

## **World Winter Masters Games, January 2020**

### A Tyneside Loipers member's experience

As most readers will know, I regularly compete in the Masters World Cup in Nordic skiing which takes me to all kinds of ski areas in Europe and North America. This year was a little different, with the equivalent of the Winter Olympics taking place in and around Innsbruck. It seemed a good idea to give it a go. The Nordic disciplines – biathlon, Nordic-combined, ski jumping, langlauf and ski-orienteeing – were to be held in Seefeld, the venue for last year's Nordic world champs (which boded well for the event organisation and the state of the tracks). Another 7 disciplines were also being contested by athletes of age 30 to 90+ during the 10 days of the festival. Unlike the Olympics, nationality wasn't a big deal, neither was your standard. If you wanted to take part and were fit enough then that was all you needed, plus a couple of hundred Euro for the entry fee.

The WWMG takes place every 4 years and this year over 3,500 people entered and hundreds of volunteers helped make everything run smoothly and happily.

I was a bit ambitious and entered both langlauf skiing and ski-orienteeing. Luckily the programme allowed me to choose my races so that I only had one per day! Less fortunately, I was affected by colds and flu in the run up, so was less than fit. Hence my ambition was somewhat muted and just finishing the week of competition would be good.

Arriving by train all the way from Newcastle was a novel way to go skiing but worked out well and no extra charge for carrying my skis. A scenic train ride, free for competitors took me from Innsbruck to Seefeld after I'd registered at the Olympiahalle. As we climbed, more and more snow appeared by trackside which was reassuring. I happened to meet a couple from London one of whom had raced on the track at Hetton Country Park!

Mid-afternoon and unable to get access to my apartment, I dumped my stuff into a locker and got changed ready to try out the tracks. These were in good condition, which boded well, though the snow depth wasn't great. Adam Pinney and Roger Homyer, with whom I was sharing, had just arrived and had the same idea.

I noticed a few changes since visiting Seefeld 3 years ago. Eventually I twigged that there had been major earthworks and bridge building for the World Champs as well as upgrades to the ski-jumps. This meant that the race trails were more convoluted and hillier than before. Not good news when you are struggling to get fit!

Before the WWMG nordic events got underway, the Saturday was taken up by a ski-marathon of 30km or 60km looping through Seefeld, Mosern and Leutasch before returning to Seefeld to finish. It was quite a sight seeing the start and later the steep hill at about 8km – impressive speed and skill from the front-runners, some double poling but most doing diagonal stride.



*Lead skiers were double poling at the base of the main hill*

For both Nordic and ski-O disciplines one can enter a short, medium and long race. For Nordic, this choice can also be between classic and free technique. We had 7.5km, 15km and 30 km distances, older women and men had shorter 5, 10 and 20km races on an easier track. In the old days, the longest lap was 15km. But most races nowadays are made up of shorter laps. This can be quite challenging (that really steep hill now has to be climbed 3 or 4 times) but the upside is seeing your supporters more often and, if things are going badly, being able to retire gracefully without a long trek to the finish!

Unlike the Loppet race on Sunday, the age classes (men or women) are started separately 5 minutes apart but position in the start lanes is unseeded and there is a danger of being held up by a slower skier until the tracks open out. For me that wasn't a problem as I was fairly happy being at the back.

Seefeld is a super langlauf centre and when not racing it was easy to find other tracks to ski on despite the thin snow at lower levels while we were there. A ten minute bus ride takes you to Leutasch which has many kilometres of both classic and skating tracks, mostly fairly flat which are great for an easy ski but also you can find some testing hills and options to ski all the way back to Seefeld.

There were a good number of Brits taking part and I knew quite a few from both orienteering and skiing circles. One new friend had only started Nordic skiing the year before and had done the Engadin Marathon in 2019. He had looked for winter training to augment his rowing and found langlauf so much fun he entered the WWMG. He did finish near the back in his races but certainly didn't do at all badly as a novice. Personally I wasn't fit enough to do more than finish the 7.5 km classic and disappointed to drop out of the 15km freestyle after lap 1 (in not too bad a time) so I took the strategic decision to scratch my 30km free race in favour of doing all three Ski-O events which gave a day or two more recovery and 'get fit' time.



*Alasdair emerging from one of the controls on the Ski-Orienteeing*

The essence of ski-orienteeing is route choice between control sites set by the planner on a network of ski trails of varying degrees of preparation and ease of travel. Being unused to skiing straight downhill on narrow skidoo tracks over soft snow with trees and branches close by and, almost as bad, climbing such tracks, my route choices were often limited and far from optimum. One is allowed to take off ones skis and walk/run carrying them by hand and many people use that option. Unfortunately my ski boots would ice up and it would take ages to be able to clip into my bindings again. Fortunately I am good at navigating (usually) and with increasing fitness I was able to edge my way to respectability over the three races (Sprint, Long and Middle). I was well pleased with taking less time for my Middle course than I did for the Sprint. In both Long and Middle I was halfway up the field.

In those three races I visited more new bits of Seefeld and environs than I have in the last 38 years (6 trips) and I really enjoyed the challenge of trying to get around on skis wherever the course planner sent me. Maybe once my new skis have more scars I will be willing to attack the trickier terrain more effectively. I am no longer a total novice at ski-O having first tried it in Scotland at Glenshee in 1979, again in Italy in 1994 and more recently at the Masters in Romania 10 years ago. It is easier now to pick an event and get involve. But, with snow never guaranteed these days, not all events actually take place. Don't let that put you off. I'll be keeping my eyes open for events next season.

Alasdair Wilson



*The Finish and the Seefeld Scenic Backdrop*