

## World Winter Masters Games, Vermiglio, Italy, January 2024

The World Winter Masters Games (WWMG) has a rather chequered history! The first was held in Pokljuka, Slovenia, in 2010, was rather badly organised, attracted quite a few British skiers and where we won one bronze medal. The second was in Quebec in 2015 and, as far as I know, no one from the UK attended. The third was held in Seefeld in 2020, the last major event before Covid, and was excellent, attracting quite a few Brits, not only to the cross-country events but also to the Ski-O and other events, such as speed skating. Unlike the MWC, the WWMG is a multi-sport event covering a range of winter sports events, including some which don't yet figure in the Winter Olympics, such as snow running and ski mountaineering. Although it's supposed to be held once every 5 years, this year's event was held a year early. No reason was given for this, and there's no clash with the Winter Olympics which will be held in the same area in 2026.

For some reason, Vermiglio in northern Italy didn't really attract the British skiing public and, in addition, one third of the British cross-country team, Lauro Franzese, was out with a broken leg sustained just before Christmas. The Ski-O competitions were cancelled altogether, possibly because of a lack of entrants, possibly because of a lack of natural snow, the one British entrant in the biathlon, Dominique Lazanski of the London Region Nordic Ski Club (LRNSC) didn't turn up (apparently because she'd heard that the tracks were icy) and, although the LRNSC should, for the first time ever, have had a competitor in the ski jumping (Grzegorz Stasik), Grzegorz had hurt himself in a jumping competition in Norway, but it made little difference because the ski jumping was cancelled, anyway. So the British Nordic Ski Team 2024 comprised yours truly scrumptious and Martin Watkins.

Vermiglio, a small town at 1 280 metres along the Passo de Tonale, isn't really near anywhere. But if you imagine a triangle joining St Moritz in Switzerland, and Trento and Bergamo in Italy, it's about half way along the upper right line of the triangle joining Trento to St Moritz (*why, then, did you need to mention Bergamo? Ed.*). The SS42 road runs through the Passo de Tonale which, in general, is a high, fairly narrow, valley with mountains on either side. At this height there should have been plenty of snow in January but, sadly, the winter had been 'dry' so there wasn't. Moreover, what snow there was had been melted and frozen again. The Nordic Ski Centre at Laghetti di San Leonardo, meaning the Lakes of Saint Leonardo, was on the shady (southern) side of the valley, but much of the snow there was man-made and it, too, was fairly icy. The shape of the valley made getting accurate weather forecasts tricky, but not in the way one might have expected! The town of Vermiglio itself gets sunny once the sun comes up, and consequently well above 0 °C, whereas the cross-country area stays mainly in the shade. Try to explain, therefore, without moving your lips, why for the Monday at 14:30 when our 7.5 classic race started, the weather forecast said -12.5 °C in the village but only -10.5 °C in the shade!

Martin and his partner Cath and I were staying in the village of Pellizzano about 5 km east and down the valley at 1 000 metres, in a comfortable and warm AirBNB apartment, where the host kept providing us with food! From there it was a short drive up to the Nordic Centre where, usually, there was plenty of parking, and this is where I headed on Friday morning to recce the tracks. Unfortunately, there was a biathlon race going on and it was very difficult to get access to the tracks at all, so I headed back down and returned in the afternoon. With just one day until the first, 30 km classic, race, one might have imagined that there would be plenty of signage but, in fact, there were only signs for the biathlon, nothing for the cross-country.

At first, we judged that the tracks were almost entirely flat, but subsequent investigation proved that this was far from the case. There was a gentle climb up from the start, followed by a short drop, before one arrived at the first steep climb, which twisted its way up over about 0.3 km, before dropping down quite quickly again in a straight run but, unfortunately, with a right turn at the bottom. Running down in the tracks was possible, provided that one was happy to take the corner at high speed. The track then turned through almost 180° before starting the long climb up to the high point which, after a short flat section, it descended quiet sharply. Again, the descent was straight, but again there was a slight righthand corner at the bottom. If one went down in the tracks, the speed was so high that it was tricky to slow down in time for the 90° left turn onto the bridge some 75 metres after the bottom of the hill!

