

World Masters Winter Games, 2010, Bled, Slovenia



Medal from the World Masters Winter Games - Fiona Crossley (GBR and Scotland) with bronze from the ladies 5 km classic

The World Winter Masters Games, Bled, Slovenia, January 2010 was heralded with much trumpeting and promise, including by this very organ, the number one Newsletter for Masters cross-country skiers in Britain. But there are promises and promises, and how sorely were we misled. Here, then, is the record of what the epic British team found at the World Winter Masters Games, Bled, Slovenia, January 2010.

Things got off to rather a bad start. Having got up at 4:30 a.m. in order to get to Gatwick Airwick in time for the 9:15 direct flight, everything went smoothly but, one second before I was due to check in I realised that I didn't have my passport. So there was nothing to do but leave Wendy to fly on her own while I had to turn around and go home again.

It was such a stupid situation, and it is the very first time that such a thing has happened to me in all my years of travelling. I wanted to pay off some of my mortgage during the week so I went into Dunstable to do so. They said that they couldn't access my account unless I proved who I was, by showing my passport (apparently in post-Thatcherite Britain one's face is no longer a good enough way of identifying someone!). So on Friday I took the passport out of my skiing jacket, went to the mortgage company and, of course, forgot to put it back into my skiing jacket. All was not lost, though. I was able to fly out on Saturday evening with a different company and I will receive €25 in tax back from the missed flights. Wow! But it still cost me about €250 for the replacement ticket and it was just as well that I checked something. The flight out was with Adria Airways and the return flight should have been with Austrian Airways so I assumed that they were two entirely separate tickets and I was only going to buy a one-way flight. But two things stopped me: firstly, a one way flight cost about €480 whereas the return cost only €250 and, secondly, it turned out that, because I had missed the outward flight, the return flight would have been automatically cancelled as well! Just as well, then, that I didn't plan to turn up at Ljubljana airport on Monday after the event and hope to be flown home!

On Sunday morning we headed to the Race Office in the centre of Bled to try to find out what was happening and the answer seemed to be “We don’t know”. There were no signs of any of the British entries on the start lists (not a very good start), and Wendy was given a sheet of paper which said “Welcome to the Masters Winter Swimming Championships” which, by the way, is a fascinating sport. When the judge says “Gladiators, remove all your clothing”, you must do this, get into a freezing lake and try to get to wherever the end of the course is before death sets in. We were given our Bag (I would like to call it a Goody Bag but this would require it to contain some goodies) but this didn’t seem to make things much clearer, apart from the fact that we had to hire a taxi to take us up to Pokljuka for the two days before the event formally started and, thereafter, we had to take a bus (apart from the half of the British team which had access to a hire car). What was mostly lacking were things such as what the facilities in Pokljuka were (e.g. whether there was anywhere where we could leave clothes) and what the tracks were.

But we hired a taxi (shared with a few strangers (we met a friendly Russian) to keep costs down to a very reasonable €9 return), while Brian and Fiona went up in their hire car. Pokljuka is about half an hour up into the mountains from Bled and its main facility, apart from the tracks and the biathlon range, seems to be the large hotel, so that is where we headed. For just €3 we were able to hire a room with a shower and lockers for our warm-up clothing and, from there, we set off to ski in the skating style. There were, of course, no track maps but the start area seemed to lead us away from the hotel and up into a valley which was sort of recognizable from biathlon on Eurosport. Sadly for us, though, they had installed the start area the wrong way round, and we should have started at the other end of the start area and headed towards the hotel, but this didn’t become clear until the following day. Anyway, we hunted around and basically found the biathlon course, which had some fairly hefty climbs and correspondingly rapid downhills. It was difficult to see where tracks suitable for Masters were to be found, though, and that evening Brian was reliably told, by the Race Office, that we would be racing the World Cup biathlon tracks! Maybe skiers from countries where they know how to ski can just turn up and race without problem on almost any track, but I prefer to know where the downhills are so that I can at least practice them a few times beforehand, and not really knowing where the proper tracks would be was not doing much for my confidence!

