

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST GREAT CROSS COUNTRY

By Paddy Pallin

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What was planned as a contest, man against man, ended in a battle of man against the elements.

Ever since 1927 when Dr Bertie Schlink and his party did the first ski trip from Kiandra to Kosciusko, this run has been regarded as a classical test of long distance running. George Arlberg, ski instructor at the Hotel Kosciusko, did the trip in 1934 from Hotel Kosciusko to Kiandra in 18 hours. Various parties have, over the years, made a ski touring trip of it and spent several days on it camping at various cattlemens' huts overnight. Then in 1962 interest in the trip was again aroused by the record breaking run from Perisher to Kiandra by Kore Grunnsund and Otto Pinkas in 11 hours.

What is the attraction of this trip? Why pick on Kosciusko to Kiandra? The answers are easy. This run is over practically the full extent of the NSW snowfields, a distance of nearly 60 miles, and is the longest ski trip which can be made in Australia. The terrain is well adapted to cross country skiing and as an extra bonus is scenically very beautiful.

It was natural therefore when a few of us touring enthusiasts began to let our thoughts dwell on a classic cross country race that we should consider this well established trip. Eventually we shortened the trip somewhat because the Northern end near Kiandra is often bare of snow in a lean year and we decided on the run from Round Mountain to Perisher.

We wrote to the Nordic Committee of the Ski Council of NSW suggesting the race be established. The suggestion was accepted and a sub-committee was appointed consisting of Kurt Lance, John Morgan, Sverre Kaaten, Ken Breakspear and Paddy Pallin. Then we got down to the serious business of organisation.

There are many things to be done for such a race which are not even thought of in an ordinary ski race. The safety and comfort of the competitors was, of course, the prime consideration. The route involved 37 miles (60 kilometres) of mountainous country practically trackless and uninhabited. Luckily we were given generous offers of help by the Snowy Mountains Authority, various Ski Clubs and a number of enthusiastic individuals. Finally our plans were worked out as follows: -

The race was to start after the completion of the Nordic events which were being held at Cabramurra. The Nordics were timed to finish on Tuesday, 17th August. Wednesday was allowed as a rest day to allow the competitors to get over the previous strenuous four days. Then on Thursday, 19th the race would start provided the weather was suitable. If there was bad weather on Thursday we still had Friday available.

There were to be four check stations on the route, where competitors would be checked in and out. These were to be snow vehicles stationed west of Jagungal, Mawsons Hut, Whites River Hut and Guthega. At the last three hot drinks were to be available. John Morgan was to head a party of the Canberra Alpine Club at Mawsons. This party would break track between Round Mountain and Mawsons. Another party was to get to Whites River from the south and mark the track to Mawsons. The Canberra YMCA Ski Club was to mark the track from Guthega and Whites. The Snow Revellers Club took on the job of marking the track

between Guthega and Perisher. Large quantities of track marking flags were provided. The makings of tea and coffee were prepared and Arne Kirkemo of Island Bend kindly offered to make a special concoction of oatmeal and fruit juices, the making of which is a special secret of Scandinavians and may account for their prowess at this sport. All this, plus supplies of waxed paper cups, spare sleeping bags in case of necessity and most important walkie talkie radio sets were to be delivered to Whites and Mawsons by snowmobile.

So the scene was set for a great race, the first of its kind to be held in Australia. The final competitors were Ross Martin, Otto Pinkas, Kore Grunnsund and Robbie Kilpinen from NSW and two Victorians Charles Derrick and Bob Maddison. These were all tough boys who had much experience in long distance running. Their keenness was almost incredible. They were all dedicated to the Nordic events in a way which was almost unbelievable. Robbie Kilpinen, Ross Martin and a young fellow named Asko Aksila holed up in the Grey Mare hut for several weeks prior to the race in order to practice and get fit. Otto and Kore were managing lodges in the Perisher Valley and went out each day in the season for a run of 6 to 10 miles. Bob Maddison had since gone overseas to Norway and Finland to race with the experts and get all the latest techniques of ski running and jumping.

