

Master's World Championships 2008 – Britain triumphant!



THE FIRST TIME: Is this the first time a Brit has stood on the very top rung of the podium in any FIS sanctioned World Championships? We think so, but if you know differently, then keep it to yourself, 'cos you're not raining on our parade!

Was this the best ever Masters World Championships of all time? How should I know? I haven't written the article yet. Be patient, my friend, and the answer will become clear at the end but, pssst, I'll give you a clue, yes it was!

Way to go

Brian and I arrived first, on the evening of Friday 22nd February or, to put it a slightly different way, 2 a.m. on the morning of Saturday 23rd February after what proved to be a rather trying journey, indicating that the Americans have adopted much the same approach to Customer Service as Britain. We missed the first connection from Seattle to Boise owing to baggage handling issues but perhaps the highlight of this trip was when we were told that, because of fog in Boise, we might not go there at all but to Spokane, instead, which is only 1/3 of the distance from Seattle. Concerned by this, we enquired what would happen if we found ourselves in Spokane. No problem, we were told, we (Alaska Airlines) will find you a hotel for the night. And will you fly us to Boise the following morning? No, Sir, you will have to make your own way. And roughly how far is it? About 290 miles. Hmmm, thanks. Anyway, we had no problems arriving in Boise, although the two hour drive up to McCall, in thick fog, was probably not the best after about 25 hours of travel. At least the motel owner, woken from her bed by our mid early morning arrival, didn't seem to hold a grudge. I should, though, to finish this introductory paragraph, be a little more precise; we arrived safely but Brian's ski bag, which contained a lot of his skiing clothing, had decided to stay for an extended holiday in Boise (it later emerged).

Several hours on the phone the following morning to Alaska Airlines (motto “We aim to please, but our shooting needs a bit of practice”) failed to locate Brian's luggage but it didn't matter because he and I have much the same height and boot size so a loan of my equipment, at a reasonable fee, solved the missing boots problem and we set off to explore the tracks. There was plenty of snow (it was later reported that 8 metres had fallen during the season) but it was snowing and around 0 °C, so classic ski waxing could have been problematical, although this proved not to be the case at first. We found the track very easily and, from the start, it set off (Brian skating, me classic) flat, with very gentle down and up for the first kilometre or so – a nice start. We then started a long but not very steep climb, before dropping down into a twisty section with a few short climbs through the woods. A fairly flat section followed, before we dipped down to the lakeside and then we more or less followed the lake for the next few kilometres to the farthest point.

We were skiing easily (I didn't want to fall with my broken hand) but there was certainly nothing tricky up to this point. We looped back, after a short climb, to the 5 km point, and then headed out again along the other leg of the lake, before turning and starting the climb to the high point. There then followed the only somewhat tricky part of the circuit, known as Down Under, which took us in some fairly fast downhill and corners, with corresponding climbs, into the woods again, before a steepish climb took us out and back to the 2 km point. A nice long descent followed (the classic skis were icing up by this point, unfortunately), and then the tracks turned into the woods for the final time, where one short, sharp descent represented the only really tricky part of the circuit. A few more corners through the woods and we were back to the start again, very nice. No problems finding the right course at all, but our conclusion was that the track was perhaps a bit too flat for Masters skiing.

Our “too flat” perception was to change over the next few days, though and, after a couple more trips around the course on subsequent days, we concluded that, in fact, the tracks were ideal, with the amount of climbs being about right, while the downhill were fun but easily manageable. The only complaints came later from the older men (whose track was perhaps a bit too easy) but, other than that, there were very few objections. On the second day, when we met Patrick o'Conner who had spent 5 days driving the 3000 miles from the East Coast, the tracks were not very well prepared, but this was down to the fact that the piste basher had broken down the previous evening. This was quickly rectified by borrowing another from a nearby resort and, from then on, track preparation was perfect. A few days in I opined to Brian that it might be possible to get round the whole track using Skate 2 (double dance). He fell into my little trap, but equally rose to the challenge, and proved that I was right. Hmmm, perhaps not the best session just prior to racing.