The following day our taxi came right to the apartment and we picked up a few Australians from their hotel. Things started to look up a bit, because the Australians had somehow managed to find some track maps. When we arrived in Pokljuka, things got even better. The waxing cabins which we had seen the day before had become available, and we and the Australians were allocated a lovely, warm cabin which became our home when we weren’t anywhere else. With the knowledge of the track plans, though, we were able pretty much to find the proper Masters tracks (although even then we missed one sharp right hand corner the first time round, because the tracks were still not marked) and, in fact, they didn’t seem too bad at all. The blokes had a 3.3 km loop to do three times for the 10 km race, while the ladies had a 2.5 km loop to do twice for their 5 km race.

That evening, Monday, was the Opening Ceremony. Unlike the Masters World Championships, these games didn’t only involve cross-country skiing, they also included alpine skiing, biathlon, ski jumping, Nordic combined, ice hockey and that classic winter sport, futsal (that’s indoor football, by the way). So Brian, Wendy and Fiona decided that it might be fun to go to the ceremony in the centre of Bled, while I didn’t. They reported that it was fun, with the usual speeches and so on (but no refreshments) and the highlight of it all was a spectacular fireworks display, but on video screens and in black and white!!

Tuesday, and 10 km classic race day. Here we found the disadvantage of the bus system. Brian’s and my race started at 9:20 and there was one bus at 7:00 which would have got us there with almost two hours to go, and the second bus at 8:30 which would have got us there about half an hour too late for proper race preparation, and we certainly needed time to affix our beautifully-designed pin-on paper race numbers, as befitting the Masters Winter Olympics! With neither of the buses being a practical proposition, we were forced to take a minibus taxi again, which cost twice as much as the ‘official’ bus. But at least it came right to the door at 7:30 and delivered us comfortably to Pokljuka for about 8:00.

With snow temperature around -12 °C, grip waxing should not have been much of a problem. But the tracks seemed to be glazed, making the snow ‘old’, so the actual wax of the day was a mixture of Swix VR 40, -4 to -12 °C and VR 45, 0 to -4 °C for old snow. It may be that we needed the warmer wax because of quite a lot of the snow being man-made. Having applied the wax, warming up was the next activity and here we found another problem – it was not clear whether there were any warm-up tracks nor where they were (we didn’t find out that they were right by the waxing cabins until later), so everyone was out warming up on the race tracks. Coming down the first significant downhill with a sharp left turn at the bottom, I decided to try staying in the tracks but this proved to be a mistake – I built up far too much speed, missed the corner and shot out onto what was the return track. Hmmm, slightly different tactics needed during the race itself.

Then we discovered another problem – it was not clear how to actually get to the starting area apart from either skiing the wrong way down the tracks or, as in my case, clambering through a wooden fence. If we had found the warm-up tracks, we would also have found the underground tunnel from there into the start area, but we didn’t. In the start area there was nowhere to leave warm-up clothes and no plastic bags or anything to put them in either, so the only alternative was to leave them hanging on the fence and hope! While I was getting to the start line, though, I was privileged to see the leading 10 or so skiers from the M01-M02 race heading back up the finish straight onto the race track! You see, with no track marking until the day of the race, and no plan of the stadium available, they had simply taken the wrong way!

From the start lists, we had all been allocated positions on the start line but there was no one there to tell us where to go so it became a bit of a free-for-all although without unpleasantness. There was no ski marking either. I had looked around the start pen for Brian but he was, rather strangely, not there and I feared that maybe he had had problems during the warm up. With him not there, the two people for me to race were Zac Zacarias from Australia and my French friend from Autrans last year, Didier Monin, an M04 but who, rather surprisingly, had been allocated an M05-M06 number. In fact the correct allocation of number according to age, or category according to age, seemed to be a little beyond our friendly organizers!

