Get Out and Run

By A. H. Pangman

PERHAPS I am biased in the matter, possibly I may be wrong, but I would like to see less emphasis placed on downhill and slalom ski-ing, and more on the good old sweat producing game of cross-country racing.

After all the original purpose of the ski was for travel across country, and so it remained for hundreds of years until the modern craze for high speed, synonymous with post war years, saw in it a perfect subject for adoption. In the downhill races of central Europe today, the winning of a race occasionally depends more on nerve than skill. The racer to win must take almost impossible slopes "straight," and risk a dangerous fall. All the more power to him, but where is it all leading to?

Downhill and slalom racing have obtained a tremendous popularity in the last few years, partly due to the thrill of speed, but mainly because they do not require any hard work. And that is the truth. One can get a cheap thrill without having to sweat for it, not realizing that the harder the work the sweeter is the moment of rest. Every sport has its own exquisite sensation or thrill associated with it, and it is hard to compare them. I have tried most sports, during fifteen fairly active years, from rowing to fencing. In most of them I never got past the novice stage, so perhaps I am not qualified to speak; but few if any, to my mind, can give the same satisfaction, the same sensation of strength in one's own motive power than that obtained when, after a long hard climb up a winding wooded trail, you scale the top in a burst of brilliant sunlight reflected from the hard snow crystals, and start to slide down the farther side, or to stretch out your cramped limbs in a long gliding stride along the level. You breathe deeply and silently, and a feeling of exhilaration is diffused throughout your whole body. By the time you have reached the next hill you are ready again and take it at a run.

If the downhill courses of Eastern Canada were of any adequate length there might be some excuse for this cautiousness of the Canadian skier towards the cross-country. In a country like Switzerland, with its towering treeless peaks, and drops of from two thousand to five thousand vertical feet, one can not expect the natives or visitors to spend much time in running around the valley floors or in climbing up a thousand meter hill. But in Eastern Canada, with the exception of Mont Tremblant, which is but a poor imitation at most, there are no comparable downhill courses. The shorter runs that have been cut during the last two years are excellent training for high speed turning on a small scale, and will certainly raise the safety speed of the average skier, but they are mere child's play when compared to descents of three and four thousand feet at an average speed of anywhere from thirty to forty miles per hour. On the other hand this country with its rolling hills, never more than six to seven hundred feet high, is ideal for cross-country racing, absolutely made for it, and yet we get an entry list of a hundred and thirty competitors for a downhill race at St. Sauveur and only twenty in a cross-country hike.

I do not wish to minimize the importance of slalom and downhill races for the development of ski-ing technique, for improving turning at high speed, and for teaching quick thinking. But they do not teach one to ski in control. They should, certainly, but if one wants to even make an attempt at winning, and who does not, he must take chances. Ski teachers for years have taught the "ski in control" idea, but how many of us actually do in practice. One usually takes the course all out—corners that can not be negotiated at full speed, result in a fall; flags which jut out inopportunely bring a penalty.

In cross-country running it is just the opposite. One must take all hills with a speed commensurate with one's ability. Heavy falls are disastrous on endurance. The novice will soon realize this. Furthermore the average cross-country course embodies in it from three to four good short downhill courses plus half a dozen slaloms. You can have them all for a fifty cent entrance fee, the price of a lone slalom event. One soon learns to "ski in control" in a cross-country race, conserving both energy and endurance for the climbs.

Again there is no better way to squander away a perfectly good ski-ing day than by entering a slalom or downhill race. Half an hour to an hour in a leisurely climb up the trail, stopping to admire the view every hundred feet or so. About the same length of time or double in waiting for your turn to start. Two minutes or less of actual ski-ing, and then the remainder of the morning as a spectator. I have spent more time during the last two years in freezing at the top of downhill courses, and sitting in the warm sun at the bottom watching as the other runners stagger past the finish line, than I have in actual ski-ing. Why—I do not know. Probably because I enjoy it. I admit that it has always been a thrill, and I have often arrived out of breath with my legs wavering like a drunk. But the excess lactic acid is soon oxidised out of my system, and then there is never any feeling of real satisfaction, of having accomplished anything worth while even if my run had been extra fast. There is no desire to seek a hot bath, or lie on a soft bed, or stretch till one's muscles crack.