On Wednesday we drove down to Boise again to pick up Wendy and Chris Donnelly (a rather easier trip than on the first night), and other people arrived on Thursday. This led to our introduction to new member and Masters virgin Sian and her friend J.D., and two Australians living in the States, while Alasdair and Norman drove over from Sun Valley, which is a couple of hours away. A misunderstanding about the number of people staying in the house (which was huge, with walk-in wardrobes as large as my whole house) could have led to some unpleasantness but we handled it in an adult manner and, after a bit of staring and slightly raised voices, we converted the dining room into a bedroom and peace and harmony, and the Special Relationship between GB and the USA, were restored.

Friday evening was the Opening Ceremony, involving a walk around the town where we met up with Chris Richards and his wife Shiela, who had been doing the Grand Tour of the western USA, new member Mark Llinares (who provided the new British Masters racing suits) and equally new member Sara-Jane Cox Conklin and her husband Mark. With that, the team (of 10) was complete, although the BMCCSA ‘team’ was larger, with the addition of Patrick o'Conner and Jack White from Canada. This put us well ahead of some countries and, as it happened, exactly equal to Australia in terms of numbers (10), number of men to women (7/3) and the number of skiers living in the US (4).



The start of the opening parade. From L. to R.: Brian, Chris R., Sian, Norman, Sara-Jane, Mark, Adam and Chris D.



Adam, Wendy and Norman in the kitchen of our huge house, trying to pretend that they have some idea of what to do there

Good job

Finally we came to the racing, 30/15/10 km classic. Unfortunately, the day dawned with it snowing and spot on 0 °C – a perfect day for cocking up the grip waxing! Even within the British camp there was no agreement on what would work best, Brian opting for Violet, 0 to -1 °C while Chris Richards chose Swix Red, -1 to +2 °C. It seemed to make little difference on a day when fish scales were possibly the best option, and we saw many other people having problems, but things were very typical; anything that gripped was likely to ice up, while anything that didn't ice up wouldn't grip. Despite this, Brian still returned the second best British men's classic performance of all time, 25.9 % (compared with his best ever of 25.1 % in the 45 km classic in Lake Placid 10 years earlier). Chris Richards was only just outside his best-ever classic performance (37.5 % compared with 37.1 % in Brusson 2006), while Alasdair was a little off his best. Better was to come, too, from Patrick later in the event. I was constantly turning over in my head whether I should risk my hand and race after all (despite advice from everyone, including my surgeon), but when I saw the conditions at the start, I was not in the slightest bit tempted!

In the ladies category, both Sara-Jane (former professional triathlon World Champion) and Sian, in their debuts, performed very well, Sara-Jane recording the seventh-best British ladies result of all time (and the third best classic result). What was pleasing, though, was that nearly all BMCCSA were fairly well up in their age groups; only Sian having the misfortune to claim a British Gold Medal. But read on ...



Brian emerges from Down Under, steepest hill on the course, heading for 2nd best ever classic result



And so does Chris R., a few minutes later

Men's M01-M06 30 km classic, Saturday 1st March

Fastest	German Schastlivyy	RUS	M02	1.27:47.5	
1)	Doug Gudwer	CAN	M05	1.26:35.0	
36)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	1.49:03.1	25.9 %
46)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	2.08:54.3	48.9 % (52 starters)
1)	Erik Johansen	NOR	M06	1.26:14.1	
51)	Christopher Richards	GBR	M06	1.58:33.9	37.5 % (77 starters)

Men's M07-M09 15 km classic, Saturday 1st March

Fastest	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M08	45:13.4	
34)	Patrick O'Connor	USA	M08	1.09:03.7	52.7 % (40 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 15 km classic, Saturday 1st March

Fastest	Elena Matveeva	RUS	F03	46:42.3	
8)	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	56:25.1	20.8 %
16)	Sian Mooney	GBR	F03	1.03:32.8	36.1 % (16 starters)



Alasdair, checking to make sure the ground hasn't disappeared, also emerges from Down Under