It would be nice to write that, at 9:20, the gun went for the start of our race, but that would be a lie. The gun was held up, we were told to get ready, the trigger was pulled but no sound came out. It made no difference because we went anyway! With the two largest groups, M05 and M06, setting off together, this caused a further problem – there were far slower people ahead of me and, with only two tracks once we exited the stadium, there was no way past and this continued until at least half way round the first lap (why, instead of two groups setting off together at 10 minute intervals, couldn’t they have had each group set off on its own every 5 minutes?). Rather frustrating but perhaps, in the long run, a good thing. I had a very heavy cold and bad cough, and I was finding it difficult to breathe properly or to really get going, and maybe if the tracks had been clear I would have set off too quickly and suffered later on. As it was, Didier got off quicker than me but I was able to pass him half way round the first lap and he didn’t get back past me. Zac, on the other hand, a much better skater, was always safely behind. But once the race started, the limitations of the beautifully designed, safety-pinned race numbers became clear. Everyone had their numbers on their fronts, so it wasn’t possible to know whether other people on the track were M05s, and therefore I should be racing them, M06s or even just tourists out for the day. I was racing someone into the finish who seemed to slow dramatically, and it turned out when the results were published that he was a fellow M05. Had I known this from his number, I might have pushed just a little harder to avoid our dead heat! I had the feeling that there were quite a few M05s behind me but this proved to be an illusion; it was nearly all M06s behind me. But, still, 27.3 % of the winner’s time was my second-best effort at this sort of level.

Men’s M01-M06 10 km classic, Tuesday 26th January

Fastest	Giorgio Morassi	ITA	M04	27:56.7	21.5 km/h	
1)	Iimo Pulkkinen	FIN	M05	30:04.4	20.0 km/h	
20=)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M05	38:24.3	15.6 km/h	27.3 % (24 starters)
-)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	DNS		

By the time Fiona and Wendy started their race at 12:40, the tracks were very glazed and it was definitely a VR 45 waxing day! For the ladies race, nearly all the categories (F01 to F08) started together but this didn't seem to cause as much of a problem as it had done for the men. Fiona appeared to be going well, whereas Wendy tried to do the same as me in the warm-up and come down the first rapid hill in the tracks, only to tumble right at the bottom on the turn, which cost her a fair bit of time. The ladies were supposed to do one of the climbs from the biathlon track (the second of the two which we had done in the men's race), but it was only when they got to the start of this hill that they discovered that they weren't going up it at all – it's always nice to know these things well in advance, n'est pas? It was, however, probably just as well, because such a climb, with its nice, fast descent, would have been far too much for the F08 ladies; I watched them come down the much less steep hill where Wendy had fallen and most of them fell or sat down much earlier on the descent! As I watched this race, the concept of 'fair play' seemed to be being given a relatively wide interpretation. One lady (I think that her number was 600 but I couldn't be 100 % sure on account of the beautifully designed paper numbers) was blatantly skating, and not just around the corners but along straight sections as well – I watched her skate at least 20 metres and so did the FIS Technical Delegate. But not one lady was disqualified according to the results and, if I was right about this lady's number, she won a bronze medal in her age group.

When the results came out, it appeared that Fiona had just missed out on a bronze medal, having been overtaken shortly before the finish by another lady, so finishing 0.5 second behind. Later, closer, examination of the results showed, however, that this lady was born in 1957 and so should have been racing in the F05 category. So a complaint was made, examined and upheld and the following day, in a moving ceremony attended by Fiona, Brian, the race Director, Sonja from the race Office and no one else, Fiona was duly presented with her bronze medal. We never discovered whether the bronze medal presented erroneously to the F05 lady was ever taken back.

