

VORALBERG

By Donald Moffat

In *The New Yorker*

BETWEEN Bavaria on the north and that part of Switzerland called the Engadine on the south (of which St. Moritz is the winter capital), Austria throws a mountainous bulge to the westward, well into Switzerland. This is called the Vorarlberg, a little province measuring only about thirty miles wide by forty-five deep, a land of narrow, wooded gullies and heaped-up crags and shoulders, with one generous valley at its middle. The principal peaks are not so high as those of the Tyrol or the Alpine country, but the Vorarlberg is superlative in that it offers what many professionals regard as the most varied and most difficult ski terrain in Europe. A middle-aged gentleman who has tried them all told me solemnly the other day that Switzerland is pie after the Vorarlberg.

In conformation, these peaks and chasms tend toward the haphazard. The main valley, still the most direct route from Paris to Vienna, appears at first to be a thread of sanity in the midst of this petrified hodgepodge, but it breaks in two at the eastern edge of the Vorarlberg, where the Kloster Thal, winding between encroaching peaks, suddenly begins to rise toward the Arlberg pass. At this point, Langen (ten hours from Paris by the Arlberg Express), the railway that has followed the valley from Switzerland gives up in despair and dives into the Arlberg tunnel, from which it emerges twenty minutes later to proceed down the Stanzer Thal to Innsbruck and on to Vienna. Only the motor road keeps on from Langen, up the steeply rising remnant of the Kloster Thal. At Stuben, it starts its looping ascent through the Arlberg pass and at St. Christoph begins the drop that brings it back eventually to the railroad at the other end of the tunnel.

On this road, at the head of the Stanzer Thal, lies the little mountain town of St. Anton. To every man who has ever put foot to ski, St. Anton stands in much the same light as does Mecca to the more conservative type of Mohammedan. Even if he knows he'll never get to St. Anton himself, he feels its influence. It is the home of the great Hannes Schneider, the Austrian mountaineer whose genius organized the technique of ski-ing in its most useful modern form and gave it the name it goes by, the Arlberg technique. In a land of naturally fine ski-runners, all of whom from childhood used ski as the only way to get about in winter, Hannes Schneider stood out as the finest of them all. And, being a man of genius, he analyzed his own skill, reduced it to a formula, and organized the school of St. Anton. If he was not the first to work out the physical laws governing slippery bits of weighted wood on snow, he was the first to organize his discoveries and make his idea available in a form that could be taught quickly and easily to others. Since the war, and to



From a Woodcut by V. Elizabeth Kemp, Montrea

some extent before it, amateurs of the ski have come from all over the world to learn his method; more important still, his near neighbours also came, and have gone forth each year in hordes to act as professional instructors of his technique. The Swiss and the Scandinavians deride the Arlberg system, and continue to use the methods that have suited them for so long, but an unbiased opinion must record it as a fact that even if the Arlberg system is not the best for every circumstance of snow and slope, it is the simplest and the most easily taught; and it is at least as effective as any other. Hence, undoubtedly, its popularity among beginners. You can go to the Vorarlberg and learn to ski—well or ill according to your capacity—in a shorter time than you can do the same thing anywhere else.

It is no longer necessary, of course, to go to Hannes Schneider's own school at St. Anton to learn the Arlberg technique, and this is perhaps just as well. The school of St. Anton struggles against a curious inconsistency. The town itself lies buried in the bottom of a narrow, sunless valley, whose steep sides, thickly wooded with firs, offer only an occasional little clearing for practice. Schneider's classes have to be transported by motor bus every day to the practice slopes at St. Christoph, fifteen hundred feet up in the mountains. This takes time and costs money. Many tourists are taking advantage of the fact that wherever there is snow and a hotel in the Vorarlberg today, you can find one or more Schneider-trained instructors who can teach you just as well and quickly as Hannes himself. Even for his own classes, nowadays, the Master relies chiefly on his assistants; he merely supervises the instruction and the transportation facilities, and occasionally coaches promising runners for racing.

The place that seems to be rapidly replacing St. Anton as the ski-ing capital of the region is Zurs, which is reached by a two-hour sleigh ride from Langen over the famous Flexenstrasse that makes its way across the precipices and in winter can be travelled only on foot, on ski, or in the little one-horse, two-passenger, shaftless sleds that meet the

trains and carry all the visitors and supplies that go into Zurs or the towns beyond.

