

Winter World Masters Games – Seefeld

Tronald Dump might believe that climate change isn't happening, but if he wants proof that it is, he only needs to look at the contents of my wax box. I have various stick waxes ranging from -10 °C down to -30 °C which have not been used for longer than I can remember (*How can you be sure of that? Ed*), apart from as base binders. If that wasn't proof enough, then why the heck was the temperature in Seefeld, west Austria, ranging from about -4 °C up to about +5 °C, *in the middle of January*? This was exactly what we found when we turned up for the once-every-five-years Winter World Masters Game (WWMG), sort of the Winter Olympics for Masters and which covers various winter sports including cross-country skiing.

Regular listeners will recall, from our experience of the WWMG in Pokljuka, Slovenia ten years ago, that this event has a reputation for rather poor organisation, and various things occurred to maintain this well-deserved reputation. They got all my race entries wrong initially (although they did change them when I pointed out the mistake), and I wasn't the only one. When we went out to inspect the tracks on Wednesday prior to the first race on Sunday, there was no track marking whatsoever, and even the day before the first race, there was still no marking (although if one memorised the track plan, or carried a map, it wasn't too difficult to find the routes). Start lists only appeared very late, and the athletes' briefing meetings took place only at 9 o'clock on the morning of the races (we didn't bother going!).

There were other things which were at best questionable, at worst daft. The first race for classic skiers was the longest, 30 km, and the course used for this (7.5 km) was disproportionately difficult when compared to the 3.75 km track used for the 7.5 km race and the 5 km track used for the 15 km race. Not only did the 7.5 km track have a second series of steep climbs and descents, it also went from the shaded, left side of the valley, where the temperature stayed fairly low all day (and where the two shorter tracks stayed) over to the right hand side of the valley, into full sun and the +5 °C.

Andy Robinson, Hans Nilsson and I met up on Wednesday morning with a view to testing out the tracks; it was -8 °C so Swix VR 45 was working well as grip wax, while Andy, on his hired skin skis, seemed to be getting good grip, too. The tracks started fairly easily, a kilometre or so of flat, rolling stuff, before we came to the first hill. This was steep, and fairly long and, because it belonged to the tracks used for the elite World Championships of a year ago, too tough for Masters. After that, the tracks dropped steeply and over a bridge (we didn't know that at the time!), before climbing again and rolling along past the downhill slope until they turned and started their return down through the road tunnel (dangerous, because if one lost control going round the corner leading into the tunnel, one was heading for the concrete, and that 5 cm thick mattress was not going to make much difference!).

After the tunnel the track continued flat for a while, passing an area where the snow was very thin and stony, before turning left and starting to climb up around a right-handed bend. There followed a second, thin, brown and stony section before a fast, long, run down back into the valley. Another gentle climb led to another left-hand turn where the climb got steeper, culminating at the high point after a steep climb round a right-hand bend. Half a kilometre of rolling terrain with two steepish climbs led into the next downhill, which continued fast around a right-hand corner, followed by another short climb, straight run down, short climb and then left turn and long run down over the bridge back to the start area. That wasn't quite it, though. Remember the climb just before the finish that featured in the World Champs? We still had to go up and back down there before we got to the finish. All in all, quite a demanding track for Masters. It was the climbs that made it hard (particularly those *uphill climbs*, as Patrick on Eurosport has started referring to them as, to distinguish them from those pesky downhill climbs); at least the descents could be handled in the familiar 'racing snowplough'.