Ladies F01-F06 5 km classic, Tuesday 26st January

Fastest	Novoselova Masha	RUS	F01	15:58.4	18.8 km/h	
1)	Bernadette Roche	FRA	F04	17:26.8	17.2 km/h	
3)	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	20:18.4	14.8 km/h	16.4 % (4 starters)
1)	Raufa Zagidulina	RUS	F05	16:50.1	17.8 km/h	
7)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	23:08.2	13.0 km/h	37.4 % (8 starters)

Wednesday was uneventful; with biathlon races taking place in the morning it wasn't possible to train until the afternoon but we did make the trip up for an hour or so of skiing. This proved that my cough, in particular, was not getting any better, which was why I decided not to start the 15 km race the following day. The race start for Brian was again 9:20, so the buses were just as impractical as they had been on Tuesday and, once again, we were obliged to hire a taxi at 8:00. There was another rather strange twist, though. Despite being billed as "15 kms", we were officially told, on the start list, that this was a 13.5 km race but it was made up of 4 laps of the same 3.3 km track that we had used in the classic race so, if my maths is correct (I was away the day they did 'difficult sums' at school), that makes just 13.2 kms! Brian had waxed for the right temperature, using high-flouro glider with Fairy Dust for dry snow, but he complained that this was very slow. He also fell twice, too, on a fairly innocuous hairpin bend with a small step-up climb, once when someone stepped on his pole and once when he brought himself down. Still, it had to be a better result than his 10 km classic race!

It hadn't seemed to me to be a very sound idea, 10 minutes before the start of the 'main' men's race, that a fairly large group of what looked like national skiers was set off, of very wide-ranging ability. This meant that the Masters competitors were soon having to overtake skiers going a lot slower. But I didn't hear any complaints about this from either Brian or Zac.

Men's M01-M06 15 (13.5) km free, Thursday 28th January

Fastest	Johann Standmann	AUT	M04	33:57.1	23.9 km/h		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M05	36:35.8	22.1 km/h		
27)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	46:48.4	17.3 km/h	28.3 %	(37 starters)
-)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M05	DNS			

To the best of my knowledge, the ladies race was uneventful! The organisers had found another racer from somewhere to push Fiona out of the medals and Wendy, learning from the classic race, fell twice, in exactly the same place! But she got up, dusted herself off and still avoided that bitter last place!

Ladies F01-F06 10 km free, Thursday 28th January

Fastest	Lyudmila Udalova	RUS	F03	27:33.0	21.8 km/h		
1)	Bernadette Roche	FRA	F04	29:23.6	20.4 km/h		
4)	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	36:30.1	16.4 km/h	24.3 %	(6 starters)
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	29:31.2	20.3 km/h		
9)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	42:52.7	14.0 km/h	45.3 %	(10 starters)

One other result from the 10/15 km race that should have raised eyebrows was that posted by 70 year old Frenchman Daniel Chopard, who completed his 10 km race in just 25:48.4! This works out at 23.3 km/h, which makes one immediately think that there must have been a little distance missing from his tracks! In fact the first 9 finishers in this category all went faster than 20 km/h.

On Friday we returned to Pokljuka in the afternoon to try to check out the 5 km track that we would use for the 30/20 km race on Sunday. This track went out into the woods behind the army barracks and involved crossing the main road (no snow had been put down at this stage, before climbing for a kilometre or so, followed by a fast but not difficult descent by the side of the downhill ski area. This bit of track was in poor condition, with a fair amount of mud and gravel. When I asked about this at the race office, they assured me that there would be no problem because they were expecting 0.5 metres of snow on Saturday. Well, great! This was supposed to be a major international Masters event and the organisers were relying, for their track preparation, on the weather! But, before that, there was the small matter of the relay to deal with.