Sara-Jane, at the finish, shows off the snazzy new BMCCSA racing suit

Awesome

Next up, Sunday 2nd March, came the equivalent freestyle race, with all remaining British skiers racing in this one. First off was Masters Newcomer Mark Llinares, who put up the fastest time but, because of a faster winner's time, just lost out to Chris D. who posted his best ever performance. Jack White, having a good season in Canada, also recorded his best ever performance, moving him to 16th in the All Time list for British Masters. But then, of course, we came to Norman, and what an exciting race it was. Over two laps, Norman seemed to be stronger than the others going up the long hill, but was losing out to them on the downhill section. So, as they came into the stadium area at the end of the second lap, it was almost neck-and-neck between Norman and two Norwegians. But, as they sprinted for the line, one of the Norwegians, Arnfinn Haugland, stumbled and this let Norman escape and finish a tantalising 0.6 seconds ahead of his other Norwegian rival (Arnfinn picked himself up to finish third, four seconds back). Not bad, really, when you consider that, when Norman first raced at the Masters, back in Grindelwald in 1999, he was down there with us mere mortals at only 60.9 % !!

Men's M01-M06 30 km free, Sunday 2nd March

Fastest	Alfio Di Gregorio	ITA	M02	1.13:57.6	
1)	Dmitry Vedeneev	RUS	M03	1.14:06.5	
33)	Mark Llinares	GBR	M03	1.37:28.3	31.5 % (39 starters)
1)	Erwin Haas	GER	M05	1.19:38.7	
59)	Christopher Donnelly	GBR	M05	1.39:16.6	24.6 % (81 starters)

Men's M07-M09 15 km free, Sunday 2nd March

Fastest	Finn Magnar Hagen	NOR	M08	40:51.7	
13)	Jack White	CAN	M08	48:18.0	18.2 % (34 starters)

Men's M10-M12 10 km free, Sunday 2nd March

Fastest	Norman Clark	GBR	M10	37:52.0	0.0 % (8 starters)
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Norman mixes it with the opposition. Third place man Arnfinn Haugland of Norway is leading at this point



Chris D. shows strong style coming past the inappropriately positioned speed limit sign towards the top of the long drag to the 2 km point

It might be thought, after all this excitement, that Wendy's debut in the Masters would be a bit of an anti-climax, but the opposite was the case. She surpassed my, and possibly her own, expectations, never being at the back of the pack and, after a good tussle with a couple of American skiers, managed to put three people behind her. Just as a matter of interest, a one minute improvement in Wendy's finishing time, which is easily possible, would have moved her up three places!

Ladies F01-F06 15 km free, Sunday 2nd March

Fastest	Laura McCabe	USA	F03	39:32.6	
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	43:06.1	
33)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	59:49.5	38.8 % (37 starters)

So, at last, we had a Brit standing on the top step of the podium and, of course, with 0 % of the winner's time! We all went to the ice hall for the presentation, and there was champagne with our dinners that night.



Wendy gets off to a good start



Sian (left) and Sara-Jane prepare to start

We had just two competitors in the 10 km classic event the following morning, and they were Sara-Jane and Wendy (slightly second hand Masters virgins by this time). At least there was no repeat of the waxing debacle of two days earlier; a predicted temperature of about -8°C led to an easy choice of Toko Dibloc pink glide wax, carefully applied by top British wax technician Dr. A.A. Pervert, with Rex fairy dust on top, producing rockets for Wendy. When the morning came with a temperature at the start of about -6°C (predicted to rise during the day), grip waxing was easy too; a couple of layers of Swix Blue, -2 to -8°C , finished off with Swix Violet, 0 to -4°C to cope with the warming, worked perfectly from the first try out. And Wendy used this splendid wax job to full advantage, storming to a much better performance, putting seven people behind her in what was, by far, her best performance of the event.

Sara-Jane performed excellently, too. A little down on her performance of 20.8 % in the longer classic race (although 21.4 % is still pretty hot), she nonetheless managed to put 10 people behind her, meaning that she finished well within the top half of the field for her age. It must have been the cheer I gave her, the new British suit making it a bit tricky to differentiate her from Wendy. With these conditions, the temptation for me to race was very strong, but a short sprint showed that my hand would hurt if I tried to push it, so it was another day on the sidelines.