As a further preparation for this race a party of four of us consisting of Rex Cox, Charles Coppa, John Morgan and myself went over the route in the first weekend in August. The purpose of this trip was to mark the route wherever possible with cloth markers on trees and also to choose the best possible final route between check points. Although the race was not scheduled to go over the summit of Jagungal we of course climbed to the top as a side trip and there found ski tracks of Ross, Robbie and Asko and in the visitors' book on the summit were several entries of their names recorded each time they came on their training runs from Grey Mare Hut. We paid silent tribute (touched with a little envy) to these young men living this wonderful but austere life in pursuit of their goal. We arrived quite late at Mawsons Hut and next morning we awoke to find heavy snow falling. We had a brief discussion on the advisability of proceeding but decided in favour of going on.

The snow fell relentlessly and the going was heavy. Visibility worsened until we were completely wrapped in a world of cotton wool. It was a case of "smelling" our way to Whites with the aid of a map and compass. Several times when I was leading I fell over small cornices, but the snow was soft and deep and apart from the bother of disentangling oneself from a mix up of stock grips, pack straps and ski bindings no damage was done. Good navigation (and maybe a bit of luck) brought us out on the road a mile north of Schlink Pass and we were soon enjoying lunch in Whites.

We had transport arranged at Guthega for midday the following day so we spent the night at Whites River hut and left very early the following morning. We climbed to meet the sun on the Rolling Grounds where the wind was keen as a whetted knife! The snow was blowing round our legs like sand and it seemed as though we trudged our way across a frozen Sahara. The silent valleys to the west were sleeping under a blanket of mist. We were alone in the world and glorying in it. Finally we came to Consett Stephen Pass and we stopped to take in the glorious scene.

Behind us were the Granite Peaks, each stark rock throwing an enormous shadow from the still low sun. The mountain sides were shining with newly fallen snow and the shallow valley was a turmoil of windblown snow. To our right were the western slopes, their valleys still under mist. Ahead of us was the great bulk of Tate and in the distance Blue Cow and

Perisher. Below was Guthega Creek and what were those tiny dots moving on the snow? We (with our 30lb packs) moved cautiously down the slope and the figures came towards us climbing with effortless speed as fast as we descended.

It was a happy meeting with Ross Martin, Robbie Kilpinen, Asko Aksila and Otto Pinkas. The first three had been into Perisher for supplies and Otto was accompanying them on a practice run. They looked superbly fit, lean as greyhounds, all whipcord and muscle.

So ended the overture. All was set for the curtain to rise. We had done all we could to ensure the success of the race and the safety of the participants. Alas! The best laid plans of mice and men...! Anyone who is familiar with snow country knows that the weather always has four trumps up its sleeve and this time the weather played the lot and we didn't win a trick.

So now to Cabramurra. The scheduled Nordic events are over, run in foul weather but with excellent sportsmanship displayed all round. The overworked officials Kurt Lance, Danny Collman and John Morgan had to make the fateful decision on Wednesday. The Snowy Mountains Authority forecast predicted that it would clear on Thursday and deteriorate again on Friday. A meeting of competitors was held and it was decided to start on Thursday morning. A message went to Charlotte Pass to the party who were to man Whites, No Go! They couldn't make it. Crisis! John Morgan and Bob Arnott who were to be in the Mawson party offered to rush around to Munyang by car and ski into Whites whilst George Dudzinski and party would go off to Mawsons.

The other parties and snowmobiles were alerted. Meanwhile YMCA Canberra Ski Club started making the trip from Guthega to Whites.

The competitors were left to work out what wax they would put on their skis, and have a good sleep before their ordeal.

Thursday morning. Visibility was good and the weather seemed to be improving. The race started with everyone in a happy mood. Otto, Kore and Robbie took turns breaking track and the pace was fast, not much slower than for a 15km race. (This one was 60km).

