

Masters World Championships 2009 – more success for Britain!



Another Masters World Championships and another Briton mounts the very highest step of achievement, this time Hilary Field after a convincing victory in the 5 km free technique race in Autrans, France. But we say “Boo, hiss” to the Russian standing to her right. Intrigued? Then you’d better read below for a full report of our triumphs and not-quite-triumphs from this year’s MWC.

Despite the French having a very good Masters ‘scene’ and some very good skiers, the MWC had never been held in France before. But many of us have skied happily in France, for example at British Weeks held in La Feclaz which is not so far away, or less happily in the Transjurassienne a little way away (although maybe this is just a personal view!). Perhaps for this reason, and because France is very easy to get to and not outrageously expensive, GB compiled a team of 19 athletes, a record by far, easily surpassing the previous record of 12. This put us ahead of many nations with far more snow than we have.

Autrans is situated in the Vercors, just up above Grenoble at a height of about 1000 m. The Vercors forms a valley and is the home of La Foulée Blanche, a large skating race held every January. So we had been promised plentiful snow and, from our man-on-the-spot, former British biathlete Ed Nicoll, we had reports of snow from as early as November. But I always had my doubts ... One other little known fact about Autrans is that it has a sizeable indoor ice-skating rink which also doubles as a theatre, famed for its staging of plays of particular relevance to French history. Its most recent production, Jeanne d’Arc (Joan of Arc) had not, however, been a huge success, as the audience witnessed the climactic scene of Joan being drowned at the stake.

Apart from Ed himself, who lives just outside Autrans, and Paddy and Hilary Field who had been there for a week or so already, newcomer Godfrey Rhimes and I were the first to arrive, having driven over from London on Tuesday, staying on Tuesday night just outside Grenoble and giving us an easy drive up to Autrans on Wednesday morning. Taking the car was very stress-free (once the queue on the M25 had been forgotten), and it allowed me to take the waxing horse and a lot of food (some of us were staying self-catering), without any of the hassle of weight limitations and maximum number of pieces of luggage that

plagues modern-day air travel. Having deposited Godfrey's luggage in his accommodation which was later to become known to those of us who are fans of the Whacky Races as the Arcanson Chug-a-Bug, and checked out my place which later proved to be perfect (its only disadvantage, as with the Chug-a-Bug, being that it was a few kilometres out of town), Godfrey and I drove into town to check out the courses.

We were told to follow the black arrows and this we managed to do for most of the track, which seemed 'interesting'. Coming out of the stadium on the 15 km A course, we turned left and made a short, sharp climb before climbing and descending a whole series of little rises and drops through the meadows. After about 2 kms or so, there was a long, gentle climb which culminated in a sharper climb, followed by yet more swoops and climbs. Nothing particularly taxing, but certainly not flat either. This continued until about the 8 km point, when the track started to climb more steeply and, a short while after this first climb, we encountered 'the wall'! Duh, duh, daa. Possibly 20 metres from top to bottom, this was steep and it wasn't really possible to skate all the way up it.

At the top of the wall, the track then levelled off, before a few more climbs and nice downhill sweeping corners before the longest of the climbs. Sadly, Godfrey and I missed the sign half way up this climb and went onto a much longer climb over the top of the race track itself and down the other side. This was a shame, because we missed the real nature and length of the race climb and we also missed the one steep (and, in my opinion, rather stupid) downhill corner, sweeping down to the right on a curve, which caused quite a few problems on race day. We would find that out tomorrow! It had been warm when we left the stadium just after lunch, but skiing conditions were just about spot on for training and, at this stage, the tracks looked good if tough. It was a bit cool at the end, though, so we weren't sad to have finished.

The following day, Thursday, we were out classic skiing on blue klistar with blue stick covering, the temperature being about -10 °C at the beginning and -3 °C at the end. With this system the grip seemed okay but a little lacking. It was on this second round of the 15 km A circuit that I 'discovered' the stupid corner, which came at about 13 kms and, sadly, I discovered it a little too quickly. A lot of people had been round it by then, and it was very icy and fast on the racing line, and I just failed to step quickly enough and landed up falling in the soft snow on the outside of the turn. The fall itself was nothing, but it did snap the belt of my water bottle ☹.

The track still had a few stings in its tail after this point; a long fast descent down through the trees and back into the meadows but this was followed by a little climb which seemed to come at just the wrong point in the race itself, and then there was a rest back towards the stadium but still with a couple of short climbs before we finally returned to the start. Perhaps the only disappointing thing, though, was that on this first official day of the competition, the tracks were still not properly marked. Most Brits had arrived by Thursday evening.

