

Ski orienteering season 2003:

World Cup medals on offer

The international ski orienteering calendar for this season includes the World Cup and both World Championships for juniors and masters. The World Ranking Events (WRE) programme includes some 40 competitions in more than ten different countries whilst, in 2002, when the World Ranking scheme was introduced, the programme comprised only 15 events.

Fourteen World Cup events

The 2003 World Cup in Ski Orienteering consists of fourteen events; eleven individual races and three relays. The first of the three rounds will be organised at Alpe de Siuci (Seiser Alm) in Italy. These events also have the status of European Championships. The first event, a middle distance mass-start competition, on 13 January, will be followed by a sprint race, a long distance event and a relay.

The World Cup circus then moves to Sweden, venue for the 2004 World Ski Orienteering Championships. The events of the second round will be held in Östersund/Åsarna, and in Sundsvall/Timrå, in the period 8-15 February.

Estonia and Russia are the host nations for the events of the third and final World Cup round. The two Estonian events, a long distance on 28 February, and a short



PHOTO: PIRJO VALJANEN

Reigning Middle Distance World Champion: Edouard Khrennikov, RUS.

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distance on 2 March, will be held together with the 2003 World Masters Ski Orienteering Championships for competitors aged 35 or older. After the events in Estonia, the World Cup athletes will continue to Cheliabinsk, Russia, where the season will be rounded off with a long distance event on 4 March, a short distance race on 6 March, and a relay on 7 March.

The Junior World Ski Orienteering Championships will be held in St. Petersburg, Russia, on 17-23 February.

No Olympic participation in 2006

Earlier this year, the International Olympic Committee decided not to approve the IOF's application for ski orienteering to be included in the programme of the 2006 Olympic Winter Games in Turin, Italy.

– We are naturally disappointed but the negative decision didn't come as a surprise to us, says the IOF President Sue Harvey. - In light of the IOC policy to decrease, rather than increase, the numbers, we realised that it would be very difficult for any new sport to make it onto the programme. In fact, no new sport, nor discipline, was admitted to the 2006 Olympic Winter Games, and just one new event, the biathlon mass start, was included.

– As regards the IOC Programme Commission's argument that the participation in ski orienteering is very low in countries outside Europe, this is certainly true. However, although the number of countries where ski orienteering is practised (approx. 30, of which 21 have annual national championships) may not be considered large compared with the total number of countries in the world, the main reason for this is the lack of snow - and this applies to all winter sports, not only to ski orienteering.

– The General Assembly has decided that the IOF should strive to get orienteering included in the Olympic Games. Therefore, until a decision to the contrary, we will continue our efforts in this regard. To start with, Council has decided to carry out a thorough review of the main reasons for the negative outcome and, on the basis of this, to decide on the future course of action, Sue Harvey concludes.

PHOTO: TEEMU VIRTANEN



This winter the European Championships is the major goal for Matti Keskinarkaus.

European Championships the major goal for Matti Keskinarkaus

By ERIK BORG

Matti Keskinarkaus has won everything that is possible to win in ski orienteering. This winter, the European Championships is the major goal of the 26-year Finn this winter.

– I have won the World Cup. Therefore this is no longer so important, and by aiming at the European Championships, I will not need to have top form for the whole winter, states Matti.

The Finnish ski orienteering ace won the long-distance race at the World Championships last year. The year before, he won both the overall World Cup and the European Championships' gold medal at the short distance. Now, most of all, he wants to have a new European gold medal in the long distance.

– I am going for all the distances, but it is the long distance race which I would really like to win if I had the choice, he says.

This spring he had an operation on one of

his feet, which resulted in two months without training.

– I was not very motivated at that time, but now sport seems even more fun than before. I really enjoy training and races more than before because I have already achieved my goals that I had as a small boy, says Keskinarkaus.

He has recovered his motivation, and the trainee pilot will undoubtedly be a man to watch out for this winter. His compatriot, Arto Lilja, who is still trying for his first major international triumph, may perhaps be a prominent challenger because of his hunger to win. The Russians are also almost sure to be found at the top of the results. Edouard Khrennikov, Andrei Gruzdev and Ruslan Gristan will certainly be at the forefront. Anders Hauge has always been exceptionally good on his home tracks in Norway. This winter might see his big breakthrough internationally.

Lena Hasselström, the ski orienteering queen of recent seasons, will not be

concentrating on ski orienteering this winter. Her abdication will open the door for a tough battle between Russian Tatiana Vlasova, Stina Grenholm of Sweden and the two Finnish girls Erja Jokinen and Katja Rajaniemi for her vacant throne. Norwegian Stine Hjerme Kirkevik will not be seen in the ski tracks either as she is expecting her first child.