We were allowed to enter non-national teams for the relay, so I was entered with Zac and an Australian M04 skier who had done well in the 15 km skate race but who then did the Catholic thing and pulled out at the last minute (7 p.m. on Friday night), so Brian was press-ganged into the team. After his less-than-good waxing job for Thursday's race, we speculated that, with quite a lot of man-made snow on the track, a low-fluoro wax job, with added molybdenum, might be the way to go, so this is what I opted for. Perhaps it was the right waxing job for Thursday or even Friday, but it failed to take account of the fairly large quantity of new snow which had fallen and I found the whole race to be very hard work. But wax testing was always going to be tricky because, when we arrived just before 8 a.m. for the race at 9 a.m., there were still no classic tracks cut at all. These finally appeared at about 8:30, by which time a decision had already been made about the grip wax (snow temperature was about -3 °C) and, while I was out warming up, a bloke on a skidoo came around pulling a little track cutter to make the second classic spoor.

Men's M01-M06 3 x 5 km relay (classic, free, free), Saturday 30th January

Fastest	Austria M03	M. Standman	15:49.3	P. Zloebel	14:40.5	J. Standmann	13:52.8	44:22.6
M05	1) Ukraine	V. Perebyinis	16:56.1	A. Turkin	16:28.0	M. Bilera	16:47.3	50:11.5
	8) GBR/AUS	A. Pinney	20:42.8	Z. Zacharias	20:00.5	B. Adams	18:21.2	59:04.4

At just 14.4 %, and coming 8th from 9 finishers, this was by a long way the best international Masters relay result for a team made up of 66.666666667 % of Brits!

And then, finally, Sunday and the 20/30 km skate race. Well, we knew the track for this race, didn't we? We'd practiced it and commented on how poor it was, but the promised snow had come so they would surely have prepared the agreed track. Wendy had gone up to Pokljuka earliest, because her race started at 9:00 (Fiona, who hadn't been sure about taking part in this race anyway, had decided to catch my cold which gave her the additional excuse – it's nice to be able to share things) and Brian and I, starting at 11:00, came up later on the 8:30 coach. Just as we were approaching the stadium we saw a whole load of racers, one of which must have been Wendy but we didn't spot her, heading down a brand new track along the side of the road! It then became clear that we weren't doing 6 x 5 kms after all, as we had thought, but we were doing 3 x 10 kms (or 2 x 10 kms in Wendy's case) on a track most of which no one had seen before.

We watched Wendy come past going really well, with plenty of people behind her, sadly all the wrong age! Then it was our turn. We decided to try the tunnel from the warm up area to the start, but there were no lights on so, although we found our way in without problem, we couldn't find our way out and had to go back; there was just enough time to get to the start. All men, M01 to M06, started together, so it was a bit of a crush at first, with a few people falling, but this was not a particular problem. What was a problem, though, was the long descent along the road – this was so slow that we had to double pole almost all the way down. And then we started the climb; not particularly steep, but it was very chopped up and slow and it just seemed to go on forever – it was surely longer than allowed in a Masters event. Who on earth took the decision to cut a track on about 300 cms of fresh snow on a track where nobody had skied at all?

Suffering now from the week-long cold, I just had no strength at all and had to stop twice on the way up the long hill (the second time I stopped, Zac the Australian came past) and very quickly took the decision that this was not my day and pulled out after 7 kms. Brian, though, was going particularly well and this was his best performance by far of the week, managing the 15 kms in just under 2 hours. Although I didn't get quite that far, it seemed as though the drinks station, at about 10 kms, was of the self-service variety!

Ladies F01-F06 20 km free, Sunday 31st January

Fastest	Lyudmila Udalova	RUS	F03	1.08:12.3	17.6 km/h	
1)	Bernadette Roche	FRA	F04	1.12:32.6	16.5 km/h	(4 starters)
-)	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	DNS		
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	1.10:15.4	17.1 km/h	
10)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	1.41:34.3	11.8 km/h	44.6 % (11 starters)

Men's M01-M06 30 km free, Sunday 31st January

Fastest	Pavel Petr	CZE	M03	1.28:37.7	20.3 km/h	
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M05	1.29:58.8	20.0 km/h	
25)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	1.58:31.7	15.2 km/h	31.7 % (39 starters)
-)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M05	DNF		

