

Masters World Championships, Asiago, 2013

By our man-on-the-spot, Brian Adams

This was the fourth time the World Master's has been held in Italy. I'd been to two of the others and they held mixed memories: Folgaria (grim hotel, baking heat, brutal courses, chaotic results distribution); Brusson (ribbon of artificial snow, lousy waxing facilities, good catering). Asiago looked like it would be an improvement. The website promised a historic town centre, lots of cafés and hotels, and high level skiing options should there be no snow at town level. Lots of really useful info about the organising committee and the local politicians too. Over 1200 skiers would be competing, including, we were promised, glitterati such as Bjorn Daehlie, Marco Alborello, Pierre Harvey, Gianfranco Polvara and Roberto De Zolt.

The GBR team provided five of the 1200. First to arrive, via Paris and Venice, were the Western Track SC contingent (me, Jim Reid and Jenny Munro). Jim had been to Asiago on an Exodus holiday and said it had great skiing, so when you add in the reasonable cost of travel and accommodation, it was a bit disappointing that GBR didn't have more competitors this year. Jim was suffering from a bursa on his elbow caused by a roller ski fall and aggravated by a crash at the Dolomitenlauf, but he was keen to ski the MWC "just the once". It was Jenny's first MWC too, and she was also enthusiastic about the challenge. On Thursday evening the team was completed by the arrival of Alasdair Wilson and Chris Donnelly who'd driven over the Brenner Pass from Munich.

We were staying at the Hotel Croce Bianca, right in the middle of the town. This had been selected by Adam on the basis of an internet report and it proved to be a dated-looking hotel with faded and chipped décor and "many interesting period features" (like no showers in some rooms). However the food was plentiful, the staff were very friendly, and they had a relaxed attitude to ski waxing and storage. They didn't seem to mind skis and boots being kept in the bedrooms, and a basement room had been set up for waxing. This was poorly ventilated but provided you used it at a quiet time, or avoided the high-fluoro junkies, the air was breathable.

Thursday morning was the first day of official training, but the first thing to do was to find the race office because the map I'd downloaded from the website was unclear. After a little wandering around we arrived at a large tent next to the Ice Rink and collected our goody bags (which seem to contain fewer goodies every year) and race bibs. Armed with the Athletes' Handbook, we worked out the shuttle bus system and headed off to the race venue. Although there are many excellent loipes in the forested hills to the south and north of the Asiago meadows, the courses for the MWC used tracks specially designed for the event. These started at the Asiago Golf Arena, a few kilometres south of the town. It had been a good winter, and a recent half-metre fall meant that the snow was deep and smooth in the fields either side of the road. The tracks were in excellent condition, so we rubbed on some violet grip wax and set off to have a look at the 15 kilometre loop. The start grid pointed uphill, then there was a bend, a fast schuss and a short climb and descent around some trees. It was on this innocuous-looking corner that Jim crashed, falling on his injured elbow. His whole arm swelled up and that was the end of skiing for him. What a disaster.

The skiing was very open, and it was nice not to be confined to the forest, as so often happens. This made it a good venue for spectators, and also made it really easy to see how you were performing versus your rivals. For the first seven kilometres, loops wound tightly round the golf course fairways. Most of the climbs were very long and gentle, with few downhill on which to take a breather. There was a long climb up to the feeding station at the half-way point, then another loopy section with some bigger climbs/descents including a "big-dipper" at the northern extent of the course. After 11 kilometres there was a fast gully down to the lowest point, where the tracks entered the forest. From here a succession of uphill led to the finish, including one long climb which the organisers claimed had a 45 metres height difference but which seemed a great deal more. First impressions were that the course was a little easy, but the lack of recovery opportunity in the first 7.5 kilometres made it a different proposition at race pace. The tracks were nice and wide, with plenty of room for overtaking, and there were no crazy corners. I thought it was a very fair, interesting course and a good test of skiing, and I liked it more and more every time I skied it. The course marking, so often an issue on the training days, was super-clear.



Warning sign at the bottom of the long climb back up to the stadium

The next day Chris, Alasdair and Jenny headed off skiing while I went to the Team Captain's Meeting. The first TCM often (*always. Ed.*) drags on a bit, but it was a sign of how smoothly the competition was run that there were no contentious issues at any of the TCMs. Of course, there were the usual warnings about team helpers wandering onto the tracks and about non-racers skiing on the tracks.

