another trip there beckons and a chance to fit in Banff and Jasper too – anyone fancy that?

Alasdair Craw-Wilson

Switzerland - Engadiner Frauenlauf

The 17km. Frauenlauf (Ladies' Race) takes place a week before the Engadin ski Marathon and runs over the last stretch of the marathon loipe, from Samedan to S'Champf. The two Tyneside Loipers (Helen and Heather Dickinson) who entered this year skied a lovingly prepared loipe in glorious sunshine along with 800 other women and finished with personal bests in 1h02.27 and 1h14.35. Strangely enough, a third Dickinson, who doesn't deign to join the Loipers, also entered, but she didn't get a PB because she wore floppy trousers that caused high air drag. Among the six Brits in the race, Dickinson daughters and mother swept the loipe, taking first, second and third places. Every statistician loves a sub-group analysis! Pix at: <http://www.alphafoto.com/images.php?runID=251&sn=1028> (I may not be fast but I always smile at a camera)

<http://www.alphafoto.com/images.php?runID=251&sn=1345> (Let's take this thing seriously)

<http://www.alphafoto.com/images.php?runID=251&sn=1029> (Just here to enjoy the scenery)

Heather Dickinson

Equipment Talk

Which skis and boots for track skiing and light touring?

Cross country skiing can be thought of as covering a spectrum of conditions from steep powder snow or ice to flat pisted tracks and equally there is a range of weights and widths of equipment to best cope with the conditions. An analogy can easily be drawn between mountain biking and road cycling. In a previous article Alan Mitcham covered the heavyweight end of the range most suited to mountain touring through to pure telemarking. For track skiing or low level or woodland touring lighter and narrower skis and correspondingly lighter and more responsive boots and poles are needed to get the best out of the terrain. This lighter weight equipment also allows a more dynamic and faster movement over the snow using either classic gliding stride technique or skating. The downside, at least for the less expert, is reduced control on descents and heavier going in softer snow where the broader mountain touring skis have the advantage.

So what are the key differences? Assuming we are going light touring over a golf course or on previously tracked snow, then a classic ski will be needed. For a telemark/mountain tour ski the ski will have little camber, i.e. it will have a soft flex and grip on the snow for climbing will be provided by skins or a plus or minus wax over much of the ski base. For a light touring ski there will be a stiffish camber so the centre of the skis are off the snow when gliding two footed but once you step all your weight on the striding ski the ski will flatten and your grip wax or textured waxless base will be pressed into the snow for grip. The shape of this ski will be

similar to the mountain ski being waisted rather than the almost parallel sides of a pure track skating ski, however it will be on average only 45-50mm wide instead of up to 70-80mm for the mountain ski. With the absence of metal edges it will weigh only around 1.5kg per pair, compared to up to 3kg per pair, so lighter and narrower bindings are needed and lighter boots to control the skis. The modern boot/binding system is known as SNS (Salomon) or the similar NNN (Rottefella) type. If you were to be doing a fair bit of skiing on untracked snow, and/or were carrying a lot of kit, there are boots available with an intermediate weight/width known as a back-country binding system. However modern track boots are very strong and stiff giving effective support, and control for turning, so choice is more to do with personal preference.

As in cycling, where we have a progression from flat handlebarred roadster with 3-speed gears with a steel frame to lightweight alloy or carbon road bikes with drops and lots of closely spaced gears,

in track skiing we have even narrower skis, with finely ground bases for improved glide, stiffer camber and more specialised shapes to either minimise drag against the loipe walls in classic or parallel sides for some skating skis to better keep the ski tracking straight. There is also choice in the design of the ski for cold or warm snow and hard versus softer tracks. However, nowadays there are skis being sold which purport to be combination skis that can be used for both classic and skate technique. Although it is possible to skate on classic skis and do classic on skate skis it is hard to do so well, for example in the former case it is easy to catch an edge or get your grip wax stopping you suddenly or in the latter any grip wax will slow you down too much to get effective glide, so perhaps this new development will be the occasional skiers dream - watch this space!

