

# Women Ski Racers in Europe

*Miss Bernie Duthie, who lives in England, sends the following ski biography of herself and also the photographs of the Women Ski Racers to illustrate her article—"Women Ski Racers in Europe"*

**I** FIRST went to Switzerland for a fortnight when I was eighteen, with strict injunctions from my mother that I was not to ski because it was too dangerous. However, the ice and toboggan runs melted in the middle of the second week and I decided to ski first and ask afterwards.

I visited Switzerland for periods of a fortnight to three weeks for the next three years but concentrated mostly on skating, and it was not until 1927 that I entered for a small visitors' ski race. Winning the ladies' first prize in this made me an enthusiastic skier, and staying out for six weeks, I passed the Ski Club of Great Britain's Second Class Test.

After this I went through a period of finding it easier to ski fast than in control with the result that for the next four winters my skiing days amounted to about one month all told, while various Swiss doctors profited to the tune of £200 and my insurance company refused to insure me any more.

In 1932, thoroughly chastened by my series of accidents, I determined never to get out of control again. For six weeks I kept this vow but on the day of the Parsenn Derby I got swept away by the general excitement and entered for the race. Getting fifth place out of thirty-two entries sent all my good resolutions to the winds and I determined that the following year I would race seriously.

In 1933, at an age when many racers consider it time to retire, I won the British Championship, for which there was only a small entry, and having been placed in several Kandahar races I was chosen to go as reserve for the

FIS team. I did not get a race as no one fell out of the team, but shortly afterwards I raced in the Austrian Championships which had a large entry, many of whom had been racing in the FIS. I was fourth in the Combined. After this success I was awarded my Gold Kandahar Badge and became a confirmed racer.

In 1934, I again won the British Championship and was third out of quite a strong entry for the Kandahar Jubilee Races. At the end of the year I was awarded the Ski Club of Great Britain's Gold Medal.

I raced for the British FIS Teams in 1934 and 1935, and the Olympic Team in 1936 and was chosen, but was unable to race for, the FIS Team in 1937, and captained the FIS Team in 1938.

In 1935 I was fourth in the Slalom and fifth in the Combined events of the Arlberg-Kandahar, probably one of my best efforts.

In 1937, I was first woman in the Duke of Kent's race, beating 27 of the men. Other races won during these years were—first, Mackinnon Cup (Open Kandahar); first, Lady Mabel Lunn Slalom (Kandahar Ladies); first, Orsini Slalom (Kandahar Ladies); first, Corveglia Cup Klostens; first, Ladies Wengen Holden Ski.

After the 1938 season I informed the authorities of my definite decision to retire from serious racing and competition for a place on the FIS Team. However, I still enjoy an occasional race, especially slaloms, and last year I was second in the British Championship Slalom and seventh in the Arlberg-Kandahar.

**I**T WAS a long time before women started downhill ski-racing and the first with the initiative to take it up were the British, who soon showed the European countries that downhill racing was not entirely man's prerogative.

The Swiss women were the first of the Europeans to follow the lead of the British. They founded the Swiss Ladies' Ski Club and in 1928 a downhill and slalom team race was held between the Swiss Club and the (British) Ladies' Ski Club. The Ladies Ski Club had by

far the most experienced team and were therefore fairly easy winners, Doreen Elliott being first in both downhill race and slalom, Durell Sale-Barker second in the slalom and Greta Raeburn second in the downhill race.

The race was held again in 1929, our British team again being triumphant with Doreen Elliott and Durell Sale-Barker dividing the honours between them. Undoubtedly, these two were the outstanding women skiers of this early period and it was they who finally ex-

ploded the old theory that women had not the physique to stand up to the speeds of downhill racing by beating forty-six men in the first FIS meeting at Zakopane in 1929.

Doreen Elliott and Durell Sale-Barker had been sent to represent Great Britain in this race on the assumption that there was to be a women's downhill event, but on arrival they discovered that the Poles did not approve of women racing downhill and therefore the women's race consisted of a langlauf. After negotiations the two British women were allowed to compete in the men's downhill race, but only on the strict understanding that they should be running *hors concours*.

downhill racing for women was accepted as a matter of course.