One of the best things about Asiago was that 90 % of the competitors were based in the town itself. With so many people around, there was always a buzz in the streets and cafés, and few competitors were further than 5 minutes walking distance of the display tent, the award ceremony area and the race office. The shuttle buses all started from the race office and were frequent. Once the TCM concluded, I was able to step outside, hop straight onto a shuttle bus, and was skiing within 15 minutes.



Ouch, that's gotta hurt! Jim's swollen elbow



Jenny and Norman. 54 years age difference

The Opening Ceremony abandoned the traditional parade round the streets behind the national flags. Instead we were told to turn up at the Ice Rink at 17:00. Perceptively, John Downing (US National Director) had asked "Does that mean 17:00 for 17:20 or does it mean the ceremony will start at 17:00?" He didn't get a straight answer. Everyone turned up at 16:45 and at 17:00 there began a short video about Asiago accompanied by the **Official Masters Song** which had been unveiled last year at Oberwiesenthal. Oh yes, Conny Vegas, singing "Stay in the Tracks for e-ver". By 17:20, and the start of the fourth loop of the tape, discontent was growing. Booing could be heard. Sheepishly, the Organising Committee (and Bjorn Daehlie) shuffled onto the platform, and the national flags were skated round the rink by members of the Asiago Ice Hockey Team. Then the speeches began. Every one of them said approximately the same thing, and every one of them was translated into English, German and Russian. By 18:20 people were getting frozen and leaving. This was a shame because the ice-dancing exhibition from youngsters and Italian

champions which followed deserved a fuller audience. Will organisers never learn? The competitors were racing 30 kilometres the next morning, they had skis to wax, food to eat and beds to climb into. At the TCM the following evening, Libor Koubek (Czech National Director) made an excellent suggestion: “In future, can we have the speeches *after* the entertainment – *then* we will see who waits until the end!”.

Conditions for the first race, the 30 km freestyle, looked like being the same as for the training days. No new snow and an overnight minimum temperature of -6 °C. This suited me, as it meant I could go with the Toko HF yellow / HF pink mix I’d applied in Glasgow. I was feeling quite confident as I’d roller skied 50 % more kilometres this year than normal, been illness-free for 12 months and I’d had two decent skiing trips abroad. There were 66 skiers in the M06 field, and with the first bend only about 80 metres from the start, there was a bit of argy-bargy, but I managed to stay out of trouble. Very quickly the race got strung out and for most of the first lap I was skiing just behind Lubos Gabcik of Slovakia. The pace felt a little slow, but every time I overtook I could never pull away and he would come past again. At the loopy section three kilometres into the second lap I glanced across and saw to my horror that old rival Zac Zaharias of Australia was only a couple of hundred metres behind. I tried to up the pace again but wasn’t able to sustain it. The skis just weren’t running. On the uphill ramp into the finish I tried one last time to overtake Gabcik but he was stronger and extended his lead. Fortunately I managed to stay ahead of Zac. I had thought that if all went well, sub-20 % might be do-able, so 22.5 % was a slight disappointment. Zac looked strong and later admitted that he’d raced every week since New Year.

Chris recorded a percentage similar to his efforts at Oberwiesenthal last year but some way short of his best in McCall, while Alasdair’s 45.3 % was not as good as his performances in Sovereign Lake. It just confirms what we all knew – it really is harder to do a good percentage in Europe than it is in North America. Curious, when you consider that the top guys (in M06 that’s Guido Masiero and Giampaolo Englaro) go to all the events, wherever they’re held. Perhaps in North America the fields have less strength-in-depth so the winners don’t have to try as hard and they can get away with taking it more slowly. Buggers!

For the BMCCSA North American contingent, Steve Smigiel recorded a useful 25.3 % while Norman Clark, having to compete against some “young guys” just up from the M10 category, picked up a bronze medal.

Men’s M01-M06 30 km free technique, Saturday 16th February

Fastest	Francesco Rossi	ITA	M02	1.11:46.6		
dns	Marco Alborello	ITA	M05	dns		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M06	1.17:49.5		
42)	Brian Adams	GBR	M06	1.35:20.4	22.5 %	
57)	Chris Donnelly	GBR	M06	1.48:31.5	39.4 %	
61)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M06	1.53:07.2	45.3 %	66 starters

Men’s M07-M09 15 km free technique, Saturday 16th February

Fastest	Alexei Khvostov	RUS	M07	40:31.1		
1)	Andrei Grob	FRA	M08	41:30.1		
35)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M08	52:00.2	25.3 %	63 starters

Men’s M10-M12 10 km free technique, Saturday 16th February

Fastest	Franz Maier	GER	M10	35:05.7		
1)	Vladimir Smirnov*	RUS	M11	39:50.8	<i>*not the same one</i>	
3)	Norman Clark	USA	M11	44:41.9	12.2%	6 starters



30 km freestyle: Brian passes the feeding station near the start



30km classic: Jenny at the same place. That bottle looks like it's about to fall out!