And then it was all over. The event had officially closed the day before, Saturday, but the closing ceremony was held in Granske Gora which is about one hour's drive from Bled so we decided not to go. So what about the summary of the whole event? Wendy was the only one who completed all of her allotted races, so she completed 35 racing kilometres in the week. Fiona completed two races for a total of 15 racing kilometres, Brian did two individual races and the relay, total 50 racing kilometres, and I completed one and a bit individual races and the relay for 22 racing kilometres (discounting the two stops!). I guess that we probably didn't do much more than 50 kms of other skiing, even if we add in race warm-ups. So it made it a fairly expensive week's trip for not much skiing or much racing.

One further thing perhaps worth mentioning, should you ever find yourself in Bled/Pokljuka for a skiing trip. Any reasonably-sized town near a major cross-country ski area would have plenty of ski/sports shops, where the avid cross-country skier could browse and buy all the necessary ski waxes, wouldn't it? Or if it didn't, then the event organisers would, Shirley, arrange to have several major wax suppliers up at the start area. All I can say to this is "Ha", followed by "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha (*continued on Page 98. Ed.*)". Bled has fewer than any sensible sports shops and we were only able to get waxes from a Swix guy who seemed to be there unofficially supported one of the ski teams.

With the event over, you might think that things would have got better. But you failed to take account of the fact that I am currently Mr. Unlucky! We had ordered a taxi for midday to take us to the airport but by 12:30 it still hadn't turned up. When it finally arrived, it was nowhere near big enough to take four people (there were already two people in it when it arrived) with all their skis and baggage. We stood around for 20 minutes while the driver tried and failed to fit another seat but, in the end, we just had to let it go while we waited for another taxi. This finally arrived at about 1:20 for Wendy's flight at 2:30 and the airport is half an hour from Bled. We just managed to get to the airport in time, but we had been promised that it would cost us €7 each with four people in the taxi – with the replacement taxi we had to pay €25 each! I then tried to see whether I could change my flight to be on the same plane as Wendy, to save me having to wait 6 hours at the airport, but they couldn't find my booking, at first at least. They did eventually find it, and it turned out that it was for the 1st March! I must just have made a mistake when I was booking it. But I didn't much fancy the thought of staying for 28 days in Ljubljana airport so for €80 I was able to change it to the earlier flight, and I just got through security with 10 minutes to go before the flight.

The check-in place was closed by a barrier and I was sure that I had got there too late for the flight, so I rushed up to the gate and asked whether I was too late. The lady said "No" but that I had to wait until they were ready for us to board. Then I noticed that there were other people waiting, including Wendy. Anyway, we sat around for another half an hour or so and then, when I was looking at the departure board, I saw that our flight had been cancelled, just like that, for "Operational reasons", whatever they are (surely "Non-operational reasons" would have been more accurate!). So we all had to queue at the Adria desk for an hour or so, before we were put onto a later flight via Brussels. And to finish off the travel hassles, when we got to Heathrow our skis had been left behind in Brussels.

We can conclude that to organise a major Masters event takes rather more than just enthusiasm, and this event was lacking in many areas. Positive side, the tracks overall were good (with the exception of the 10 km track), the waxing cabin was excellent and the people were very friendly and accommodating, if sometimes uninformed (and if you read that and thought "Why were they in uniform?" then you read it just like me when I was proof-reading!). Negative side, the lack of information made things difficult, the bus transfers were a joke and very badly timed, the lack of track maps and marking made training difficult, and the paper numbers were hopeless. Makes you wonder, really, what we had paid our €130 entry fee for. There are no plans to hold another World Winter Masters Games for at least the next four years, but if such plans do emerge, I think that we would need a lot of guarantees that things would be far better organised than this event before I would be willing to recommend it. Let's just wait and see what happens.



This could be the start of the 15 km skate but it is probably the 30 km skate. The arrow marks Brian.



This could be the start of any race except the ladies – there was seemingly no official photographer!