On Friday, it was -15 °C at 9 a.m. and I had to attend the first Team Captain's meeting in the village, after which I went out skating and found that the tracks felt slow. Brian Adams had been out classic skiing on Swix -2 to -8 °C stick wax for transformed snow and was happy, Alasdair Wilson and newcomer John Helliwell were also out on stick wax but were less happy with its performance. When I met Brian after his ski, he complained that his new job meant that he hadn't been able to get in as much training as previously, and his new computer screen was also giving him a bad back. At least, having identified these problems in advance, they became admissible and perhaps it was just as well!

And then, finally, we came to Saturday and the first race of MWC 2009; 30/15/10 km skate, involving most of the British team. The weather forecast the day before had predicted -17 °C early in the morning, but in fact it was -12 °C (the weather forecast throughout the week proved to be pretty inaccurate) as Christian Lund and I drove into Autrans fairly early. The temperature went on climbing throughout the day, reaching -10 °C by the younger men's race start and +2 °C by 3 p.m., which did not bode well for the following day. Us skaters were, however, on a mixture of Toko blue and pink glide wax, and I would say that this was just about right.

This race was the Masters debut for many of our team, including former British biathlete Ed Nicoll who lives just outside of Autrans, Norwegian (via Northern Ireland) Christian Lund, Godfrey Rhimes and Bruce Baker. As might be expected from his background and local knowledge, Ed proved the fastest of us all and overtook Christian for 10 minutes at the drinks station after about 22 kms. He reported no real problems, however, apart from having had his poles stepped on on the wall on lap one, and then being inadvertently tripped on lap two. Many people had to herring bone the wall, and the long climb to the highest point at about 13 kms on each lap seemed very hard to most people. The silly downhill bend caught out several people, Christian on the first lap as he tried to racing step around it, me on the second lap when I came into it a bit too quickly to get onto the soft snow on the outside, and Bruce three times (twice on one lap).

The BMCCSA had six other members racing in the 15 km men's race, newcomer Alan Shepard from the Manchester club, new member Steve Smigiel and our Canadian member Jack White all involved. I had no chance to speak to any of them about their races, but this was Alan's least good performance of the week, and for Jack and Steve it was their best. Just for the record, Ed Nicoll produced the best-ever performance by a Brit not called Norman Clark, while for me it was my best-ever Masters skate performance. Gareth Buffett put in a performance much in line with his usual standard, Godfrey was happy with his performance but Chris Donnelly seemed somewhat off his normal pace, which continued throughout the week.

Chez les femmes, another BMCCSA newcomer Barbara Baker did well to beat experienced Fiona Crossley after Fiona had led her for much of the race and, despite falling on the last corner, Barbara held on to beat Fiona by well over a minute. Wendy McRae, in her second Masters appearance, put in a solid performance to keep two people behind her, but both she and Fiona just failed to come away without a British Masters medal, bronze for Fiona and silver for Wendy.

Sadly, illness kept Mark Conklin out of this race and, in fact, of the whole event, and he eventually passed the illness on to wife Sara-Jane. Patrick o'Connor was also out with illness from this race, but was able to make a come-back later in the week. Our final newcomer, Ellen-Anne Mackenzie, didn't quite arrive in time for this race. All in all, though, a good start to the event for most of us. Interestingly, this was the first time that average race speeds have been given in Masters results, and it is interesting to note how some people with slower speeds got better winner's percentage results, such are the vagaries of the winners' times. Also interesting is that almost everyone, including winners, was slower than in McCall last year.

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

Fastest	Roberto De Zolt Ponte	ITA	M02	1.17:02.9	23.4 km/h	
35)	Christian Lund	GBR	M02	1.52:11.6	16.0 km/h	45.6 % (38 starters)
1)	Benoit Chopard-Lallier	FRA	M03	1.21:20.1	22.1 km/h	
10)	Ed Nicoll	GBR	M03	1.29:05.4	20.2 km/h	9.5 % (42 starters)
1)	Alexander Abramov	RUS	M04	1.22:56.9	21.7 km/h	
41)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M04	1.52:51.8	16.0 km/h	36.1 % (48 starters)
	Mark Conklin	GBR	M04	DNS		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M05	1.24:07.1	21.4 km/h	
54)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	1.50:07.3	16.3 km/h	30.9 %
69)	Christopher Donnelly	GBR	M05	2.00:30.6	14.9 km/h	43.3 %
76)	Bruce Baker	GBR	M05	2.21:48.0	12.7 km/h	68.6 % (88 starters)
1)	Markus Florinett	SUI	M06	1.29:59.7	20.0 km/h	
51)	Gareth Buffett	GBR	M06	2.15:31.2	13.3 km/h	50.6 %
54)	Godfrey Rhimes	GBR	M06	2.17:38.3	13.1 km/h	52.9 % (65 starters)