The start list for Jenny's 15 km classic race the following day looked disappointingly strong as it included two Russians, a Norwegian, a Canadian and a French girl. With only six skiers in the F01 class, a medal (whether MWC, or the dreaded BMCCSA) was guaranteed. Conditions were more problematic than for the previous day: air temperature +1°C, snow temperature -1°C, new light snow falling on old tracks. Although the warm-up area was quite small and lacked length, it did have a number of polished tracks going straight uphill at slightly different gradients. If we could get something to work on these, it would probably be okay on the sunnier polished loops of the race course. Swix VR50 with a layer of colder VR45 over the top did the job. Jenny seemed to get good grip most of the way, and, if her skis *were* slippery it wasn't enough to stop her smiling for her many fans around the course. Honestly, will some people not realise that this is serious competition and that if it's not painful, you can't be trying hard enough!

There was a bizarre moment when the announcer at the finish of the M04 class clearly said "and coming in to the finish, Adam Pinney of Great Britain". Some mistake surely. Or did our steamed President have a doppelganger? A *younger* doppelganger. Other notable absentees included Pierre Harvey (*Good to know that I was up there with best! Ed.*), and Jack White, BMCCSA member of honour from Canada, who was out ill.

Women's F01-F06 15 km classic technique, Sunday 17th February

Fastest	Lotta Wasstrom	FIN	F03	45:38.7		
1)	Svetlana Alekseeva	RUS	F01	45:46.3		
5)	Jenny Munro	GBR	F01	1.10:11.3	53.3 %	6 starters

Men's M07-M07 15 km classic technique, Sunday 17th February

Fastest	Walter Steiner	SUI	M07	43:18.7		
1)	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M09	45:16.9		
27)	Patrick O'Connor	USA	M09	1.12:52.1	60.9 %	32 starters

Weather conditions for the busy "everyone skis 10 kms today" day were perfect. The 10 km loop was approximately the same as the 15 km but with the long descent into the gully and the climb back up in the forest snipped out. For the classic skiers, the slightly colder conditions made waxing easier. I played it a bit safe and went with Swix VR45 again (new snow, -2 °C to -8 °C). Grip was great but glide was compromised. In retrospect it would have been worthwhile waxing colder, as a lot of the 10 km course was double-pole-able. Still, I was pretty satisfied with 21.9 %, which was a best for me in a MWC classic race (*And, by the way, the best ever British Masters classic result. He should be a bit less modest. Ed.*). Jenny was happy to have bomb-proof grip too, and recorded her second victory over her French rival, Elodie.

In the afternoon, Jenny and I stood near the top of the finishing ramp to watch the others, and a close finish between Chris and Alasdair, both of whom recorded their best percentages of the competition.

Men's M01-M09 10 km classic technique, Monday 18th February

Fastest	Bruno Carrara	ITA	M02	25:31.8		
dns	Marco Alborello	ITA	M05	dns		
1)	Giampaolo Englaro	ITA	M06	27:41.4		
28)	Brian Adams	GBR	M06	33:44.7	21.9 %	49 starters
1)	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M09	31:17.3		
43)	Patrick O'Connor	USA	M09	49:33.4	58.7 %	48 starters

Women's F01-F08 10 km classic technique, Monday 18th February

Fastest	Lotta Wasstrom	FIN	F03	30:43.1		
1)	Svetlana Alekseeva	RUS	F01	31:23.9		
5)	Jenny Munro	GBR	F01	47:12.8	50.4 %	7 starters

Men's M01-M09 10 km free technique, Monday 18th February

Fastest	Vitaly Chernov	RUS	M01	22:49.9		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M06	25:18.3		
52)	Chris Donnelly	GBR	M06	34:05.3	34.7 %	
54)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M06	34:34.6	36.6 %	
dns	Pierre Harvey	CAN	M06	dns		58 starters
1)	Andre Grob	FRA	M08	27:28.4		
34)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M08	34:50.4	26.8 %	48 starters
1)	Finn Magnar Hagen	NOR	M09	27:38.3		
28	Jack White	CAN	M09	35:09.1	27.2 %	41 starters