Brian (light blue hat, just right of centre) starts



Chris (black hat between two whites) in good position

Ladies F01-F06 10 km classic, Monday 3rd March

Fastest	Elena Matveeva	RUS	F03	30:29.6	
8)	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	37:00.6	21.4 % (18 starters)
1)	Raufa Zagidulina	RUS	F05	32:57.2	
17)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	45:12.3	37.2 % (24 starters)

All of the remaining BMCCSA contingent opted for the freestyle race in the afternoon and, again, everyone produced some excellent performances. Mark, in what was his last race (he had to leave before the long race) improved well on his 30 km performance, both in percentage terms and in number of people beaten and, if he continues to train as he has promised to, has the possibility of moving considerably further up the field. Brian, too, put in his second best performance of all time, 16.0 % being just down on his Quebec 2002 performance of 15.7 %. Jack White skied excellently to record just 15.0 % of the winner's time, making him the second best ever BMCCSA male skier after Norman, Chris D. was a little down on his 30 km performance, while Chris R. also put in his second best ever percentage and Patrick was saving his best for last. Chez les femmes, Sian put up the best performance of all British ladies of this event, meaning that only two British ladies are ahead of her in the Best-of-All-Time list.

But, of course, pride of place went, yet again, to Norman, stonking home a wide 19 seconds clear of his nearest rival for yet another Gold Medal. His main rival, Arnfinn, DNFd in this race (surprising, because it is the shortest of the men's races, but perhaps he was just saving his energy ...). Although we all trundled down to the medals ceremony again to watch Norman climb to the top step, there was no champagne for dinner this time; after all, it was just getting too commonplace!

Men's M01-M06 10 km free, Monday 3rd March

Fastest	Andrey Nutrikhin	RUS	M01	22:59.3		
1)	Dmitry Vedeneev	RUS	M03	23:43.6		
33)	Mark Llinares	GBR	M03	30:37.8	29.1 %	(42 starters)
1)	Jon Engen	USA	M05	25:14.0		
41)	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	29:15.9	16.0 %	
57)	Christopher Donnelly	GBR	M05	31:33.9	25.1 %	
68)	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	33:39.3	33.4 %	(71 starters)
1)	Einar Vikingstad	NOR	M06	25:45.9		
51)	Christopher Richards	GBR	M06	32:08.8	24.8 %	(68 starters)

Men's M07-M09 10 km free, Monday 3rd March

Fastest	Finn Magnar Hagen	NOR	M08	27:12.1		
14)	Jack White	CAN	M08	31:17.5	15.0 %	
43)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M08	41:39.9	53.2 %	(45 starters)

Men's M10-M12 5 km free, Monday 3rd March

Fastest	Norman Clark	GBR	M10	16:54.4	0.0 %	(9 starters)
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Ladies F01-F06 10 km free, Monday 3rd March

Fastest	Ragnhild Bolstad	NOR	F03	27:42.0		
14)	Sian Mooney	GBR	F03	32:19.8	16.7 %	(24 starters)

We had a full British team in the Men's relay but this was not perhaps our finest moment; the team finishing in the same position as we often do (although two British teams have, hysterically, finished non-last). Sian also tried her hand as part of a *hors-concours* team with the Australians, and finished non-last by one.

Men's 4 x 5 km relay, Wednesday 5th March

Fastest	Russia	M02	48:20.6					
1)	Russia	M05	V. Spirin	13:04.9c	V. Maltsev	13:18.3c		
			A. Vayner-Krotov	12:36.3f	S. Starchenko	12:34.3f	51:33.8	
7)	Great Britain	M04	B. Adams	15:46.0c	A. Wilson	17:55.5c		
			C. Donnelly	15:58.6f	C. Richards	16:11.6f	1.05:51.6	(7 finishers)

Ladies 4 x 5 km relay, Wednesday 5th March

Fastest	USA	F03-04	B. Reid	13:46.9c	J. Rabinowitz	15:06.5c		
			L. Hall	12:54.2f	L. McCabe	12:42.5f	54:30.1	
5)	AUS-GBR	F03-04	C. Melvey	15:56.6c	S. Mooney	18:05.5c		
			D. Feakes	16:31.7f	C. Vergona	15:58.4f	1.06:32.3	(6 finishers)