Men's M07-M09 15 km free, Saturday 31st January

Fastest	Waldemar Leithner	AUT	M07	44:18.2	20.3 km/h	
64)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M07	58:19.5	15.5 km/h	31.2 %
72)	Alan Shepard	GBR	M07	1.03:25.4	14.2 km/h	43.2 % (76 starters)
1)	Andre Grob	FRA	M08	45:04.8	20.0 km/h	
26)	Jack White	CAN	M08	56:54.3	15.8 km/h	26.2 % (34 starters)
	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M08	DNS		

Ladies F01-F06 15 km free, Saturday 31st January

Fastest	Olga Nutrikhina	RUS	F01	42:45.6	21.1 km/h	
1)	Nancy Burden	CAN	F04	47:04.4	19.1 km/h	
16)	Barbara Baker	GBR	F04	1.01:03.6	14.7 km/h	29.7 %
17)	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	1.02:48.4	14.3 km/h	33.4 % (19 starters)
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	46:55.1	19.2 km/h	
33)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	1.09:11.6	13.0 km/h	47.5 % (15 starters)
1)	Marjut Vuorenmaa	FIN	F06	50:56.4	17.7 km/h	
	Ellen Anne Mackenzie	GBR	F06	DNS		



Ed Nicoll stonks his way to second-best ever British Masters performance



Put a dark alley around this man and would you like to meet him? Oops, and I promised no sarcastic comments!



Five times British Roller Ski champion, Fiona



Wendy McRae, in a tuck, joins the party

Sunday 1st February 2009, uh oh. At 9:00 a.m. the temperature hovered around -1.5 °C, by race start time it was just about spot on 0 °C! Almost everyone, including the professionals, were having trouble with the grip wax. Alasdair started on hairies but had to stop and put wax on, while newcomer John Helliwell had his skis waxed by Holmenkollen and reported them useless. There was even some controversy, with Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin being told (incorrectly, according to FIS rules) that she was not able to take wax handed to her by husband Mark once in the starting area, while the third place Russian lady was having her skis waxed by a helper outside the area, who then simply handed them back to his athlete. Sadly, poor wax (and possibly developing illness) forced Sara-Jane out of the race at about half distance. On the plus side, John had had his skis glide-waxed by a professional (as had Godfrey for the previous day's race), both having a mixture of high-fluoro powder and liquid, and both reported a significant improvement in glide.

Star of the show, however, was Hilary Field. She had one pair of skies waxed by Maplus which turned out to be useless, and then went onto VR70 and it was great to see husband Paddy give up his race in order to help get Hilary's wax right. Hilary skied well from the beginning and came home in a strong 2nd place in her class, beating her bronze medal won in Kiruna a few years ago. Perhaps interestingly, Hilary's average speed was lower than that of Alasdair Wilson finishing towards the back of his age group, and anyone who saw Alasdair's get-up in the fancy dress race in Kvitavtn recently might be thinking that perhaps the operation would be worthwhile!

Men's M01-M06 30 km classic, Sunday 1st February

Fastest	Olivier Bulle	FRA	M03	1:38:18.5	18.3 km/h	
1)	Gianpaolo Englaro	ITA	M05	1:40:47.0	17.9 km/h	
29)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	2:34:04.6	11.7 km/h	52.9 % (33 starters)

Men's M07-M09 15 km classic, Sunday 1st February

Fastest	Oddvar Vehusheia	NOR	M07	49:00.8	18.4 km/h	
50)	John Helliwell	GBR	M07	1:25:32.9	10.5 km/h	74.5 % (55 starters)
1)	Tuomo Venalainen	FIN	M09	52:55.9	17.0 km/h	
	Paddy Field	GBR	M09	DNS		

Ladies F01-F06 15 km classic, Sunday 1st February

Fastest	Kerstin Drexler	GER	F03	54:13.7	16.6 km/h	
	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	DNF		(10 starters)

Ladies F09-F12 10 km classic, Sunday 1st February

Fastest	Ruth Svensson	SWE	F09	47:17.4	12.7 km/h	
2)	Hilary Field	GBR	F09	54:41.2	11.0 km/h	15.6 % (8 starters)

The next day, Monday, the weather forecast had predicted -3 °C in the morning; the reality was +3.5 °C as Christian and I drove into Autrans early in the morning (the bus we'd hoped to take didn't arrive, but this was the only time we had problems in that department). The wax company Holmenkollen recommended a red klister -3 to +2 °C; we bought this but it was hopeless. We added Swix Red (which is actually silver), in the range 0 - +5 °C and this worked, as did Swix Orange (+3 - +12 °C), and it seemed like most people went for the Swix Red option.