Men's M10-M12 5 km free technique, Monday 18th February

Fastest	Anatoly Churakov	RUS	M10	16:46.3		
1)	Vladimir Smirnov	RUS	M11	19:27.1		
3)	Norman Clark	USA	M11	21:18.4	12.0 %	6 starters

It's always a relief to get the first two races out of the way and relax a little. We didn't have a relay team so for Chris, Alasdair, Steve, Jack and me, this meant three days without a race. For Jenny and Patrick, it was four. Tuesday however was still a long day. This was because some of us had signed up for the official tour to Venice, with a 05:30 breakfast and a 06:00 coach pickup. Jim had been to Venice before, and so went on the alternative trip to Vicenza. But the night before, he warned us "don't have lunch anywhere near St Mark's Square – it'll cost you an arm and a leg."

There were a lot of Masters competitors on this trip, four coach loads in fact. And it was a good day for sightseeing: cool, hazy sunshine. We visited the glass-making island of Murano (cheers as our ferry overtook the Russian Team's vessel). Then on to St Mark's Square. With instructions to reassemble by 14:00 we were left to find lunch. Heedful of Jim's advice we wandered for 15 minutes through a maze of narrow, gloomy alleys before choosing a café for pizza. It wasn't cheap. On emerging, significantly lighter of wallet, we turned through an archway into dazzling sunshine. St Mark's Square! After lunch there was a guided tour and time for a flying visit to the Doge's Palace. We got back to Asiago at 9 pm, an hour late for dinner, but the Croce Bianca staff were understanding.

While four of Team GBR were engaged on these cultural activities, Alastair explored the public loipes at Campomulo with some of the Alaskans staying at our hotel. The tracks there are reportedly fantastic and you could get a public shuttle bus direct from the centre of Asiago.

The day before the 45 km freestyle race Chris drove me, Jenny and Jim to the neighbouring village of Gallio on a shopping trip. Guzzi Sport was a small shop offering discounts to WMC competitors. Punto Sport (= Intersport) had a terrific range of stock and some really good prices. Unfortunately I couldn't find a pair of Fischer RCS skating skis which suited my weight. You cannot always believe what is stamped on the side of the ski, it seems. I selected a pair of 187s stamped "71 kg" but when the shop flex-tested them the computer said "suitable for 39-43 kg" (*Could this have been per ski? Ed*)! Another pair of RCSs was also miles out. No sale to Brian but they turned out to be perfect for Chris. Now, I'd never buy a classic ski without a proper in-shop test, but in the past I've taken chances with skating skis. After today's experience, never again. If we'd had a spare day it would have been interesting to test my own skaters on the machine.

Men's M10-M12 15 km free technique, Thursday 21st February

Fastest	Helmer Furanas	SWE	M10	55:55.1		
1)	Vladimir Smirnov	RUS	M11	1.05:39.3		
3)	Norman Clark	USA	M11	1.12:48.1	10.9 %	4 starters

Men's M07-M09 30 km free technique, Thursday 21st February

Fastest	Alexander Podshibyakin	RUS	M07	1.25:15.7		
1)	Giuliano Secco	ITA	M08	1.26:55.1		
32)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M08	1.52:05.1	29.0 %	48 starters

Men's M01-M06 45 km free technique, Thursday 21st February

Fastest	Roberto De Zolt	ITA	M03	1.52:41.9		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M06	2.01:49.3		
33)	Brian Adams	GBR	M06	2.28:08.4	21.6 %	
48)	Chris Donnelly	GBR	M06	2.52:34.1	41.7 %	
dnf	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M06	dnf		61 starters



10 km freestyle: Chris nears the corner at the 2 km point



10 km freestyle: Alasdair on the last climb up to the finish line

The 45 km freestyle was held in light falling snow. We expected the track would cut up and become a sugary slog, but it held up pretty well. More of a problem was the flat light. In the long fast schuss down the "gully" the lack of any lateral features made it difficult to pick up the tracks. I felt I was going well for a

lap, and it was fully 11 kilometres before the lead M05s caught me for 5 minutes. So far, pretty good. Unfortunately it was only another five kilometres before the M04 leaders caught me for 10 minutes, then only a further three before I was overtaken by a guided missile in a yellow and grey ski suit.