After the bridge, the tracks were flat for a while, before a short, gentle climb and easy but quick descent to another 90° left hand turn. A bit more double poling, and then over the bridge and there was one more climb followed by a two-step descent and we were back to the start, 3.64 km in total. In my view, a bit scary, with the two downhills on the limit of what older Masters (and me!) should be expected to do.

Saturday, first race day, and the first time I'd raced over 30 km since the last WWMG back in 2020. The weather forecast suggested -3 °C so I prepared two pairs of skis, one with Swiz VR45, -2 to -8 °C for transformed snow, and one with blue klister and VR50 on top, 0 to -4 °C, and headed up the hill to the venue. There I found that it was -6 °C, so that meant little point in testing the klister skis and I had to stick with the stick waxed ones. These, though, were working well during the warm up so, after that, I came back to the changing room and decided to add one more layer of VR45, just to be safe, only to find that I'd left it, and my cork, carefully in my bedroom!

There were fewer than 60 entrants in the male 30-69 age category, so everyone set off together. There were only 12 male 70+ entrants, 11 ladies 30-59 and 7 ladies 60+. Why were the ladies grouped differently from the men, one could have wondered, but one didn't. All 30-69 men starting together was not a problem, there were many tracks at the start, which dropped to four and then two, and the line was soon spread out. But it did make who one was competing against impossible to know. I knew, however, that I was competing against a Spaniard, Manuel, who now lives in New York and who is about my level. We started off more or less together; I was catching him on the flats and uphill but, while he was brave enough to stay in the tracks on the downhills, I was a scaredy cat and came out of the tracks, this costing me a lot of time! We continued this way for 4.5 of the eight laps. At the top of the first steep hill I went past him for the first time, but then he came shooting past me on the way down and this, together with a few other people coming past at high speed upsetting me, meant that I fell having got to the flat corner at the bottom! Rats!

Snowploughing down the hills and into the sharp corners was doing my grip wax no good at all, and I was progressively losing grip! I'd also picked up a pulled muscle in my lower back the week before, which was making double poling with any force a bit painful! So, for the last few laps, I was getting nowhere on the hills and was having to come out of the tracks and do a very slow herring bone. I was pleased when the final lap came, and was just crossing the final bridge when I fell, stupidly, once again; no idea why because I was going slightly uphill at the time! Anyway, shortly after, the race was over; I was cold and tired, and last!

**Long distance classic technique, Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> January**

**Men's M01-M08 30 km**

Fastest	Giovanni Gerbotto	ITA	M03	1.28:52.3	19.7 km/h		
1)	Martin Furrer	CH	M07	1.38:57.8	17.7 km/h		
10)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M07	2.21:34.7	12.3 km/h	43.1 %	(10 starters)



**Me (thank you, fans) starting yet another lap against the cool, light blue snow!**

Monday, short distance classic race, 3 x 2.5 km loop. This made things much easier, because the first steep downhill and long climb were gone, and so was the short climbing loop before the finish. So, in fact, only the one steep twisting climb and one fast downhill, and the rest was more or less flat. I'd been out the day before to practice the downhill, this time with one foot in the track and the other foot out, and this made the whole thing much safer and faster. So then it was only a question of getting the grip wax right to get *up* the hill! This was where the problem of weather forecasts raised its head! The weather forecast for the lakes suggested -9 °C when we were due to start at 14:30, the forecast for the town of Vermiglio suggested -14 °C. To get a better, and real, idea, I drove up to the stadium at about 11:00, and it was -6 °C, but there was no doubt that the sun was a-comin' round the mountain!

Back at base, I prepared two pairs of skis, one for slightly colder conditions and the other for warmer conditions and, lo and behold, at race HQ it was -1.5 °C and getting hotter! The warmer skis had been prepared with base binder, Swix VR50 and then Swix VR45 on top, and this was reasonable during the warm-up. But it was so warm and sunny that, after the warm-up, I had to remove my thermal tights and two top layers and, just to be on the safe side, I added one layer of Swix VR40 (0 to -3 °C) and I was all set!