Alan Shepard, race unknown



Christian heading for Britain's best ever classic result

Britain had quite a few starters in the morning's 10 km classic race, when there was a cold wind early in the morning and they should really have had more people on the clothes return area as a few of us stood around getting cool waiting for our clothes to be returned. However, the race itself was excellent. Conditions were not quite as fast as anticipated but, without the full length of the climb of the 15 km A circuit, and without the silly sharp bend, the course was much easier. Even then, though, there was disappointment. Having reached the highest point of the circuit, we were all looking forward to a fast run down into the stadium, only to find that we were having to double pole hard against the strong head wind. Christian Lund skied strongly throughout the race and landed up recording the best-ever British result in a classic race, 24.1 %, finally deposing Brian Adams who had held the record since Lake Placid in 1998. Brian himself reported stepping on a pine cone just after the wall and having to stop and clean off his skis, while I was happy to be able to catch and pass quite a few people in my category, to finally finish 10 places from the back (my highest ever placing) and at 28.0 % this was my best-ever Masters result. Sadly, although I skied faster than Brian, he landed up with a better percentage of the winning time and, therefore, a higher placing in the best-of-all-time list. Oh well.

Men's M01-M06 10 km classic, Monday 2nd February

Fastest	Alexander Mindrin	RUS	M02	31:08.1	19.3 km/h	
19)	Christian Lund	GBR	M02	38:38.1	15.5 km/h	24.1 % (22 starters)
1)	Alexey Mazurov	RUS	M03	31:18.1	19.2 km/h	
	Ed Nicoll	GBR	M03	DNS		
1)	Mauri Kaila	FIN	M04	31:27.9	19.1 km/h	
29)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M04	40:16.1	14.9 km/h	28.0 % (39 starters)
1)	Gianpaolo Englaro	ITA	M05	32:47.5	18.3 km/h	
38)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	41:33.1	14.4 km/h	26.7 % (48 starters)
1)	Pekka Virtakoivu	FIN	M06	33:24.3	18.0 km/h	
45)	Gareth Buffett	GBR	M06	51:27.1	11.7 km/h	54.0 % (50 starters)

Men's M07-M09 10 km classic, Monday 2nd February

Fastest	Oddvar Vehusheia	NOR	M07	31:26.8	19.1 km/h	
1)	Tuomo Venalainen	FIN	M09	32:20.4	18.6 km/h	
30)	Paddy Field	GBR	M09	48:12.0	12.4 km/h	49.0 % (48 starters)



Godfrey Rhimes, Gareth Buffett and Alasdair Wilson



Barbara Baker in either the 30 or 15 km skate race

Among the ladies, battle was again joined between Barbara, Fiona and Wendy, with Ellen-Anne in attendance this time to record a strong British Gold medal, her first. Once more Fiona was ahead of Barbara going out of the stadium but, having been diagnosed with anaemia a few weeks before Autrans and the tablets not fully having cured the problem, she just ran out of energy part way round the loop. Despite sitting down on the straight before the finish, Barbara stayed ahead for an easy win this time. Nonetheless, this was still Fiona's second best Masters performance, as it was Wendy's, with Wendy not so very far behind Fiona this time and even passing an F04 for 10 minutes just on the finish line. Again, sadly, illness kept both the Cox-Conklins out of their respective races.

Ladies F01-F06 10 km classic, Monday 2nd February

Fastest	Olga Nutrikhina	RUS	F01	32:13.4	18.6 km/h	
1)	Ragnhild Bolstad	NOR	F03	32:41.4	18.4 km/h	
	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	DNS		
1)	Jekke Liby	NOR	F04	35:59.3	16.7 km/h	
9)	Barbara Baker	GBR	F04	43:28.6	13.8 km/h	20.8 %
10)	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	46:07.2	13.0 km/h	28.2 % (13 starters)
1)	Sirkka Ehrnrooth	FIN	F05	32:13.9	18.6 km/h	
17)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	47:18.0	12.7 km/h	46.7 % (18 starters)
1)	Lida Palme	GBR	F06	37:55.0	15.8 km/h	
12)	Ellen-Anne Mackenzie	GBR	F06	59:36.4	10.1 km/h	57.2 % (12 starters)

Men's M01-M06 10 km free, Monday 2nd February

Fastest	Lilian Gaillard	FRA	M02	26:08.6	23.0 km/h
1)	Fanil Akhmetdyanov	RUS	M04	28:36.0	21.0 km/h
	Mark Conklin	GBR	M04	DNS	

That afternoon we moved on to the skate races in which we had another good turn-out, only Patrick not able to race because of illness. This turned out as the worst race of the week for new BMCCSA member Steve from America, Godfrey, Alasdair and Chris Donnelly, whereas it was the best for John Helliwell and Bruce Baker, although the latter was by now beginning to feel the pace. For Alan Shepard the performance was a little worse than in the 15 km race earlier but better than what was to come.