You might be wondering about poles. For track skiing you will need longer poles than for the mountain in order to make better use of your arm power and extension on terrain where you can expect to glide after each stride. As a rule of thumb, a classic pole should reach your collar bone from the ground and a skating pole your lips. An inch either way won't be far out, just as well as most poles come in lengths going up in 5cm intervals. The baskets will be rather small, designed for less drag along the track and assuming a firm base. For light touring, the more traditional basket will be less prone to sink in softer snow but in either case a tungsten carbide tip is advisable to better cope with icy conditions. For speed, carbon fibre poles are lightest and stiffest but alloy poles are good for touring, as they are much less prone to damage from hitting obstacles and can be bent back into shape. On a nostalgic note I recall that the advantage of the old bamboo poles was that they could be mended by lashing with string or tape to get you home – in fact I still have such a pair in the garage. They'd go with the wooden skis also sitting there which are perhaps those combi skis we're looking for because they are truly multi-purpose – but that's another story.

Loipers' extra-curricular activities

Newcastle to New Delhi, India (April 2011)



In April, Paramjeet rode his motorbike 10423km from Newcastle to Delhi to raise to visit his aunt and to raise money for UNICEF. He used 580 litres of petrol, crossed 12 countries, braved rain, snow and a sand storm, spent three nights in a police station hiding from Al-Qaeda, and has decided never to do the trip again. In the next newsletter, we will have a full report of Paramjeet's trip.

Meanwhile, Paramjeet writes: "People can still donate at www.justgiving.com/Paramjit-Bhogal and see my pictures and blog at www.psbhogal.ning.com. I saw the work of UNHCR in Sindh, Pakistan and every penny helps those who are less fortunate than us. This trip brought home to me the kindness of people to strangers and the inequality that exists between people. I think that a more equal world would be better for us all."

Loipers' summer programme

Thursday 19th May. End of Season Meet at Heather's (3, Glastonbury Grove, NE2 2HA, Tel: 0191 281 0495) Meet at 7pm onwards for food and wine, followed by a slide show - loipers' weekends and trips abroad, plus anything else you would like to contribute about your activities over the winter. It will be great to see everyone - please get in touch with Heather to let her know you are coming. Bring along a contribution to the food (feel free to contact Heather first so we don't end up with too much of the same thing). And bring along any pictures, preferably on CD or

memory stick - laptop and projector will be supplied. For anyone coming by metro, nearest station is West Jesmond - instructions to Glastonbury Grove are available from Heather (or look up on streetmap.co.uk).

Sat. or Sun. in June (date/time to be confirmed) - Roller skiing 'come and try it' day, 10.30 onwards, at Hetton Lyons Park. or Leazes Park 10.00 - 12.00. The club can provide the equipment (skis and boots and poles). If you are interested, please get in touch with Alasdair about your preferred date/time and to confirm boot size, etc.

Friday 10th June. Paramjeet is organising a social event on the 10 June (7.30) at Newcastle Cricket Club to raise money for UNICEF and St Oswald's Hospice, Tickets at £15 can be reserved from Paramjeet (Tel. 07792522865, or psbhogal@yahoo.co.uk). The evening will have Indian food, music by the Johnny Cash Tribute band, and a short slide show about Paramjeet's recent bike trip to India - all welcome.

Sunday 12th June at Ashington - orienteering event with Newcastle and Tyneside Orienteers. Orienteering is a challenging outdoor adventure sport that exercises both the mind and the body. The aim is to navigate in sequence between control points marked on a unique orienteering map and decide the best route to complete the course in the quickest time. It does not matter how young, old or fit you are, as you can run, walk or jog the course and progress at your own pace. Orienteering can take place anywhere from remote forest and countryside to urban parks and school playgrounds. It's a great sport for runners, joggers and walkers who want to improve their navigation skills or for anyone who loves the outdoors. The event at Ashington is mainly in urban parkland and ideal for anyone who wants an introduction to the sport. Alasdair and Alan will be there at the start to give some guidance on orienteering maps and controls. Let Alan know if you are interested in joining us. Event details at <http://newcastleorienteering.org.uk/events.php> There will be a small entry fee.