Zurs lies in the middle of a comparatively shallow, oval-shaped cup, fifty-six hundred feet above sea level, and is favoured with rather more sun than some of its neighbouring resorts get. Moreover, the sides of the cup are free from rocks and trees, and vary in degree of slope, thus forming a perfect terrain for practice. Zurs has a dozen hotels and pensions. Rooms must be engaged not later than October for the Christmas-New Year's season, and not much thereafter for the longer season that begins in February and lasts through April. March, they say, is the best month of all for snow and sun conditions. There's a corps of twenty instructors at Zurs, under the direction of Hannes Schneider's brother Friedrich, and their instruction is given—and taken—seriously. Hours are strict. The process of teaching is thoroughly systematized. The beginner has to pass an examination to mount to a higher class. And the result is that he learns the rudiments quickly.

Zurs has the disadvantage, shared with St. Anton and with the famous centres like Innsbruck, of being big. Lots of people, crowds on the slopes and indoors, dancing in the evening, shops, hairdressers, fashionable goings-on of one kind or another which have nothing to do with the serious business of ski-ing. They even had a robbery at Zurs the other day. A fellow pinched a pair of ski and two sweaters from a shop window, and immediately the mountains were filled with smart-looking police wearing long green cloaks and pistols, searching people for a pair of ski and two sweaters. They haven't yet got their man.

The method of instruction at all the resorts of the Vorarlberg and the Tyrol is, as I have said, standardized. You buy a book of tickets for thirty schillings, which entitles you to six days' lessons, morning and afternoon, however you want to use them. The usual periods are from ten to twelve in the morning, two to four in the afternoon. That is plenty, for beginners. You report at the designated starting place at ten and set off with an instructor and a group of fellow-neophytes for one of the practice slopes, feeling very helpless and clumsy and heavy footed, and perhaps rather self-conscious, too, especially if you bought your clothes in New York or London or Paris. (The best place to buy them is right there.)

The instructor begins by teaching you how to walk on level ground, how to climb easy gradients, how to turn round while standing still (the kick turn), and shows you the proper position for running downhill. Then—probably during the first period—he will go on to the snow-plough, or stem, for controlling speed downhill without turning. Each step is taught slowly and patiently, with repeated explanations and repeated demonstrations. A patient race, the Austrians. Before many days have passed, you will have gone onto the stem-turn, the stem-christiania, and the straight or "parallel" christy—or "tail-wagging," as it is also called—for turning and braking at higher speed. Usually the early lessons are given on beaten snow, which is easy; and if the pupil shows any aptitude, it isn't long

before he has mastered the "hotel stop," a christy done with all the nonchalance he can muster on the hard, level ground in front of the hotel, while thousands cheer. This manoeuvre is very important for building up the morale. But teaching can go only just so far. Until the pupil gets the feel of the various positions, stops, and turns for himself, he doesn't progress. It's like learning to swim, or ride a bicycle: a matter of timing and balance. If you're a bright boy, you soon move up to the next class, consisting probably of people who have been at it a few days longer than yourself. Soon comes a sadly discouraging interlude: you start executing the same manoeuvres, performed (you believe) so gracefully on packed surfaces, in deep, soft snow, and all progress seems to end at once. You're quite helpless. Everything you learned so quickly before appears to be useless and you have to start in all over again.

Instruction is varied once or twice a week by short excursions up and down the valley, which give you the feel of climbing and also the realization that when you're off the familiar practice ground, where you know every grade and bump, things don't work out quite so well. These trips are lengthened as your muscles harden and your wind improves, until before long you're going off with the class on all-day trips up in the mountains with climbing skins on your skis and your lunch in teacher's rucksack—climbing for two or three or four hours to one of the so-called "huts" (really small hotels, with electric lights, a kitchen, telephone, and beds for the storm-bound) and getting more and more frightened, as you climb, at the prospect of coming down such impossible slopes. Well, you do get down again, in a little less time than it took you to get up, and even more tired from the exertion of digging yourself out after so many tumbles. Your feeling of heroic mountaineering may then be slightly impaired by hearing the old fellow who carries fresh milk up to the hut every day say that the snow was so bad (i.e., ruined by you and your classmates) that it took him fifteen minutes to come down instead of the normal ten.

Any ordinarily intelligent person of average physique ought to be able to gain the bare rudiments in a couple of weeks. From then on, it's a question of practice and practice and more practice, on every possible variant of snow and slope, till eventually you react automatically to the requirements of the situation, and begin to think not in terms of "going ski-ing" but in terms of going up on the mountains for a day—on ski because there's no other way of getting there.

You don't need to take lessons if you don't want to. You don't have to attend class any day you don't feel like it. If you feel stale, or tired, or merely lazy, it isn't a bad idea to check ambition in the coatroom occasionally and read a book. The book you read will probably be pedagogic in nature and concerned with the art of ski-ing, and it will help make certain points clearer to you. But these intervals of rest have one unfortunate aspect. The beginner takes his day off, and his mind, leaping ahead, weaves rosy visions of himself as already expert, slipping down a steep mountainside in a

series of beautifully connected loops. Next day he goes buoyantly out again, eager to show off (if only to himself), and is dismayed to find that nothing works. It is the way in which he deals with this discouragement that determines whether or not he'll ever be a ski-runner. If he keeps plugging, there's hope for him. Which is not to say that the beginner must never take a day off, but rather to emphasize the importance of not letting imagination run too far ahead of performance. It may be encouraging, too, to reflect that even the experts know despair; only the other day, I heard one of the really great Arlberg runners sadly admit that he was too old for successful racing. He is just over thirty.