Not given up on the Olympics

There is no place for ski orienteering in the Olympic Games in Italy. Kåre Kirkevik thinks this is a pity, but he also believes there will be new chances in the future.

– We must just continue our work and see when the next opportunity arises, comments Kirkevik, who is the Chairman of the IOF Ski Orienteering Commission.

In late August the IOC Executive Committee decided that no new sports disciplines would be added to the Olympic Games in 2006.

– The decision was very disappointing to the ski orienteering world, but is of minor importance in the short term. I don't believe that the decision will have any major effect for the sport in Scandinavia and Russia. It may have a more negative significance for Southern and Mid-Europe and Eastern Europe outside Russia where the sport and the available resources are smaller, comments Kirkevik.

Ski orienteering has had to contend with very unkind weather gods for a number of years. This has resulted in difficulties in obtaining organisers, but it is a good international calendar that awaits the world's best ski orienteers this winter with 11 World Cup races in four countries and three relays. The World Cup races in Italy also incorporate the European Championships.

Even though the snow conditions have been poor, the interest for ski orienteering has been sustained at an impressive level. Participation at the last World Championship relays is good proof of this.

– 22 nations took part in the men's relay class at the World Championships. In comparison, there were only 14 nations in the men's cross country at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City", relates Kirkevik.

PHOTO: TEEMU VIRTANEN



Ski orienteers have come closer to ski stadiums and to spectators. The photo shows Swedish Tomas Löfgren and Ukrainian Andriy Kubin at the 2002 World Championships long distance event in Bulgaria.

Even familiar terrain can be strange enough

Bringing ski orienteering events into ski stadiums creates a contradiction

BY TOMMI ROIMELA

During the past years ski orienteers have come closer and closer to ski stadiums. Today most ski orienteering competitions are indeed held on well-known ski stadiums. It is of course easier for the organisers as the permanent ski tracks can be used as the basis for the network of ski orienteering tracks. On the other hand it can cause a few problems as some of the competitors may be familiar with the terrain. Is the sense of fairness in danger in this situation?

Pekka Varis, a member of the IOF Ski Orienteering Commission, thinks the current trend is absolutely right. Varis, who led the Ski Orienteering World Cup 1997 almost as he liked until he became injured at the end of the season, and who won silver in the 1998 World Ski Orienteering Championships classic distance, stresses though that fairness has to be the primary objective.

– I think it's right to bring the competition into a stadium. It makes the technical preparations easier, and the network of ski tracks is often already there. For the local visibility of the sport it's also important to have top orienteers from the respective region taking part in the event. Nevertheless, special care should always be devoted to issues of fairness. A "fair" competition situation doesn't come automatically, Varis points out. You can't just take people to the ski stadium and let them ski.

– All aspects have to be thought through carefully for each event. It's quite rare for anyone to have a real advantage from knowing the terrain, but occasionally even a little help from advance knowledge of the terrain can be decisive, he says.

It would be ideal if athletes had such high ethical standards that they wouldn't compete in terrain they are "too" familiar with. But

withdraw from a race in the future gets higher for others too. You can't just leave it up to an athlete's ethical attitude, but the organiser and the IOF Event Advisor have to judge it carefully on a case by case basis, he stresses.

Getting to know the terrain already before the competition

There is a definitive trend that ski orienteering events will be drawn to ski stadiums. Inevitably there will be situations where some of the athletes know the ski tracks better than others. However, there are ways to make it fair to everybody.

– One important thing is to make the dashed tracks unforeseeable. This means that you don't use the paths which already exist in terrain, but the tracks are made in the virgin forest, proposes Varis.

His idea is that when the tracks are manmade, you can use the same terrain again in the future. Then you just make the tracks differently, and the network will again be unknown for all competitors. Another way to ensure fairness is very simple. If someone knows the terrain, let's make it possible for everybody else too.

– If you feel that someone has a real advantage from knowing the terrain, you can try to make things more equal for the other competitors by having the model event in a part of the competition terrain, or even allow competitors to ski the model event on the permanent tracks of the competition course. For example, before the World Ski Orienteering Championships 2004 in Sweden, there will be a training day for everybody in Åsarna in conjunction with the ski orienteering World Cup 2003, and one week is reserved for training during the summer 2003 in the very same terrain, he relates.

Varis believes though that there is not just one correct way in which to deal with the issue of fairness:

– I think that all means of ensuring fairness, including the possibility of embargoing the terrain should always be considered on a case by case basis, he concludes.

A watershed in the history of orienteering: Annual World Orienteering Championships soon a reality

PHOTO: ERIK BORG



Björn Valstad, NOR, here surrounded by fans, won the 2002 World Cup.