Happy seems hardly the right word – Ellen Anne in action on the 30 km classic



Dr. A.A. Pervert checks to see that the ground has not disappeared

However, star of the show yet again was Hilary Field, one place up from her first race silver to claim her first ever gold medal and the first gold medal for any British lady since the Masters began back in 1984. Sadly, expecting to receive her medal at that evening's ceremony in the centre of Autrans that evening, things did not go quite as expected for poor Hilary. The reasons are explained below.

Men's M01-M06 10 km free, Monday 2nd February

1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M05	28:26.2	21.1 km/h	
56)	Christopher Donnelly	GBR	M05	41:30.7	14.5 km/h	46.0 %
60)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	43:51.7	13.7 km/h	54.2 %
64)	Bruce Baker	GBR	M05	46:29.5	12.9 km/h	63.5 % (69 starters)
1)	Arkady Varankin	RUS	M06	29:38.7	20.3 km/h	
56)	Godfrey Rhimes	GBR	M06	48:00.1	12.5 km/h	61.9 % (66 starters)

Men's M07-M09 10 km free, Monday 2nd February

1)	August Boeckli	SUI	M07	27:45.1	21.6 km/h	
59)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M07	37:54.5	15.8 km/h	36.6 %
62)	Alan Shepard	GBR	M07	39:59.3	15.0 km/h	44.1 %
65)	John Helliwell	GBR	M07	47:11.4	12.7 km/h	70.0 % (67 starters)
Fastest	Andre Grob	FRA	M08	27:08.8	22.1 km/h	
22)	Jack White	CAN	M08	34:18.7	17.5 km/h	26.4 % (40 starters)
	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M08	DNS		

Ladies F09-F12 5 km free, Monday 2nd February

Fastest	Hilary Field	GBR	F09	20:12.8	14.9 km/h	0.0 % (5 starters)
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So what happened to mess up Hilary's medal ceremony and, therefore, her moment of glory? I will let her take up the story:

“On Monday the 2nd February 2009 I competed in the F09 class in the 5 km Free Technique race at the Masters World Cup in Autrans. I took the lead from the very beginning, increased the lead throughout the race and won by around 50 seconds from Hanna Laurila of Finland. Galina Makaricheva of Russia was third, a further 20 seconds behind.

Following the race, the medals were not awarded because, as I understand, the Russian team had protested that Galina Makaricheva should have been placed first. Although the protest was submitted out of time and was not accompanied by the requisite deposit of CHF 100 (ICR 393.4.3), it was nevertheless considered by the Jury, who eventually ratified the unofficial result. The medals were presented at the next available medal ceremony on Wednesday 4th February.

As I waited to go onto the podium to receive my gold medal, I was jostled roughly by members of the Russian team, causing me almost to fall over. Also, as I came down from the podium after the ceremony, I was accosted in a very threatening manner by a female member of the Russian team, who shook her finger within inches of my face then thrust four fingers under my nose, apparently indicating to me that I had finished in fourth place. I found this aggressive and insulting behaviour to be most distressing, particularly as I had already had to wait for two days to receive my medal as a result of the Russian team’s frivolous and incomprehensible appeal against the results.”

This was, indeed, truly unsportsmanlike behaviour and I raised the matter at the next available Team Captains’ meeting. To make things clear, it seemed that our old friend Vitali Kourochkin, my equivalent for the Russian team, had no idea about this incident and promised that the lady concerned would be banned from Masters racing for at least one year. Still, it was an incident which would have been better avoided.

Britain, despite the size of its team, had no relay squads wanting to race so the only BMCCSA member to take part was Steve in a US team. On this day it was very warm, +4 °C in the morning and the snow very quickly became soft. Christian, Wendy and I went up into the hills for a ski along the ridge above Autrans which would have given nice views over Mont Blanc had it not been so cloudy and had we managed to find the lookout point. But perhaps had we known what was coming in a couple of days, we would have been better to have avoided making this trip.

Men’s 4 x 5 km relay, Wednesday 4th February

Fastest M02 Italy 50:51.1

12)	M07	USA	1.38:46.8	Owen Hanley	24:40.9	
				Lester Lockspeiser	32:20.0	
				Timothy Bray	20:22.9	
				Steve Smigiel	21:23.0	(12 starters)

By now it was Thursday and, therefore, time for the longest skate race, 45/30 kms. At 9 a.m. the temperature was at about +5 °C and it probably hadn’t frozen all that much over night. The track, however, was initially fairly hard but collapsed rapidly to become very soft and slow. John Helliwell pulled out after two laps, shattered, but was happy to have learnt exactly what is needed for MWC-level races. The next incident left me feeling rather embarrassed and guilty, however. I had known the previous evening that a time limit would be imposed at the end of the second lap, but I hadn’t passed on this information because the limit seemed so generous that I just couldn’t imagine that it would be a problem. I was wrong; Godfrey and Gareth were both stopped from starting the third lap by the 1:30 p.m. time limit, Gareth by only a few seconds! The only mitigation that I can offer in this case, however, is that if they had both skied harder over the first two laps to get through the time limit, I’m sure that the last lap would have been pretty hard and unpleasant. Brian, though, looked determined and strong right from the beginning and this was his best race by far of the week, both in terms of percentage and his position through the field, and this despite being inadvertently knocked off the track by Alan Shepard, not having his best race. Perhaps more work is needed on very slow roller skis to prepare for this type of conditions.