The two sets of longer races, as always, completed the programme, with the classic race starting, once again, in perfect conditions and over a slightly easier course because the ups and downs of the Down Under section (which the ladies hadn't been doing anyway) had been removed. The course was also about 1.5 kms short of full distance, because the decision was taken to cut out one flat loop of about 500 metres so as to avoid any problems of people going the wrong way at the point where younger skiers separated from older ones. We has three entrants in the classic races but Alasdair, complaining of pain from an injury caused in a fall the previous day, DNFd after the first lap. Patrick, on the other hand, was having a great time and, when I spoke to him afterwards, he reckoned that he had skied as well as ever in this race. The statistics don't quite bear this out (he'd had a 31.6 % finish in Lake Placid ten years earlier) but 40.4 % is still very reasonable in a classic race and, in any case, it is as much about how one feels in a race that counts so, on this basis, we include Patrick's photo. This leaves, sadly, only Jack White without his photo included but, frankly, his second best ever BMCCSA skier result has to be set against the awfulness of his canary yellow race suit and, in the end, the race suit lost! Sara-Jane had another good race in the new British suit and, although this was marginally her worst race of the event, she was only one place short of the top half of her race and 23.8 % remains very respectable.

Men's M01-M06 45 km classic, Thursday 6th March

Fastest	Bernhard Schneider	GER	M03	2.02:03.0		
1)	Mathias Bergelt	GER	M05	2.05:32.9		
	Alasdair Wilson	GBR	M05	DNF		

Men's M07-M09 30 km classic, Thursday 6th March

Fastest	Kjell Johnsen	NOR	M07	1.29:24.9		
1)	Ola Kvaale	NOR	M08	1.31:34.6		
29)	Patrick o'Connor	USA	M08	2.08:37.1	40.4 %	(40 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 30 km classic, Thursday 6th March

Fastest	Elena Matveeva	RUS	F03	1.26:52.7		
7)	Sara-Jane Cox-Conklin	GBR	F03	1.47:30.8	23.8 %	(12 starters)



Patrick having fun



And finally. The sign says it all; we were!

And so to the final race of the event, with quite a lot of smart money on Norman to carry off the hat-trick of Gold Medals. Off first while conditions were still fairly cold (around -8°C), Norman led for two of the three laps but was never able to pull clear of his rivals who, I'm sure, had ganged up to make sure he didn't win again (after all, who wants to be beaten by a Brit?). As they went up the long drag for the third time, Norman had dropped back to fourth place and was never able to get back on terms. Arnfinn, perhaps with the benefit of not finishing the 5 km race, won the race, with an American and a Canadian taking the next two places, with Norman 6 seconds behind in fourth. A shame, perhaps, not to get the hat-trick, but certainly no disgrace; who could be unhappy with two gold medals?

Jack put up yet another fine performance while Chris D. looked very strong throughout and had his best result of the event and, in fact, his best ever MWC result at just 23.4 %. Chris R. was also well up in his field (I'm sure that it helps to be able to ski in a group) and did well to stay ahead of the Australian Warren Feakes. Among the ladies, Sian put up yet another good performance but, despite my best efforts as Top Waxing Gnu, this was not quite Wendy's best race and, sadly, she spoilt her record by picking up a British bronze medal. A shame, really, after her earlier efforts. But a time under 2 hours for 30 kms (or a bit shorter) is still pretty cool. Finally, Brian had woken up with a cough and a heavy cold but decided to race nonetheless. However, after just a few kilometre he realised that he had nothing in the tank and had no alternative but to stop at the end of the first lap. This, too, was a shame, because it was his first DNF of an otherwise distinguished Masters career. Some of you will remember, from Brusson two years ago, the famous quote from Mike Bangle "I was pulled off by four beefy Italians". I suppose in Brian's case that could be amended to "I pulled ...". No, no, we won't even go there, and I'll not have you making up your own jokes!