In the meantime John Morgan and Bob Arnott were having their troubles. They arrived at Whites on Wednesday afternoon accompanied by a Porsche Snow Vehicle and crew and immediately started off to Mawsons guiding the Porsche. Visibility was poor however and the snow vehicle got bogged and could not go on. The party then return to Whites and the Porsche went back to Munyang Power Station. Early next morning John and Bob set off to go to Mawsons on skis. Visibility was again poor. They left a note for the vehicle driver indicating their intentions and asking him to follow. They skied for some hours, but eventually the visibility was so poor they decided to return on their tracks. They had only returned a little way when they came on the Porsche up to the roof in snow. It had subsided into a creek bed. With the aid of the vehicle's wireless they reported their position, learned that the race had started and that the competitors were well on their way to Mawsons. After considerable combined efforts of John, Bob and the Porsche's crew they managed to extricate the vehicle and headed back to Whites to prepare hot drinks for the competitors.

Meanwhile the Mawsons party, not having the radio which should have been delivered by the snow vehicle, was not aware the race had started.

The team had by this time passed No1 check station (the snow vehicle which had marked the trail to the beginning of the long climb over the slope of Jagungal), and were now climbing steadily in soft snow, Robbie Kilpinen was feeling strong and started to put on pace and Otto went after him. Kore, being heavy, was breaking through the soft snow and Ross soon passed him. Charlie Derrick and Bob Maddison caught up with Kore. The visibility got worse and worse and it was only possible to see the track here and there. It was a frightening experience.

Robbie Kilpinen and Otto Pinkas realised the danger and, in the interest of safety, abandoned the lead they had established, and waited for the others to catch up.

Even with good visibility it is quite difficult to find Mawsons from the north. With poor visibility the task is formidable. There are so many features and small valleys which all look alike. The boys were getting really worried, when suddenly Robbie saw a rock which he recognised as one he had eaten his lunch on two years previously. Spirits immediately rose to have this check on their whereabouts. However the weather got worse and visibility poorer. Not far from Mawsons, Otto was in the lead. He turned to the others saying "We should go down soon" and with that he disappeared over a 25ft cornice. Luckily no bones or skis were broken.

They were relieved to meet George Dudzinski and Dave Bennett who were marking the track leading into Mawsons. Safely in Mawsons, Anne Dudzinski made a cup of tea.

The next lap was to Whites. The snow was getting worse and the going very heavy. Bob Maddison was suffering from flu, but he plodded on not complaining. Of course there was nothing hot at Whites. John and Bob had wisely put out the fire before leaving and had expected to be back in ample time to prepare drinks. The boys did not want to wait and get chilled so they merely had cold lemon drinks and pushed off leaving Bob Maddison behind. Bob was bitterly disappointed to abandon the race but he was suffering now from flu and getting cramps. No doubt he could have finished the trip but would have held back the others. He therefore made a sporting decision and pulled out.

The rolling Grounds are always exposed and this occasion was no exception. The wind was strong and cold. Charles and Robbie weren't wearing mitts. Robbie had lost his and Charles had his in his pack and was too cold and tired to get them out. To make matters worse the snow was colder and the skis, waxed for wet snow, began to ball up. The long miles past the Granites and across the Rolling Grounds were fought against bitter winds but all things come to an end and eventually Consett Stephen Pass was reached.

Charles and Ross decided that because the others had done most of the track breaking they would finish together and let the others race it out from Guthega Bridge. However the going was so slow and nobody seemed inclined to put a spurt on, so finally everyone decided to finish together.

At the end of the long climb up Back Perisher they were delighted to meet Jeff Rankin who was keeping watch with a radio. Then a line of gum tips which had been laid by Bruce Haslington and Jeff led to the finish at The Valley Inn.

A crowd of spectators urged out into the inclement weather but the indefatigable Sverre Kaaten stood awaiting the finish and were somewhat astounded to see the competitors arrive in a bunch, line up and solemnly step over the line together.

What an anti-climax you may say. Yes was it? The prime purpose of a race is not necessarily to see who can pass the finishing post first, but rather to provide men (or women) with an opportunity to exercise their particular skill under circumstances requiring them to give of their utmost. This race did that and more. It called forth sportsmanship and thought for others which alas, is often absent in hard pressed conditions.

Ken Murray and members of his organisation were kindness itself. After a brief examination by a doctor the boys were given hot baths, dry clothing and a meal. In a few hours they had completely recovered from their ordeal.

The elapsed time from start to finish was 7 hours 55 minutes. Very good considering the conditions but one which will easily be beaten when the race is run in good weather.