

“Norwegians” versus “Lilienfelders”

A struggle that is rationally scarcely understandable took place at the start of the 20th century between the German Wilhelm Paulcke (left/1873–1949), considered to be a practitioner and the Austrian painter Matthias Zdarsky (1856–1940) from Marktl near Lilienfeld, whom Paulcke regarded as a mere theoretician.

Although also inspired by Fridtjof Nansen, Zdarsky had dared to question the centuries-old style of the Norwegian peasants in his book *Lilienfelder Skilauf-Techniken*, published in 1897. Paulcke's work *Der Skilauf*, which appeared one year later, in which the author came down, unreservedly on the side of the “Norwegians”, was his answer.

What had Zdarsky done wrong? He had established that the Norwegian Telemark model with a binding of Spanish liner was unsuitable for the very steep slopes of the Alps. Thereupon he developed a cushioned steel sole binding, registered by him as a patent, which made the skis easier to steer, because the heel could not slide away.

In addition he shortened the boards, so that the stem turn became possible. While Zdarsky skied with a long bamboo pole, Paulcke popularized, after the example of his tutors



from the north, two short sticks and the Telemark turn. The arguments grew more intense when the adherents of both sides got involved, wishing to prove the superiority of “their” ski technique to the other side.

It took years until the recognition dawned that besides the Nordic ski sport Alpine ski sport had its justification. The “Lilienfelders” had to wait till 1936 until they could also fight for Olympic medals.

A generation deprived of Olympic success

Lauritz Bergendahl (1887–1965) was the first Nordic ski star. In the photo (below) he passed the Olympic torch to Eigil Nansen. Right: Oscar Mathisen (1888–1954) was the master of speed-skating. Adjacent: German figure skater Werner Rittberger was the hope for 1916.

If the First World War had not prevented the winter sport competitions of 1916, the first Olympic "Ski King" might have been Lauritz Bergendahl. The success record of the 29 year old farmer from Sørkedalen is impressive. From 1910 to 1915 the Norwegian won the Holmenkollen race over 50 km five times – in 1914 with 22 minutes lead. In addition there were four victories in the 18 km combined cross-country race (1909, 1910, 1913 and 1915). In 1913 he won the German championship in ski-jumping in Oberhof.

In 1910 Bergendahl was awarded the Holmenkollen medal and in 1915 the "Damenes Pokal" (Ladies Trophy) for "the handsome skier from Christiania". When he retired in 1916, for the first time a different person drew attention to himself in the Holmenkollen: the 21 year old Thorleif Haug from Drammen was seventh over 50 km. Eight years later in Chamonix he achieved three Olympic gold medals.

What Bergendahl represented in skiing, so did his compatriot Oscar Mathisen in speed skating. After he had become Norwegian champion aged 18 in 1907, he won the world title the following year – four years after his brother Sigurd.

Of the six World Championships in which Mathisen took part he lost only one: in 1910 in Helsinki against the Russian Nikolai Strunnikov. He set 14 world records, of which one – 2:17.4 min over 1500 m, made on 18th January 1914 in Davos – stood for 23 years.

After the war Mathisen turned to the professionals, whose World Championship he won in 1920. As a 40 year old he raced the short distances faster than the best amateur. However his end was tragic: he shot his depressive wife – and then himself.

The German figure skater Werner Rittberger was only 18 years old when he became runner-up to the world champion, the Swede Ulrich Salchow in Davos. Two weeks later he achieved the same placing at the European Championship, which took place in Berlin.

After the Potsdamer had become runner-up in the World Championship in 1911 as well behind Salchow and in 1912 behind the Austrian Fritz Kachler. 1916 could have been his great year. Instead he had to risk his life as a pilot in the "air war".

After that Rittberger continued his ice-skating career. But as Germany as loser of the war was excluded from the Games of 1920 and 1924, greater successes were denied him. In 1928 he could take part for the first time in the Olympic Winter Games in St. Moritz, but he fell ill, and for that reason he gave up after doing the compulsory figures and finishing twelfth.

And yet Rittberger left something permanent behind. Skating owes him the jump named after him, also known as "Loop". Chance played a major role when Rittberger showed it for the first time in 1909 in the Berlin Ice Palace. During his free programme to operetta melodies by Walter Kolos, the drum was struck so violently that in terror he leapt backwards outwards and after a turn landed just the same. The public was enthusiastic and the jump, which today is demonstrated four times, was invented.



Photos: Volker Kluge Archive

Bergendahl too achieved Olympic honours. On 15th February 1952 he carried the Olympic flame into the Bislett Stadium, where he passed the torch to the last skier: Eigil Nansen, the 20 year old grandson of the Polar explorer.