There were a lot more people racing on this day, but still most men were grouped together, which made for quite a large pack of skiers heading out of the start at the same time. For possibly only the second time I can remember in a Masters race, I had to slow down a little to avoid colliding with skiers in front. Up ahead, Martin was going well, although he reported that it had been hard going up the first steep hill, not least of all because of the corners but also because other skiers had effectively destroyed the classic tracks. On the final lap, though, near disaster; one lady and one male skier were ahead going fast down the steep hill. The lady was not in the tracks and fell, and the other tried to take avoiding action but fell, too. Martin, though, just managed to avoid both, and continued to an excellent fifth place, best finishing position in Masters competitions other than when winning!



**Not the best quality photo, but here's Martin powering his way to 5<sup>th</sup> place in the short classic race**

For me, I was happy, and right behind my rival Manuel as we started the steep climb for the first lap. With the temperature now possibly around zero he, like several others, had opted for skin skis. But this was not a day for skins, which were slow and, when he stumbled, I was passed him and he was not coming back after that! I was puffing like a steam train but going well, and was determined not to allow Eva Lehotska, the lady who'd kept Nerys Jones in two silver medal positions in Seefeld last year, to pass me. She'd done the biathlon race that morning, but that's her problem and, although I didn't quite beat her time, starting five minutes after me she didn't come past! Interestingly, the fastest man on the day was in the 55-59 age category; was there, perchance, some high-fluoro usage going on, we wondered?

## Short distance classic technique, Monday 15<sup>th</sup> January

### Men's M01-M08 7.5 km

Fastest	Gian Joerger	SUI	M06	19:35.2	23.0 km/h		
1)	Todor Mashov	BUL	M07	21:12.8	21.2 km/h		
5)	Martin Watkins	GBR	M07	23:28.9	19.1 km/h	10.7 %	
15)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M07	28:30.2	15.8 km/h	34.2 %	(17 starters)

Wednesday, last racing day for me. Same issue as for two days previously, the weather forecast predicted something quite low, so the solution was exactly the same, prepare two pairs of skis, one for cold and the other for warm conditions, simples! When we arrived at the stadium, it was -4 °C, so out went the cold skis and in came the warmer ones with the addition of a couple of layers of Swix VR50, 0 to -4 °C. A recce of the track showed that the snow was quite a bit slower than on previous days, and proved that the grip would probably have been adequate, but I wanted to be able to get a bit further up the hills before having to herring bone. So back to the pits and a slight panic before I realised that we were starting at 09:45 instead of 09:30, then the addition of one short layer of Swix VR55, only one degree different (0 to -3 °C), but that one degree could be important!

09:45; we were told to wait for the man to blow his whistle, but the "Go" came before he blew, and we were off. Martin was well up towards the front, while I had the feeling that I was at the back of the pack! I looked back but couldn't work out whether the skiers behind were younger men who'd gone off at 09:30 and so would have been starting their second lap. No matter, the important thing was that I was able to go further up the first steep hill in the tracks than one person in my group, so I was past him, I didn't lose much time on the downhill because I went half way down in the tracks before adopting my half-slight snowplough safety position for the bottom half, and I overtook someone else on the second climb. As I was going down the first hill, I saw Martin at the top of the climb back up, so he was already some distance ahead and we'd only done a quarter of the first lap!

I was much more braver down the second steep hill – so far, so good, but this meant going into the bridge rather faster than I'd wished; lucky we've been practicing stem turns all season! Towards the end of my first lap, coming down the drop into the start area, there was a non-racing planker right in the tracks ahead of me. I shouted, "Excuse me, Sir, would you mind awfully extricating yourself from the race track?", or words to that effect – nothing! I shouted again, as did a course controller – again, nothing. I shouted a third time, asking whether he knew his father, and this did the trick, at least for a second. But just as I was about to pass, he made to move back into my track! Honestly, was the cold making his brain stop working?

At the start of my second lap, I was just a few seconds ahead of the start of the young ladies group. There was no unpleasantness, though; those faster than me went past, and I joined the battle with those of roughly my speed. It started snowing lightly on the second lap, and this got heavier on the third lap, which made things rather cold, but at least it improved my grip. I was in a good battle with two or three ladies, one of whom, a Greenlander, I thought was a bloke! This continued until the last lap, when I went past 'him' on the final steep uphill and was determined that I would stay ahead. I was faster on the double poling, but 'he' was right behind me on the final climb. So a sprint, of short, rapid, kick-double-pole was required to just pip 'him' to the line!