Thursday 23rd June (6pm start) - Meet at the Crown PH in Catton (south of Hexham). Keith is leading a walk in Allendale, taking in some of the traditional hay meadows which will be in flower. Finish at the pub for good food and excellent beer from Allendale Breweries. Their Curlew's Return is probably the best brew in Northumberland. Contact Keith to confirm you are coming.

Saturday 13th or Sunday 14th July (date and time to be confirmed) - All day bike ride, start and finish at the Parkhead Cafe. We start on quiet roads (mostly downhill) to Rookhope, via Blanchland or Edmundbyers or Stanhope, back up the Bolts Law Incline (pedalling option - or pushing uphill for anyone else) then along the waggonway (or back along the road) back to the Parkhead cafe. There are lots of options for extra loops. Contact Keith or Alan.

August (date to be confirmed) Come along to an evening get together at the Union Rooms (Wetherspoons) in Newcastle.

And more on roller skiing...

Alasdair is generally able to give individual/small group lessons on a Weds or Thursday evening around 6-8pm or daytime by arrangement (at a small charge). He is also keen to give casual coaching to groups and suggests group skiing/training on Friday mornings, roughly fortnightly May 13th, (20th) 27th, June 10th, 24th, July 8th, (15th) 22nd and Aug 19th. 10-30 to 1-30 approx. Dates in brackets are possible if there is enough interest. Venues would be Hetton, Town Moor/Leazes Park and options of roller tours (tba). Do please get in touch with Alasdair to let him know when you are available. The Hetton venue is ideal and has a range of gradients on a wide tarmac loop of 1.8km - it also has a visitor centre with loos and coffee machine.

Snow Sport England roller ski coaching weekends are planned at Hetton Lyons Park for 2nd/3rd July (contact Sue Bambridge at sbambridge@tiscali.co.uk) and 27th/28th August (contact Helen Bell at helenbell115@btinternet.com). These weekends are highly recommended - the standard of coaching is excellent and there are coaching groups for all levels from beginner to advanced and racing standard. At the August weekend you'll have the chance to try racing, or help the club run the race on the Saturday afternoon - help with marshalling, taking entries and lap counting much appreciated: contact Alasdair if you are able to help.

Trailers for next winter's programme

Suggestions for next winter include:

- World masters Oberweisenthal, Germany, March 1st till March 9th, 2012 - contact Alasdair.
- Hut touring in Norway - contact Alan, Keith or Charlie.
- Introduction to hut touring in Norway: staying mostly in staffed huts, skiing mainly on marked routes, easy/moderate terrain - contact Heather. If there is enough interest, I would suggest a meeting in September to discuss area, dates and what people want from the trip.
- Yllas, Finland: Mostly track ski-ing but also some downhill. - contact Alan.
- Telemark weekend in the Alps - contact Alan.

Notes from the committee

Misuse of Loipers email list: The committee would like to remind loipers that the telephone and email list is sent to members so that they can communicate with each other about ski-ing and related activities. Please do not use this personal information for other purposes.

Notify Alan of changes in e-mail address: The membership secretary (Alan Mitcham, alanmitcham@metronet.co.uk) needs to be informed of any changes of e-mail address. Much of our communication with members is done by e-mail, so it is important that he has your up-to-date e-address.

XC videos: Finally, a few recommendations for armchair training:-

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1075933699772560796>

<http://www.rollerski.co.uk/ns028.html>

<http://www.vimeo.com/2485142>

<http://thesimplesecrets.com/dvdsvideos.html>

<http://www.avmaroc.com/videos/biathlon+2008-cLiPgScWcevlXBM.html>