The race records show that Doreen Elliott and Durell Sale-Barker reigned practically supreme from 1926 to 1930. During this time there were a number of courageous skiers such as Greta Raeburn, Freda Gossage, Nell Carroll and Phyllis Beckton who were good racers, but none of them had the technique which could produce the almost monotonous regularity of success of these two champions.

Phyllis Beckton was probably the fastest of these racers and had it not been for a bad accident early on in her racing career she might well have proved better than the best, for she



Miss Durell Sale-Barker



Miss Evie Pinching

Miss Gerda Paumgarten



Miss Bernice Duthie

This was the first occasion on which downhill racing was officially recognized by the Federation Internationale de Ski and, like all innovations, was looked upon with suspicion and a certain amount of dislike.

Although not favoured by good conditions—and, to quote Doreen Elliott who did the better time of the two women, "I have never seen before or since such awful wind slab, ice ridges, and breakable crust,"—the race was however an unqualified success and thus definitely brought downhill racing into favour.

Miss Elliott's and Miss Sale-Barker's magnificent effort in being thirteenth and fourteenth respectively, out of a field of sixty was an effective answer to all preconceived ideas of women's racing and from that date onwards

won both the L.S.C. Championship and the British Championship from Miss Elliott in 1926.

Nell Carroll was also a splendid racer and would, perhaps, have been a serious challenger if she had not had a curious failing in that she invariably missed yellow flags and so was several times disqualified in big events. Nevertheless, she shares with Miss Sale-Barker the distinction so far of being the sole holders of the Gold Arlberg-Kandahar badge.

An obvious question to ask here, and one I have often heard asked, is which was the better racer, Miss Elliott or Miss Sale-Barker? The answer, however, is far from obvious. I can only say that if both were entered for a race and one did not win the other almost certainly

did. If asked to bet on the results my money would have gone on Miss Elliott if the course was on soft or difficult snow and on Miss Sale-Barker if it was on hard snow, while for slaloms I would have kept it in my pocket.

Miss Elliott was and still is one of the most graceful women skiers and the guides at Gstaad, where she often stayed, nicknamed her "The Swallow." Her racing record is the more surprising when one realizes that most of her time was taken up with organizing beginners' skiing and that therefore she could get little or no training. Eventually she gave up racing, having strained her heart. It was unfortunate that during her whole racing career she was only able to race in the Arlberg-Kandahar once, on this occasion winning the slalom.

Miss Sale-Barker was a surprising skier, for while practising she seemed rather unsteady, although she was a graceful performer on hard snow. In a race, however, she became absolutely inspired and some of her performances were indeed magnificent.

About 1930 came a challenger to the British supremacy in the person of an Austrian girl named Inge Lantschner. With a similar style of skiing as that of Nell Caroll she combined remarkable soft snow technique and, like all skiers from Innsbruck, the steeper the slope, the better she skied. Having won the Arlberg-Kandahar at St. Anton in 1930 from Nell Caroll (Miss Sale-Barker and Miss Elliott not competing) her appearance was looked forward to in the 1931 races with much speculation.

By 1931, however, a young British skier was rapidly coming to the fore. This was Muffie Mackinnon, whose complete mastery of the deep soft snow prevailing at the time of the FIS carried her to victory in all three events, successfully beating Inge Lantschner. Durrell Sale-Barker won both downhill race and slalom in the Arlberg-Kandahar of this year, so although the margin of success was smaller the British women still led the field.

The year of the financial crises was 1932 and consequently had a bad result on British racing. Muffie Mackinnon wintered in England and the European challengers became more numerous; Hadi Lantschner, sister to Inge, joined their ranks, while the Swiss produced Roesli Streiff and the Italians Paola Wiesinger, to champion their causes. The little Swiss girl Roesli Streiff was the winner of the combined FIS results with the Lantschner family taking second and third places, Durrell Sale-Barker and Doreen Elliott being only fourth and fifth respectively. Most of the British skiers went home before the Arlberg-Kandahar and from now on, with the competition becoming stronger each year, the British had to be content with fewer wins such as Muffie Mackinnon's Arlberg-Kandahar in 1933, Jeanette Kessler's success in the Arlberg-Kandahar of 1934 and in the Swiss Champion-

ships of 1935. Unfortunately Miss Kessler broke her leg in the FIS of that year, which was a sad blow to British hopes.