The Vorarlberg is a civilized country inhabited by civilized, friendly, simple, courteous people, all of whom, from the smallest boy to the oldest man, know more about ski-ing and mountaineering than you're ever likely to. They are not much impressed by the tourists, but, being a race of much dignity and self-respect, they don't let on. Many of the natives speak a little French or English, and with either of these languages you can get along, but you'll have a better time if you brush up on your German before coming. Nor is it a bad thing to recall, from time to time, that to the native Austrians you are a strange creature called a "foreigner."

DOPE

By Arnold Lunn

"A STARTLING revelation to me," writes George Jost in the last issue of the "Canadian Ski Annual," "in the Roberts of Kandahar downhill race was to learn that some of the British runners had doped themselves before the race with a drug which they call 'kola.'"

The fact are correctly stated. Certain continental racers who had used this drug had given a few tablets to our racers and they were trying it out as an experiment for the first time in the Roberts of Kandahar. When this fact came to the knowledge of the committee, it was made clear that the practice must be discontinued, and that no racer would be considered for a place in the British Team who used kohl. This step was taken not because there is anything in the least wrong in using kola—we will come to that in due course—but because it seemed important to protect the reputation of British ski-ing from the sort of personal criticism which is inevitable once the word "dope" enters into the discussion.

The overwhelming majority of our opinions are conditioned by emotional reactions rather than by reasoned judgment. The word "dope" for instance, has much the same effect on people as the thing which it signifies. It dopes the judgment and prevents people thinking straight. I am told by a distinguished Canadian that as the result of this article all Canadian ski-runners are convinced that British racers are dope fiends. If this be so, then every Canadian who takes a glass of wine is a dope fiend,

for kola is considerably less stimulating than Burgundy, and only slightly more stimulating than beer.

What precisely do we mean by "dope?" I am told that in Canadian langlauf races it was customary until recently for friends of the competitors to give them a swig of brandy before the last half mile or so, and that this practice was discontinued when it was found that it did not pay. Were these excellent langlaufers "dope fiends"? And if not, why not? Brandy is a far more powerful stimulant than kola.

Before the FIS downhill races this year the Swiss team took a little brandy, and one of them very sportingly offered a glass of brandy to a member of the British team. The overwhelming majority of British racers take nothing before a race, but the racer in question took a pull at the brandy, and it certainly steadied his nerve.

Let us try and think straight on this question. It may perhaps be best to avoid the word "dope" altogether, for this word only arouses prejudice, and to discuss instead the use of drugs and stimulants.

Drugs are beneficial if taken for special purposes and in special emergencies. Morphia is good for relieving the pain of a skier with a broken leg, but this type of drug, though beneficial in emergencies is deadly if taken for the pleasure of the stimulant.

Can a big race justly be described as an emergency? And if so, should a ski-runner be entitled to take morphia or cocaine? Certainly not. One of the main objects of sport is the improvement of physique. Any skier who started taking morphia in order to win races would become a drug fiend.

Should the law forbid the use of all stimulants? I think not. If it is wrong, as plenty of people believe, to take a glass of brandy after a good dinner, then it is equally wrong to take a glass of brandy before a big race. If it is legitimate to drink brandy after dinner, it is legitimate to drink brandy before a race. If it is legitimate to drink a glass of brandy or a glass of wine before a race, then it is legitimate to take kola. Kola is perfectly harmless, and is a less powerful stimulant than wine.

If we lived in a reasonable world, where judgments were always based on reason, the question could be settled quite simply. The racer would be advised to try out with medical advice and help drugs or stimulants which were in no sense injurious, to discover which drug or stimulant was most valuable in enabling him to stand the strain of a big race. He would reject, out of hand, such drugs as morphia and cocaine for reasons given above. He would hold himself free to use kola, or bromide, or asperin, in small doses.

But we do not live in a reasonable world, and racers have not only to protect their nerves but to protect their reputations. My advice, therefore, is summed up quite briefly as follows. Experiment very carefully and take the best medical advice. Reject any drug with the sort of name which arouses prejudice in ill-instructed people. Very few people use kola, but many people use bromide and asperin. It is therefore reasonably safe, from the point of view of your reputation to use bromide, if you find it useful, but it is dangerous to use kola, however harmless kola may be.