Alasdair seemed to be going quite well when he passed us at the top of the first hill on the second lap and he had already overtaken Gareth and Godfrey for five minutes at this stage. But then he stopped just a short while later, citing a complete lack of energy. Ed Nicoll was once again by far the fastest Brit, but he reported that he hadn't enjoyed the race at all and that it had been only about survival. Finally, Chris Donnelly was, by his standards, not doing all that well, his 38.2 % finish not comparing very favourably with his 23.4 % in the same race in McCall last year.

Illness kept the Cox-Conklins out of racing, and Bruce decided that he was just too tired to race over such a distance (probably a very wise decision). Paddy and Hilary had already left the event because of Paddy being the TD at the Transjurasiennne. So among the ladies it was left to Barbara and Wendy to represent GBR and they both did so with style. Barbara reported that her glide wax had lasted for about 20 kms into the race (much as Brian had said about his) and then started to fade, but I wonder whether it was actually the wax or just the level of suction from the very wet snow that caused the problem. Although Wendy scored a strong British Gold Medal, and in percentage terms it was her worst race of the three, she still did well to keep going and to finish within just four minutes of Barbara after two and a half hours of racing.

Looking at the results sheets that evening, I don't think that I have ever seen quite so many DNFs or DNSs at a Masters before, almost 50 % in some age categories. So the fact that almost all Brits who were able to make it to the start line did so (even if some didn't quite make it to the end) was very much to our credit.



John Helliwell (GBR), centre, with two Swedish medal winners



No wonder these foreigners win everything – look how many legs this geezer has!

Men's M01-M06 45 km free, Thursday 5th February

Fastest	Alfio Di Gregorio	ITA	M02	2.24:01.3		
1)	Didier Boeglin	FRA	M03	2.29:02.7	18.7 km/h	
15)	Ed Nicoll	GBR	M03	2.54:03.0	15.5 km/h	16.8 % (35 starters)
1)	Alexander Abramov	RUS	M04	1.31:27.5	17.8 km/h	(50 starters)
	Mark Conklin	GBR	M04	DNS		
1)	Guido Masiero	ITA	M05	2.40:40.3	16.8 km/h	
39)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	3.20:36.8	13.5 km/h	24.9 %
51)	Chris Donnelly	GBR	M05	3.41:59.3	12.2 km/h	38.2 % (79 starters)
	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	DNF		
	Bruce Baker	GBR	M05	DNS		
1)	Karl Milz	GER	M06	2.46:00.2	16.3 km/h	(54 starters)
	Godfrey Rhimes	GBR	M06	DNF		
	Gareth Buffett	GBR	M06	DNF		

Men's M07-M09 30 km free, Thursday 5th February

Fastest	Jean-Pierre Poncet	FRA	M07	1.29:15.0	20.1 km/h	
51)	Steve Smigiel	USA	M07	1.59:31.7	15.1 km/h	33.9 %
58)	Alan Shepard	GBR	M07	2.11:17.9	13.7 km/h	47.1 % (70 starters)
	John Helliwell	GBR	M07	DNF		
1)	Finn Magnar Hagen	NOR	M08	1.28:29.1	20.3 km/h	
23)	Jack White	CAN	M08	1.53:20.0	15.9 km/h	28.1 % (33 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 30 km free, Thursday 5th February

Fastest	Elena Slushkina	RUS	F03	1.28:07.8	20.4 km/h	<i>(What an appropriate name. Ed)</i>
1)	Natalia Kuzmina	RUS	F04	1.37:28.5	18.5 km/h	
10)	Barbara Baker	GBR	F04	2.27:03.9	12.2 km/h	50.9 % (12 starters)
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	1.56:47.2	18.3 km/h	
13)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	2.31:17.5	11.9 km/h	54.1 % (13 starters)

Ladies F09-F10 15 km free, Thursday 5th February

Fastest	Galina Makaricheva	RUS	F09	59:36.1	15.1 km/h	(5 starters)
	Hilary Field	GBR	F09	DNS		

Friday, and it was nearly all over. The evening before the 45 km classic race, Christian and I had lain awake listening to the sound of the rain thundering down onto the roof of the bedroom, both wondering whether there would be any snow left the following morning. It was still raining when we woke up and the snow was looking sparse, but it backed off a bit as we tried out grip waxes. The normally-reliable Swix Red seemed just to be lacking a bit in grip, so we both agreed on the Swix +3 - +12 °C klistar and, once this was applied, there was little to do but sit around, watch the rain pour, and await the start of the race.

