

FORTEINTJESBERG

By Arthur N. Field, Chairman of the Ski Club of South Africa

WINTER sports in South Africa can now boast a history of five years. To those who indulged in this thrilling sport in the first years of its introduction to South Africa, the "silver tail" is beginning to wear off, and the pleasures derived from novelty, of gliding perilously and falling helplessly, are giving place to the pleasures of better ski-ing.

The sport, imported from the Alps and the Arctic regions to sub-tropical Africa, has thus become well established in a zone where no person of sound mind would, a few years ago, have expected it to become firmly rooted. The modern world takes delight in the unexpected and the new, and the story of how winter sports became established in South Africa is no less unique than the spectacle of Norwegians, together with sons and daughters of South Africa, speeding and leaping and cutting turns on the snowfields high up on the Hex River mountains, in the Western Province of the Cape.

The story really began when, some fifteen years ago, Mr. E. W. McL. Thomas, having learnt the thrills of ski-running in Switzerland and Norway, brought back a pair of ski and ascended the Matroosberg (7,300 feet altitude), the tallest of the Hex River giants, to demonstrate his conviction that ski-ing was possible in South Africa. The attempt was partially successful. Mr. Thomas had the pleasure of being the first to ride on ski in South Africa; but he was obliged to admit that ski-ing on Matroosberg was extremely dangerous for any but the most skilled exponents of the sport.

In 1922 a new chapter was commenced when two Worcester students, Messrs. E. S. Field and E. G. Pells, commenced their University studies at Cape Town, and, looking around for an interesting vacation occupation, undertook to write a series of articles on the Hex River mountains for the "Worcester Standard," with an arrangement to publish these articles in book form as a guide to mountaineers. Most of the vacations for five years were spent in systematically exploring every peak in the Western Province.

Mr. Pells, having won the Rhodes Scholarship, proceeded to Oxford, and the love of the mountains acquired among the Hex River peaks lured him, between his courses, to further exploration in the Alps. Here he, too, became enamoured of the joys of ski-ing, and he returned to South Africa with his beloved ski among his baggage. His explorations in the Hex River mountains had taught him where to look for happy ski-ing grounds in South Africa. He and his companion had, in their student days, established a high-level climbing base at a cave in a beautiful nook which they named Disa Dell, from which they had frequently worked across a wide plateau which they named Fonteintjesberg (in the heart of the Hex River Range). At its summit they had erected the first beacon. In those days they

heartily detested Fonteintjesberg for climbing because it had given them so many hours of laborious wading through deep snow. But what a difference the ski would make. Returning with his Alpine equipment, Pells was soon ascending to the once hated snowfields on Fonteintjesberg, but this time with an eagerness to encounter the snow so that he might strap on his ski and demonstrate a new sport for South Africa. His published accounts in the "Cape Times" of July 9, 1922, of his successful experiment, soon attracted the attention of others who had learnt the thrills of ski-ing overseas.

Two Norwegians, Mr. Michelsen and Mr. Meyer, who had at one time held high rank in the championship events of their homeland, gave impetus to the movement by some daring and brilliant exhibitions of ski jumping. The enthusiasts soon banded together and formed the Ski Club of South Africa, and very appropriately elected Mr. E. W. McL. Thomas as its first president. It must have been a great source of pleasure to Mr. Thomas to realize that his convictions had been fully justified, and his gratification was demonstrated by the donation of a stone cottage to the club.

The hut was built with the assistance of energetic members of the Worcester section of the Mountain Club, the Worcester municipal engineer, and 150 Worcester schoolboys and girls, who transported the timber for the hut up 3,500 feet of the mountain. The "Thomas Hut" as it has been christened, stands within a few yards of the cave which had been the base for the two student explorers of Fonteintjesberg. Ski-ing is now conducted in comparative comfort. In the hut are lockers for the ski, mattresses, bedding, cooking utensils and oil stoves.

As the years pass by advancement is steadily being made in bringing this sport within the reach of all. Ski-ing is a vigorous sport, and youth is required on the part of its ardent devotees in any part of the world. In Switzerland and Norway funicular railways are available in many areas to save the laborious climb up to the snowfields prior to the exhilarating run down. Enthusiasts talk of the day when this ski-ing de luxe will be available in South Africa; but that day is not yet. At present an ascent by bridle path of 3,500 feet is necessary to reach the hut. Occasionally good ski-ing may be had near the hut, but for the greatest portion of the ski-ing season another thousand feet must be ascended to reach the high level plateau where the best snowfields are found. Horses have now been made available to ride up as far as the hut. Those (including the writer) who have seen the enormous crowds who flock to the snowfields of Europe each year for winter sports, visualize this as a first stage.

The presence of the hut at a high altitude has enabled the writer to make comparisons between South African snowfalls and those of Switzerland.

In the regions of the Alps, the absence of high winds permits the snow to fall in big feathery flakes, which pile up rapidly in many feet of soft, powdery snowfields. Several days of alternate thawing and freezing, by day and night, are required for this feathery snow to settle before it is firm enough to provide ideal skiing conditions. Fonteintjesberg derives snow of this nature only from the gentle south winds, which are infrequent. Snowfalls on that high plateau are brought up mainly by the driving northwest winds, which bring alternately sleet (like fine hail) and feathery flakes. The former tend to beat the latter down, with the result that as soon as the storm has lifted the snowfields are in the condition which the ski runner loves—firm enough to prevent sinking through, but soft enough on the surface to allow the long ski to "bite in."

Mr. Michelsen and Mr. Meyer, who were born and reared among the snows of Norway, consider that the snow of Fonteintjesberg cannot be improved upon as a training ground, and the rapid progress made by young South Africans in acquiring the intricate technique of the sport, fully corroborates their opinions.

The spice of danger, which adds zest to winter sports in northern lands, is not entirely absent on Fonteintjesberg. Though, so far, warnings to caution by the leaders have prevented any catastrophe on the South African snowfields, heavy mist and snowstorms have been the case of a few exciting adventures. To be lost in a snowstorm on a high plateau several miles in extent, with only one narrow valley to safety, and with the knowledge that unless the valley could be located whilst their endurance lasted they were fated to death from exposure, was the terrifying experience which befell two schoolmasters on one occasion. Fortune, however, favoured them, and just as they were resigning themselves to their fate, a lift in the clouds enabled them to locate the way out.

Two young Cape Town men on another occasion had attempted the ascent to the hut after dark, relying on having done so successfully on several previous occasions by the guidance of the well-defined bridle path. A heavy snowstorm came on, entirely obliterating all traces of the track. Their lantern would not function in the blizzard, and in any case, would have served only to dazzle their limited vision. For two hours they stumbled and floundered in the deep snow, but eventually coming upon the stream in Disa Dell they were able to follow it to the hut, which they reached in inky darkness at 3 a.m. Friends who had preceded them administered warm coffee and wrapped them up in blankets while they recounted their adventures, reminiscent of many tales told to the monks of St. Bernard.

Youth the world over, and throughout the ages, has sought new fields for adventure. The young men and women who for the past five years have been developing winter sports in South Africa will have many thrilling fireside tales to tell when Father Time bids them remain around their hearths while the snow falls on Fonteintjesberg.



The Thornton Perpetual Trophy, won in 1934 by K. Baadsvik, emblematic of the Canadian all round Amateur Ski Championship