Everyone reported that the third lap felt very hard, but then it usually is. Certainly I was fighting the onset of cramp for the last 15 km. *Note to self: I need to ski 45 km non-stop more often. Too much of my on-snow skiing is of the “start-stop-photograph-wee chat-start-adjust gloves-start-stop-café” variety, so in future, cut the faffing.* Alasdair was finding it difficult to catch his breath and dropped out after two laps. Despite informing the race officials of his decision, he was bemused to see his name in 16th place in the “Final” results sheets (but not the provisional ones snatched from the results board by a Russian competitor). The guided missile turned out to be Roberto De Zolt, who won his M03 class by more than four minutes. In M11, Norman picked up another bronze medal, his third of the competition.

The snow persisted all afternoon and into the evening by which time another 150 millimetres had fallen. Fortunately it stopped, the sky cleared and the overnight temperature dropped to -12 °C. Conditions for the long classic races looked like they would be ideal – cold and sunny.

As usual, the first port of call on arrival at the Golf Arena was the waxing tent where the Rode guys posted the current air and snow temperatures. Good, just what you need. However the recommendation for the Rode wax of the day was never much use. The Rode grip waxing system is needlessly complicated and lacks a logical structure, so it wasn't easy to convert the recommendation into the Swix equivalent. Fortunately, this didn't matter much. With fresh snow, well below zero, it was easy to slap on some Swix VR40 blue and this seemed to work pretty well.

Jim and I did a lot of spectating during this race from various vantage points around the course, and in some places you could watch skiers for a couple of kilometres. It was interesting to see how the leaders manage their effort, where they try hard: “corners are for accelerating”; and where they back off. We saw a lot of Jenny and Patrick. Jenny's effort management strategy was quite simple: just take it nice and controlled, get to the finish, and look to do some damage next year in Pillerseetal!

Men's M07-M09 30 km classic technique, Friday 22nd February

Fastest	Ferdinand Kraller	GER	M07	1.32:54.5		
1)	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M09	1.38:40.4		
26)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M09	2.45:09.6	89.8 %	33 starters

Women's F01-F08 30 km classic technique, Friday 22nd February

Fastest	Svetlana Alekseeva	RUS	F01	1.39:50.1		
1)	Svetlana Alekseeva	RUS	F01	1.39:50.1		
4)	Jenny Munro	GBR	F01	2.41:09.9	81.9 %	4 starters

So to the Closing Ceremony and Banquet. This was one of the best ever, way up there with Krasnogorsk. No expense spared, posh waiters with white gloves, unlimited free wine, excellent food and, best of all, *table service*. Thus the Oberwiesenthal banquet catastrophe was avoided. The band leader had a bit of a Carlos Santana fixation. No bad thing, and his band were useful too, with the limitation that the Italians, like the French, can't really *rock*. However, that didn't stop some interesting shapes being pulled on the dance floor.

All in all, this was an excellent Masters and on the report card, nearly everything was “satisfactory” or better. Accommodation, race organisation and marshalling were very good, although the warm-up track and the ski-testing areas were too small. The track preparation was excellent, the courses were great and the loops were well-marked from Day 1. The changing arrangements for GBR were fine, but a little cramped for some of the big teams, and there was no secure storage for warm-up/warm-down gear. The feeding stations were well-placed and had copious quantities of liquids, but everyone reported that solids were hard

to find. The catering tent and food was okay and fairly cheap. The shuttle buses ran frequently and kept going until late. There wasn't a queuing system, but as the Russians were using a different bus (orange not blue) that was never much of a problem! Overall, the organisational effort and commitment was very good. This was my thirteenth MWC and it was probably the best I've been to – just ahead of McCall and Sovereign Lake, with Brusson and Krasnogorsk gaining an honourable mention. Bottom of the league table? Folgaria and Bled (World Masters Games). All of this is just gut feeling though. Adam should establish an official spreadsheet where, at the conclusion of each WMC, the team would award a score out of ten for courses, track preparation, organisation, transport to stadium, waxing facilities etc., etc.

Asiago was a very attractive location. Although it is only 1000 metres high, it has a good snow-holding record. If snow should be sparse, there are several easily-accessible higher venues (Campolongo, Campomulo) not far away. The town is a major walking centre in summer time and there are loads of reasonably priced hotels and cafés. Definitely worth a return trip. Sadly, none of the advertised “stars” turned up – never mind!