Evelyn Pinching gained the best result for British skiing in 1936 by winning the FIS at Innsbruck, but she retired from serious racing after this event and Jeanette Kessler's leg not having mended entirely satisfactorily, the years of 1937 and 1938 were lean ones.

However, after the success of Isobel Roe and Marion Steedman in the Arlberg-Kandahar of 1939 there seems to be some hope of a revival.

After the decline of British supremacy, the honours in the big races were quite evenly distributed among the different countries. Switzerland produced Anny Ruegg, Nini Zogg and Erna Steuri to champion their cause; while Austria had Gerda Paumgarten, Norway Laila Schon-Neilson, and Germany Kathe Grasseger, Lisa Reish and Cristel Cranz.

From 1937 onwards there can be no doubt that Cristel Cranz has reigned supreme amongst the women skiers of the world. Considering the high standard and large numbers of present-day women racers it is a remarkable feat for anyone to have won so many first class events over so long a period. Her triumphs include the Olympic Games in 1936, the FIS and the Arlberg-Kandahar in 1937 and the FIS in 1938 and 1939. Her style is in no way showy and has none of the over-exaggerated vorlage of many modern skiers, and, in fact, her appearance of absolute rock-like steadiness over the most difficult ground gives a most deceptive air of slowness, while in a slalom she gives the most amazing impression of controlled power I have ever seen in a woman skier.

In conclusion I notice that it is assumed by most people that the standard of skiing today is far and away higher than that of the old days and that the star racers of the present time would leave the stars of the past far behind. I would like to argue that in skiing, as in most other sports, it is impossible to make any fair comparison between the past and present owing to the changing conditions of the courses and equipment.

Personally, I am convinced that the really star performer in any sport is born and not made and that those who rose to the top in the past would as surely rise to the top now if they could have their time over again under present conditions.

While watching the Arlberg-Kandahar at Murren this year I could not help wondering just what all those highly trained, well-equipped young racers, flashing down the carefully prepared course, would have said had they suddenly been transplanted back to the conditions of 1929 and asked to run the race over a course of "wind slab, ice ridges and breakable crust" on skis with completely rounded wooden edges and bindings which would have made the

present method of vorlage an impossibility. The winners might conceivably be the same but what of the winning times?

In closing may I point out an article which gives what I consider to be rather an inaccurate impression of some of the best British women skiers of the 1929-31 period. I refer to "The Women Ski Racers of Europe" by Alice Wolfe.

Miss Sale-Barker was not first lady in the Zakopane 1929 FIS. Miss Doreen Elliott was first, the respective times being: Miss Elliott thirteenth, in 10 mins. 16 secs., and Miss Sale-Barker fourteenth, in 10 mins. 26 secs.

Another thing which I find surprising in this article is that racers of the standard of Lady Raeburn and Miss Diana Kingsmill should have been mentioned as if they were the British best, while really outstanding skiers like Miss Nell Carroll and Miss Esmé Mackinnon appear to have been overlooked. Miss Carroll and Miss Sale-Barker are holders of the Woman's Gold A-K badge (the only two up to

date), while Miss Mackinnon won the 1931 FIS.

Also, superb as was Fraülein Inge Lantschner's performance in every kind of snow, I do not like Mrs. Wolfe's assumption that the British women's technique was not equally good. As early as 1928 Miss Elliott was fourth out of seventeen starters (only three of whom were women) in the Inferno Race at Mürren. This race necessitated a five-hours climb to the start; the course was an aggregate vertical descent of 7,500 feet and official snow conditions read "Touched by wind and inclined to be crusty on top, breakable crust in lower fields." Surely no women could have had the strength to have competed so successfully against men in such a gruelling race without the most superb technique.

Miss Mackinnon showed her form in the notably difficult snow conditions of the 1931 FIS by winning all three events, Fraülein Inge Lantschner being second and eighth in the two straight races and second in the slalom.



"Spring Time in the Rockies"—Ski Camp in Eremite Valley, Jasper National Park

Photo: C.N.R.