The year 2002 is drawing towards its end and elite orienteers are already looking forward to the 2003 season, and to the World Orienteering Championships (WOC) in particular. Ever since the WOC was established in 1966, it has been held every second year. From 2004 onwards, there will be an annual WOC as well as an annual World Cup series. The 2003 WOC in Rapperswil-Jona, Switzerland will therefore be a watershed in the history of orienteering.

Extensive development process

The revised elite events programme is the result of an extensive development process. It all started in 1996, when the delegates at the General Assembly in Jerusalem, Israel, reconfirmed that Olympic inclusion is the overall goal for the IOF. Following this decision, Council formed an Olympic Project Group to start up and to co-ordinate the work. Two years later, in 1998, the General Assembly approved an Olympic Action Plan, including the development of a new elite events programme. In the year 2000, the General Assembly unanimously adopted Council's proposal "IOF Elite Events - a concept for development" and the so-called "Leibnitz Convention" on media and spectator friendly events.

Immediately after the Congress in Leibnitz, the Elite Events Programme (EEP) group

was formed and given the task of developing and proposing the new event programme. After broad consultation with member federations, athletes and coaches, the EEP submitted its conclusions to Council. On the basis of the EEP report, Council presented its proposal at the Extraordinary General Assembly held in 2001. On this occasion, the members approved the introduction of a new programme with WOC and World Cup every year from 2004 onwards, and agreed that the new discipline formats should be sprint, middle, long, and relay.

Qualification as part of the WOC programme
The decisions taken at the Extraordinary General Assembly in 2001 were in line with the suggestions made by the EEP group. In its report, the group also suggested that the WOC formats be adapted to a more limited time window. As long as the individual WOC finals are run in the form of time trials, some form of qualification is required to achieve this goal. Many delegates at the Extraordinary General Assembly expressed a preference for a WOC qualification model based on regional events.

At a seminar held during the IOF Congress in July 2002, Council presented three models which could be used in order to qualify

runners for the WOC finals. One of these methods was based on regional qualification and another on world rankings. The members, however, expressed their clear preference for the third model presented, i.e. for qualification races held in conjunction with, but prior to, the WOC.

Several improvements to increase participation

As a basis for the implementation of the new programme, the Elite Events Commission (EEC) has evaluated the 2002 World Cup and considered the feedback received from athletes, coaches, federations and other interest groups.

– First and foremost, we need a more realistic programme in terms of the number of competitions, and in relation to the limited financial resources, says Björn Persson, Chairman of the EEC.

– Our goal is to create a programme which makes it possible for as many nations as possible to participate. We will, for example, seek to avoid having split rounds requiring travel in between the events. We also intend to prioritise a reasonably affordable, common ‘Olympic style’ accommodation for all teams.

The goal: clearly distinguishable formats

– The coming two-year period will be characterised by event quality development and stabilising of the event formats. The EEC will continue to develop the sprint, trying out different formats as well as different environments. As regards the relays, we will carefully analyse them to ensure that they are fair, and that they become shorter and tighter, says Björn Persson.

– In order to attain the goal of making the events fair and challenging for the athletes, yet interesting for spectators, media and sponsors, we are ready to make adjustments within the formats, e.g. in relation to recommended winning times, course planning etc. We certainly realise that not all of the event formats will be appreciated by every athlete, but we are firm in our goal to give each of the three individual event formats its own, clear profile, Persson continues.

Not only the race formats, but also the events as such, will need to be stabilised. The means of assisting the organisers include both on-site activities and organiser’s manuals and guidelines.

– The Competition Rules are currently being updated and we are, for example, looking at the possibilities of making electronic punching and time keeping mandatory for WOC and World Cup events. We also strive to ease up on some of the secrecy requirements in relation to the events so as to ensure fairness and to guarantee that all nations have equal access to information when they prepare themselves for the events, says Björn Persson.

New blood in the commission

The development process beginning in 1996 has been finalised, and now it is time to consolidate and to implement the new programme. A lot of hard work will still be required in order to achieve the goals. With the aim of improving the communication with the elite athletes, the IOF Council has recently decided to include Frauke Schmitt Gran, Germany, and Sixten Sild, Estonia, in the Elite Events Commission.

– With the appointment of Frauke and Sixten, and with other initiatives aimed at improving the communication with the athletes and the coaches as well as with the event organisers, we hope to create a continuous dialogue and to achieve a better understanding between the interest groups, Björn Persson concludes.



Simone Luder, SUI, dominated women's orienteering this year.

PHOTO: ERIK BORG

Good Wishes for the New Orienteering Year 2003!