Then, as if by a miracle, just a few minutes before my race start, the rain stopped! Not only that, but the tracks were still firm and fast for the whole of the first lap. I managed to catch and overtake a couple of people in my age category after a few kilometres but then my glasses steamed up and I fell going into a very innocuous corner simply because I couldn't see the right line and landed up in the soft, deep stuff. This allowed the two people I'd overtaken to retake me. Although I stuck with them, I was never able to get past or pull away again. But we rocketed through the first lap of 15 kms in something like 55 minutes!

Then it all started to go wrong. Half way around the second lap the tracks collapsed, the suction to the snow started (despite hefty rilling the night before), I completely ran out of energy (despite an excellent job being done by Wendy to hand me energy drink and bananas twice every lap) and everything became a big struggle after that. The second lap took something like 1 hour 15 minutes and, as I left the stadium for the third lap, Christian, having started 10 minutes behind me, was just coming into the stadium. He caught me with about 7 kms still to go and then was able to pull out around one minute each kilometre until the end. I seem to remember (although I have tried to put the whole race out of my mind), that the worst part was the final small loop of a climb at around 14 kms – if I was going at 5 km/h at that point I'd have been surprised. Boy was I glad when it was all over and all that was left was having to do an interview, in French, after I crossed the finish line but, after the skiing, that was a doddle.

Patrick was recovered enough to race the 30 km classic race on the same day, but 57.2 % was well off what he is capable of and, with Fiona out with no energy left, it was Ellen-Anne who completed the British contingent. Finally it was all over, and there was just enough time to shower, change, pack the skis and get onto the bus down into Grenoble for the closing banquet.

Men's M01-M06 45 km classic, Friday 6th February

Fastest	Peter Milz	GER	M03	2.27:15.5	18.3 km/h	
1)	Lilian Gaillard	FRA	M02	2.28:28.0	18.2 km/h	
11)	Christian Lund	GBR	M02	3.16:58.2	13.7 km/h	32.7 % (11 starters)
1)	Grigory Kornev	RUS	M04	2.30:55.4	17.9 km/h	
26)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M04	3.32:16.4	12.7 km/h	40.6 % (28 starters)

Men's M07-M09 30 km classic, Friday 6th February

Fastest	Werner Vogel	AUT	M07	1.30:15.7	19.9 km/h	
1)	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M08	1.32:12.5	19.5 km/h	
37)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M08	2.24:56.4	12.4 km/h	57.2% (44 starters)
1)	Stig Karlsson	SWE	M09	1.43:32.3	17.4 km/h	(27 starters)
	Paddy Field	GBR	M09	DNS		

Ladies F01-F06 30 km classic, Friday 6th February

Fastest	Ragnhild Bolstad	NOR	F03	1.34:4.8	19.0 km/h	(8 starters)
	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	DNS		
1)	Jekke Liby	NOR	F04	1.43:16.3	17.4 km/h	(13 starters)
	Fiona Crossley	GBR	F04	DNS		
1)	Hermine Egger	AUS	F06	1.55:42.4	15.6 km/h	
9)	Ellen-Anne Mackenzie	GBR	F06	3.02:55.7	9.8 km/h	58.1 % (9 starters)

So now let us summarise the whole event. On the whole it was excellent, accepting that the organisers couldn't do anything about the very warm weather. Ironically, it started snowing the day we left (Saturday) and, within a couple of weeks, the Vercors had received another 2 metres or so of snow, so we were clearly just very unlucky. Even when the snow was sparse, however, they had done a great job of bringing snow onto the track from the surrounding area and, unlike other resorts, they hadn't dug up a whole load of pebbles into the bargain. Perhaps the only couple of disappointing aspects were, firstly, that the tracks weren't properly marked from the beginning, that stupid corner (which, incidentally, was very similar to the equally stupid corner in Rovaniemi) and the fact that we had to travel so far and so long to get to the final banquet so that there was little time to relax after the longest race.

Now let us look at the tracks. Many people were complaining about their toughness and they did seem to me to be difficult beyond their apparent profile. The following analysis was made by Paddy Field.

Course	MWC HD	FIS HD	%	MWC MC	FIS MC	%	MWC TC	FIS TC	%	% difficulty	Target
5 km C	32	100	32	26	50	52	58	150-210	32.22	38.74	50
10 km A	57	150	38	28	80	35	194	250-420	57.91	43.64	50
10 km B	63	150	42	19	80	23.75	159	250-420	47.46	37.74	50
15 km A	123	200	61.5	20	80	25	317	400-600	63.4	49.97	50
15 km B	98	200	49	21	80	26.25	300	400-600	60	45.08	50

HD = Height Difference (the difference between the lowest and highest points on the course).