And what of Martin up ahead? At one point he was second in his category. But on the fast but fairly innocuous downhill into a sharp left turn, he caught an edge, went down and put his back into spasm. The whole incident probably only cost about 10 seconds or so but, in the time it took for him to recover his rhythm, he was caught by a Finn and someone from an older category. Each time he tried to overtake the other guy, the Finn blocked him and refused to go past the other guy. In the end, the Finn sprinted up the final short climb and pipped Martin for third place, just 2.5 seconds ahead – how annoyingly close to a medal!

## Middle distance classic technique, Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> January

### Men's M01-M08 15 km

Fastest	Sadurni Betriu Boix	ESP	M03	41:19.9	21.8 km/h		
1)	Martin Furrer	SUI	M07	47:29.5	18.9 km/h		
4)	Martin Watkins	GBR	M07	53:04.1	17.0 km/h	11.8 %	
12)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M07	1.03:01.8	14.3 km/h	32.6 %	(14 starters)

My best percentage of the event, pleasing, and I equalled my finishing position, 12<sup>th</sup>, from Seefeld four years earlier. But there were 6 non-starters, so who knows? After the race, we all went to the café upstairs in the race building for three hot chocolates, which could have been entirely that! They were so thick that they could almost have been made from melted chocolate. But who cares? We'd earned them, and diets are for wimps anyway!

Two days later and I was on my way home, there being insufficient Brits to make up a relay team. The trip proved rather adventurous and expensive! I decided to head over the mountains for a bit of scenery, rather than stick to the motorway and the Brenner Pass. Half way up an alp, the "Warning, car about to explode" light came on, but what was I going to do, in the middle of nowhere, but press on, hoping that it wasn't serious? Ladies and gentlemen, pay attention to your warning lights because, not far from the Austrian border, the car did, indeed, explode! I exaggerate for dramatic effect (it's artistic licence, for which I pay £3.86 a year to the Post Office); the diesel particle filter blocked up and a hose leading to it burst and, after that, the car was going nowhere! Luckily, I conked out right next to a garage, who arranged for me to be taken to a nearby hotel, where I installed myself pending arrival of a new filter. Three days later, said filter arrived and was fitted but, sadly, the turbocharger was also damaged and the car was a goner! Train to Bergamo, flight home, buy new car, drive back to Italy to collect skis and luggage, then drive back to the UK, all taking up four valuable days when I should have been training for the World Masters. In the end, this little episode cost me about £1 500 (even though the car never moved again, I still had to pay to have it 'repaired', and I had to pay for its decent Christian burial in northern Italy), not to mention the cost of a new car! Why hadn't I thought eh, eh, or RAC?

Martin, however, still had one race left, on the Sunday, long distance skate. I can't tell you how he thought that he got on, because he's not told me. All I can do is present the results and tell you that there were more DNSs (13) than there were starters (12), and even more than finishers (10). We can also observe that it was Martin's slowest race, so those 8 times up the hills must have been hard work (I know that he didn't like the first, twisting, climb), and also his least-good percentage of the event.

## Long distance free technique, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> January

### Men's M01-M08 30 km

Fastest	Marco Mosconi	ITA	M05	1.24:42.6	21.2 km/h		
1)	Francesco Benetti	ITA	M07	1.35:41.1	18.8 km/h		
5)	Martin Watkins	GBR	M07	1.50:06.8	16.3 km/h	15.1 %	(12 starters)

So there we have it. How did we rate WWMG 2024? Much better, and better organised, than Pokljuka, without a doubt, not quite as well organised, and with less of a 'community spirit' than Seefeld 2020, perhaps but, on balance, I would say better tracks, at least once I'd learnt to go down the hills semi-competently. Getting to the race venue might have been a bit tricky without our own vehicles but, with them, it was easy, and our accommodation was comfortable and well-priced. We could have been unlucky with the snow, because Italy in particular has struggled with a lack of snow this year, but the venue was almost always in the shade and the tracks were always well-prepared and not icy as might otherwise have been feared. In short, I enjoyed it, which means that all the rest of you, who didn't go, missed a great event!