By the way, there were also medals for some of our friends from the past: Victor Popov and Vitali Kourochkin from Russia, a good bronze medal for Anny Ketelaars from the Netherlands in the ladies 30 km classic race, and a good 15th place for a skier from Peru in the M02 30 km skate race early in the event! These two latter certainly show what is possible for non-snow nations.

Men's M01-M06 45 km free, Friday 7th March

Fastest	Adam Swank	USA	M01	1:41:23.4	
1)	Jon Engen	USA	M05	1:50:54.3	
44)	Christopher Donnelly	GBR	M05	2:16:53.1	23.4 %
	Brian Adams	GBR	M05	DNF	(69 starters)
1)	Einar Vikingstad	NOR	M06	1:53:59.7	
59)	Christopher Richards	GBR	M06	2:23:13.7	25.6 % (71 starters)

Men's M07-M09 30 km free, Friday 7th March

Fastest	Finn Magnar Hagen	NOR	M08	1.16:36.1	
12)	Jack White	CAN	M08	1.29:20.2	16.6 % (33 starters)

Men's M10-M12 15 km free, Friday 7th March

Fastest	Arnfinn Haugland	NOR	M10	54:11.1	
4)	Norman Clark	GBR	M10	54:17.2	0.2 % (7 starters)

Ladies F01-F06 30 km free, Friday 7th March

Fastest	Laura McCabe	USA	F03	1.13:26.9	
21)	Sian Mooney	GBR	F03	1.30:44.6	23.5 % (31 starters)
1)	Tatiana Esipova	RUS	F05	1.18:21.6	
36)	Wendy McRae	GBR	F05	1.55:22.5	47.2 % (38 starters)

Lick arse

Wendy, Chris D. and Norman all had to leave that evening (Wendy and Chris to get early morning flights), but the rest of us (apart from Mark, who had left earlier) all stayed for the banquet which, although it wasn't perhaps the best, certainly wasn't the worst either. The food was good and was delivered in a timely fashion, but the tables were a little too close together. We left before the Line Dancing started, partly because I'd spoken to a Morris Dancer just before leaving for McCall and he had told me that Line Dancing was only invented to stop people making fun of Morris Dancing.

On the way out of the banquet, we bought the DVD of the event that had been put together by the main sponsors, Blackhawk on the River, a local but large property development company. We had been watching this on the screen prior to purchase, and it looked rather good. Sadly, when we got back to the house and sat down to watch it, we realised that we had been sold an inferior version, which was about the only real disappointment of the whole trip. The sponsors did, however, post a good video of the event on their website although, at the time of going to press, I haven't been able to download it and play it properly yet.

So now we can return to the question of whether this was the best ever Masters. This was the fourteenth World Masters Championships I have been to (although it was the second, along with Mariezell, where I was not able to race and, of course, I had to pull out of Krasnogorsk half way through the event). McCall was certainly one of the best attended and I found the organisation to be just about spot-on throughout.

On the positive side, I reckon that the tracks were probably the best I have ever seen for a Masters – hard enough but fair, with no dangerous sections or daft downhill such as we had seen in Rovaniemi the year before. The tracks were always well prepared (except for the day when the piste machine broke down, which was quickly rectified) and they were very well marked and easy to learn (even before the event opened properly on the Wednesday). The locals were very friendly (we were often offered lifts as we were walking around), the Organising Committee were friendly and efficient, Team Captains' meetings went smoothly, and the Opening Ceremony was one of the best. Booking accommodation was very easy and efficient, and the accommodation itself was good and very cheap compared with many other places.

On the negative side, there was the problem with Brian's ski bag on the way out and my wax bench on the way back (BA had allowed me to take four items of hold baggage on the way out but only three on the way back, unless I wanted to pay £75), we found the food to be rather expensive when we ate out, and not of particularly good quality, and there are always going to be problems when the journey takes 25+ hours. Of course, not being able to race made things a bit annoying for me personally but, on balance, I think that I'm happy to conclude that this was, indeed, the best Masters World Championships ever, especially given the fantastic results from the British team.