MC = Maximum Climb (the height difference of the longest climb on the course without a break of at least 200 m).

TC = Total Climb (the total of all the climbs on the course added together).

Where FIS norms show a range, the mid-point of the range has been taken.

The % difficulty has been calculated by adding the % of HD, MC and TC and dividing by 3.

So when you look at these figures in the knowledge that our requirements are 50 % of FIS specifications, you will see that all of the tracks were well within this limit overall. Perhaps tellingly, however, two or three values stick out as being significant. Firstly, the Height Difference on the 15 km A course, at 62 %, was well above the limit, as were the Total Climb figures on both the 15 km A and 15 km B at 63 and 60 % respectively. We were told that the wall had not been included in the track during earlier visits by WMA officials to Autrans, and when conformity with specifications was first checked. It may have been these factors which led to the impression of overall difficulty.

Anyway, let us finish with a couple of comments from British participants:

Ellen-Anne: Yes, on the whole I did enjoy it but as much because I speak French as anything else. While the evenings were enjoyable, the days when I wasn't racing might have been rather lonely otherwise.

We had been to Autrans three weeks before the Masters to recce. I started rolling about a month before that and took skiing lessons while I was in France. It's a beautiful area, great craic, lovely people and we plan to go back for the Foulée Blanche next year if we can. The Autrans Masters week went well for me by and large; as usual my laps were consistent within a couple of minutes around 10 km an hour, so translating that to a longer event augers well. I had lots of energy left after the 30 km which started in pouring rain (I had to be pushed out of the starting pen), but I got the clothes and the nutrition spot on for me, anyhow.

The skis were quite another thing and my ski teacher lent me hers – fish scales – which meant climbing was a lot easier though the glide was a little less – takes a lot of the pain out of waxing around 0 °C. I led fearlessly from the back in both races, got to be on greeting terms with the marshals and got a big bear hug from one at the end of the 30 km.

The banquet at the end was, indeed, a feast, and the dancing was fearless and international. Suffice it to say that one of my more inspired rock 'n' roll sequences nearly took out a Russian couple.

Chris D.: We missed most of the traffic and got home in good time on Friday, although I suspect a speeding ticket is on its way from the Swiss authorities; trust them to put a camera somewhere on a downhill with a following wind. I've been ill for most of the time since getting back, over-tiredness following the soggy 45 km I suspect, but this has not prevented me keeping the calorie intake up, bring on those ravioli gratins and tartiflettes. It has finally snowed here in Munich so I should be able to go training without spending more time in the car than on skis.

I really enjoyed Autrans although it was a pity that we weren't all together in the same accommodation. The Arcanson thing worked out because everybody was flexible, got on okay and nobody got ill; it could quite easily have got uncomfortable with such tight living conditions. I'm not sure whether I'd like to chance it a second time.

With the exception of lottery corner on the 15 km A, the tracks were fine for fast snow conditions, but for the 45 km on slow snow were too hard. I much preferred McCall in this respect.

I found Autrans a very attractive venue in that there was a lot to do on non-racing days. The race organisation was generally very good, although the warm-up track could have been longer, and handing over your warm-clothing at the start and having to queue up after the finish seemed a bit energy intensive to me and unnecessary. The system at McCall and Brusson worked fine with pens for each country. The feed-stations were marginal, both in number and supplies, which I initially put down to limited man-power but then I also got the impression there were about four people at each corner taking numbers, some of this could have been automated and split times on the laps would have been nice. The bus-shuttle service was excellent, very reliable and friendly.

In conclusion I've put Autrans back on my list of possible holiday venues. Finally, many thanks for organising everything, I realise it's impossible to satisfy everybody all of the time, and it's very good of you to take it all on.

I just have one picture of me taken by the official photographer which you can have if you make a binding agreement not to add any sarcastic captions under it, otherwise there must be better team pictures around.

Alasdair W: I trust your drive home wasn't too bad once you'd got down to the plains. I had managed a bit of classic vorlaufing next to the gite on Saturday but it didn't seem to be worth rushing down to Meaudre to ski on unpisted tracks. So an eventful bus/train flight saw me home.

It has taken me a while to get back to training as the unexplained loss of endurance that I experienced in the races continued once I got home. I enjoyed the event in general – a good place to go back to – maybe la Foulée Blanche next year. The locals were welcoming, particularly the opening ceremony, although McCall is a hard act to follow for support by the finish. I think McCall's finish set up has been the best allowing many people to line the last 100 metres.

I think my actual skiing technique was the best it's been. I was with Chris Donnelly in the 10 km until about halfway, which was encouraging, and I felt like I was classic skiing well despite the lack of grip in the 30 km. I just didn't have any of the staying power I expected otherwise I would have toughed out the 45 km. Never mind, next year ...