

Alpine Ski Racing and the International Ski Federation

By John Ball

Last April, a member of the MARA board asked me a very good and very commonly asked question. How does ski racing work? What she and so many others want to know is how ski racing is regulated and controlled. I will try to explain how ski racing is managed and controlled from the humble beginning of a club program such as MARA to the US Ski Team competing in the most renowned of all international competitions the Olympics.

My starting point will be the International Ski Federation, which is abbreviated in all languages as the FIS. The FIS is the controlling and regulating body of what was initially considered as amateur ski competitions. In earlier years this entailed alpine, cross country, and jumping. Speed skiing and freestyle skiing became accepted FIS sports in 1965 and 1977 and today snowboarding is the new cousin. Of course the word "amateur" has all but disappeared in sport today but in the early part of the twentieth century the Olympic movement was very much an amateur one and initially entailed only summer sports. The founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin saw winter sports and skiing as so truly amateur, so frank and so pure in their sporting dignity that their exclusion from the Olympic program deprived it of much force and value. Thus, in 1924 France the Olympic host also held a week long Winter Games, which became known as the 1st Winter Olympic games.

Skiing has existed since time immemorial. The old Scandinavian legends bear witness to this. If the existence of skiing is very ancient, its practice as a sport is very recent. It was not developed in Norway until after 1850, when the first races were held around the town of Christiania, which later became the city of Oslo. In 1905 skiing's universal fame began to grow. Pierre de Coubertin, along with his colleagues in the IOC (International Olympic Committee) gave the Olympic Diploma of Merit in 1905 to the Norwegian cross-country skier Fridtjof Nansen. From this time on the sport had its desired international recognition.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's Alpine countries experienced a rapid increase in the popularity of the sport and competitions were hosted by these countries. National Ski Associations appeared in 1879 in Germany, 1893 in Switzerland and 1904 in the US. At an international ski competition in Morex, France in 1909 the coach of the Norwegian Team stood up at the prize giving and invited anyone interested in creating an international body of skiing to attend a meeting in Norway. The result was the founding of the International Skiing Commission, which strove from 1910 to 1924 to monitor the development of competitive skiing throughout the world.

In 1924, at the time of the first Winter Olympic Games, this commission gave birth to the International Ski Federation or the FIS. The FIS has continued to control and promote ski competitions around the world to this day.

The FIS Link to the Ski Club - The FIS Controls the Sport

The FIS is the controlling body over alpine skiing around the world. Its tentacles of power reach down to even MARA.

MARA, as a ski club is the smallest building block in the FIS. Many similar clubs in the Pacific Northwest make up the Division (PNSA). The PNSA is a Division of the USSA, which in turn is a member of the FIS. The FIS is represented in the US by our national ski association i.e. the US Ski Association, which runs the US Ski Team. The national association is divided up into six geographic divisions, which in turn are made up of 100's of ski clubs like MARA. The Divisions boundaries are on a somewhat practical geographic basis. This is an effort to control the expense and effort of traveling to ski competitions and to a degree control the number of competitors at events.

All skiing organizations need funding and they tax (membership fees) their membership as one form of fund raising. The FIS, being at the top of the pyramid charges a membership fee to the US Ski Association, who in turn charges a fee to the divisions which collect via a levy to each ski club. Other funds are raised through competition licenses. To compete in FIS races a competitor must register and pay a fee to the FIS through its national association. Likewise to compete in PNSA races one needs a competitor card for competitions sanctioned by the Division. You simply cannot enter a FIS race without having a FIS license. Likewise in PNSA races you need a competitor card from a ski Division within the USA or a card from a national ski association of another country e.g. Canada. For club level competitions the rules may be a little looser with a club membership or simply a race entry fee being the minimum requirement.

The FIS makes and enforces the rules of competition. To have international competitions we must have consistent rules and protocols for running the events in order to have fair competitions. Events sanctioned by the PNSA are run according to FIS rules and for the most part, the same rules are used at the MARA club level. The Technical Delegate or simply the TD is the representative of the FIS or the PNSA who attends all ski races to ensure that the events are run by the FIS rules. They have the power to cancel or overturn the results of an event if the rules are not followed.

The FIS rules governing equipment are constantly changing. Technological advances in equipment have increased competitor speeds to unprecedented levels. Rules for safety and injury prevention have put a stop to some equipment use. Some equipment can give an unfair advantage to a competitor. While not trying to dampen the spirit of innovation, the FIS has been establishing rules on the shape and length of skis. These rules are meant to slow down racers to make the sport safer. Unfortunately, some of the same innovations that have helped make skiing so much easier and more enjoyable for us recreational skiers allow racers to go so much faster.

There is safety protocol. The TD checks out all safety issues. I have been at a World Cup event in Vail when the TD delayed the start of the event until more protective

padding was put around the finish area. There are rules for entry and rules prohibiting the use of some performance enhancing drugs. Some rules are difficult to enforce and have little bearing on the outcome of junior races and are not adhered to rigidly in some of our Division races or Club events.

Basically, the FIS is the guiding and controlling body of skiing in the world and without its coordination and rule making the sport would never have grown to such an international level as it has.