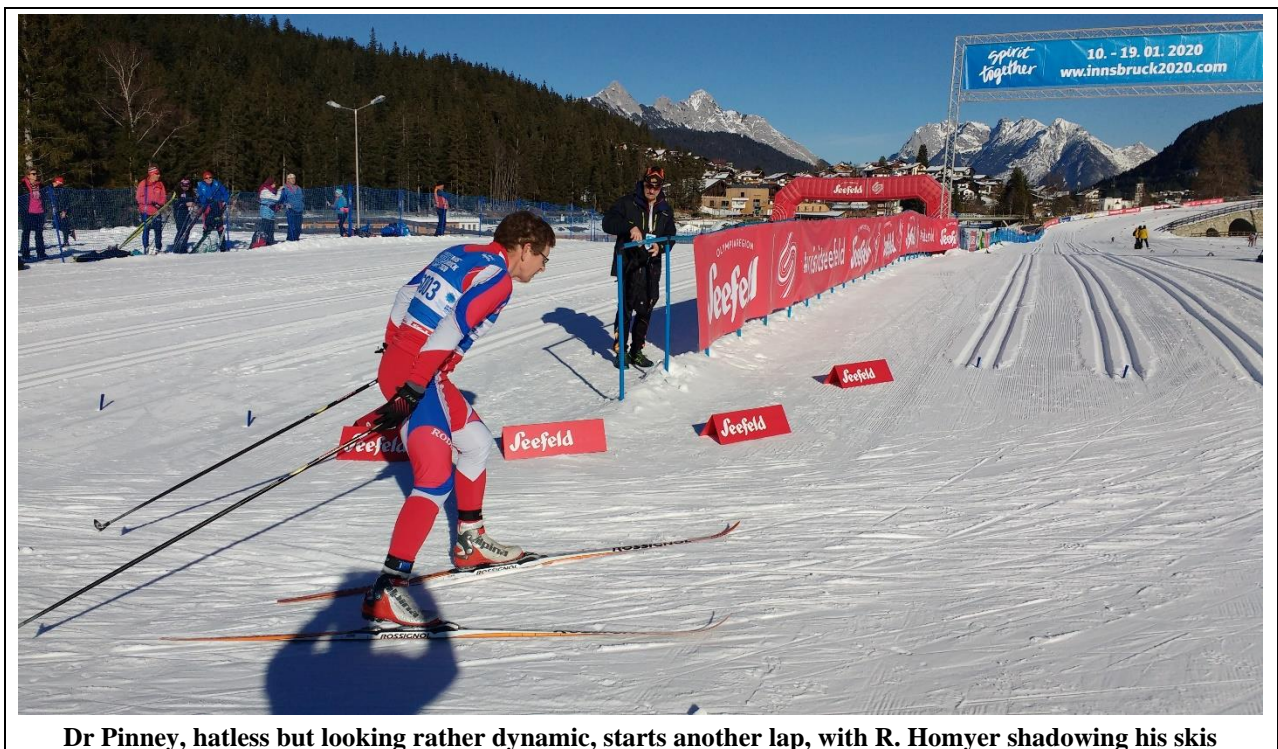
That was the 7.5 km track used only for the long race. The shorter track, 3.75 km, followed the longer track at first but then doubled back on itself before taking a different climb up the hill to meet the 5 km track which used the same first steep climb as for 7.5 km and did the bridge drop. After a climb and short flat, the 5 km track continued for an additional loop, down a short drop and round a sharp left-hand corner. This was on the limit of what could be handled in the tracks, as Andy and I proved by trying it many times over, not always with success! Another short climb, nice drop, uphill then left-hand downhill corner, swooping right hand bend

and re-joining the 3.75 track which had doubled back on itself, and then both tracks started the return section. This consisted of two sharpish drops with a short climb in between, before a final climb up to a short loop and then down over the bridge and back to the start. Still not quite there – that World Cup climb had to be negotiated before the finish!

Although the grip wax worked well early in the cool and shade of the morning, it worked substantially less well in the heat of the sun and in the warmth of the afternoon. So, on the Thursday with very little grip, I bowed to the inevitable and bought a pair of racing skin skis! Friday brought an unfortunate incident for Andy. On the drop on the far loop of the 7.5 km track, he fell, hitting his head and shoulder and prompting double vision! This led to him deciding not to race the full 30 km classic race but, instead, to only start it (to get the feeling of pre-race nerves) and then pull out after the first climb. Hans, complaining of a lack of fitness, had already decided not to do this race.

Sunday, cold, -8 °C, and finally the 30 km classic race. I'd had my new skin skis prepared in the shop with HF glide wax, and I'd prepared my waxable skis with Guruwax klister (-2 °C to +7 °C) with stick wax over the top. Tricky decision; the waxed skis gripped excellently but might stop working at some point, whereas the skins had somewhat less grip but were certain to keep this throughout the race. In the end, I opted for the waxable skis and wasn't disappointed, at least not by the grip. In fact, I felt that the grip was excellent; having been at the back of the main group out of the start and for the first kilometre or so, I was able to pass about five people by staying in the tracks almost the whole way up the first long, steep hill. The only thing that stopped me was a lack of puff, not a lack of grip! Having said that, the grip wax was probably too good, and this was slowing down the glide. So I was, for most of the first lap, in a small group of four; I pulled ahead on all the uphill while they shot past me on the downhill. This continued until I had a ridiculous fall, going uphill! I'd shot down a hill and was gliding up the other side at speed, when my skis slid apart and down I went, losing contact with my little group and losing complete contact with my hat!

After that, the next three laps were spent mainly on my own; I caught one of my original group and had the same experience for a lap (catching on the uphill, losing on the downhill) until, on the third lap, I pulled ahead, and I got caught and overtaken by one M60. It was, though, a hard, hard race, and I was happy when it had finished. At least, it felt hard but, when I think back over other Masters 30 km results, while I've done the race faster in the past, I've also taken longer for it, so maybe these tracks were not so difficult after all.



Dr Pinney, hatless but looking rather dynamic, starts another lap, with R. Homyer shadowing his skis



Andy, getting plenty of grip from his skins, starts the first, long, climb

Another cold start on Tuesday, around -8 °C but, as usual, warming rapidly to a high of +4 °C by 2:15 p.m., the time scheduled for Roger's start in the 7.5 km free race. Roger awoke claiming of feeling tired after the 7.5 km race of the previous day (*What? 7.5 km? Real men race 30 km on one day and then 7.5 km the day after. Ed*), but was the only Brit racing on this day. His race was uneventful but, as before, he was catching people on the climbs and losing out on the downhills, including snowploughing down the hill where he'd fallen the day before.

Men's M30-M65 7.5 km free technique, Tuesday 14th January

Fastest	Andreas Schwarz	AUT	M40	17:05.5	26.3 km/h		
1)	Friedrich Nockler	ITA	M65	19:09.2	23.5 km/h		
15)	Roger Homyer	GBR	M65	23:32.0	19.1 km/h	22.9 %	(21 starters)

Wednesday was not a day for stick wax, although during the warm-up the combination of Swix VR50 and VR55 had worked well. The early-morning temperature was one degree warmer than predicted the night before, and the very early start (08:40) didn't give much time for waxing in the morning. It seemed that, more or less between the warm-up and the race start, the temperature went up to around zero and most people were struggling. I got off to a rather slow start, because I discovered that one of my pole straps was undone, as a result of having to get little stones out of my boots before the start and, as a consequence, I got stuck between Mr Fat and Mr Slow and, by the time I'd got past them, the pack that I should have been with was already 30 metres in the distance. I was hoping that, when I came to the first uphill, I would catch the herringboners but, a short way up the hill, I realised that I had very little grip either, and had to join them in herringboning. As the race went on, the situation got worse, and I was having to herringbone up even modest slopes, but so was everyone else. On the plus side, though, the downhills were nice and could be run almost straight. Andy, on his skins, improved his speed compared to the 7.5 km and was very happy with this.

Men's M30-M65 15 km classic technique, Wednesday 15th January

Fastest	Christian Baldauf	AUT	M50	38:48.3	23.2 km/h		
1)	Daniele Vuerich	ITA	M60	41:29.2	21.7 km/h		
11)	Adam Pinney	GBR	M60	59:31.1	15.1 km/h	43.5 %	
17)	Andy Robinson	GBR	M60	1.11:29.2	12.5 km/h	72.3 %	
	Hans Nilsson	GBR	M60	DNS			
	John Moffat	GBR	M60	DNS			(17 starters)

The 15 km classic finished the racing for Hans, Andy and me, but there were still two races to go, Roger and Alasdair in the 15 km free and then, finally, Alasdair alone in the 30 km free. Morning conditions were cold for the first of these but it soon warmed up for the race itself. There were two groups set off together, the M60 and M65s and, as they came past me standing at the bottom of the first big climb, Roger was about mid-pack, while Alasdair was at the back of, but still attached to, the rest of the pack. I then moved to take photos in a different part of the track on the second lap, the bottom of one of the long drops and the start of a short climb. What was interesting to note here was that the leader of the M40 class came down the hill with such speed that he needed to do nothing whatsoever to get up the short climb (he just glided up it), whereas other, less daring, individuals had to skate up it; there's work for us Brits to do here! I waited for a while to catch Alasdair at this point but, complaining of a lack of fitness, he'd pulled out at the end of Lap 1.



Roger powers on, alongside two rivals

Men's M30-M65 15 km free technique, Thursday 16th January

Fastest	Stefan Heindl	AUT	M30	33:27.4	26.9 km/h	
1)	Vladimir Andronov	RUS	M65	39:12.6	23.0 km/h	
10)	Roger Homyer	GBR	M65	45:35.5	19.7 km/h	16.3 %
	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M65	DNF		(19 starters)

There's not really a great deal to report from the final race, 30 km free. Alasdair invoked the "not in good enough condition" clause (he was also racing in the ski orienteering) and didn't start, and that was about it!

Men's M30-M65 30 km free technique, Friday 17th January

Fastest	Sergey Tarasov	RUS	M35	1.25:13.0	21.3 km/h	
1)	Nikolai Karetnikov	RUS	M65	1.45:01.0	17.1 km/h	
	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M65	DNS		(14 starters)

So how would we summarise this event? Well, compared with Slovenia 10 years ago when, for example, we had pin-on paper numbers and the track for the longest race wasn't cut until the night before the race, the organisation has certainly improved! This time we had proper bibs and the tracks were always very well-prepared; it was just disappointing that they weren't marked before the races.

Seefeld is a very easy place to get to, and Roger, Alasdair and I found an excellent AirBNB apartment, almost right in the centre of town and just 10 minutes' walk from the track, which worked out at just €30 per night for each of us. We found that the race facilities near the start were fairly basic, and in fact we got on much better using the locker room right at the start of the public tracks, which gave us a warm place to put on boots and get ready, and gave us a 500 metre ski up to the race start.

The WWMG doesn't attract the same number of racers as the Masters World Championships. I would guess that there were maybe 500 racers compared with 1 000 for an MWC, but the standard is much the same, so our normal measure of percentage of the winner's time remains valid. I was happy with the tracks and, despite an initial feeling that they were harder than a normal Masters, I'm not sure that this was really the case, although perhaps the uphill were a little steeper. All in all, it was a good fun event, and one worth considering when it comes around again in five years' time, although I have no idea at the moment where it will take place.