

## **Masters World Cup, February 2001, Mariazell, Austria**

You know that dream that all cross-country skiers have, the one where you've trained and trained for months, you're in the best shape of your life and you're ready to surpass all previous achievements, then you turn up only to find that all the promised snow is nowhere to be seen. The dream goes on that the hotel you've been allocated is a fifteenth century monastery, with stark wooden furniture, no TV and off-suite facilities, and the waxing room is a damp shed heated only by the warmth of the sun. Well, this dream seemed to be happening to us on the first night in Mariazell. But I'll come back to that later.

The trip got off to an unusual start. I met up with Irene in Vienna and we proceeded to collect the previously hired hire car. So far so good, but when we trotted out to the car park it was to find the car with a big bash in the driver's side door. This upset Irene's finely honed sense of aesthetics and it had to be changed. No problem there, but when we saw the second car, oh my God, what a disaster; this one had no hub caps. Now I need hardly tell you, dear readers, fashion experts as you all are, that this is just not on. So having called over the attendant, he and Irene started checking all other Budget cars for replacements, while I did the British thing and tried to pretend that I was not part of this but an innocent bystander. This first sortie having failed to acquire the necessary caps, Irene was all for half-inching some from another company's hire cars, but luckily she was bought off by the entirely spurious excuse that winter tyres did not need hub caps and that event over (phew), off we tootled.

Boyed up by tales from Irene's family (who are locals to this area) of a recent snowfall of half a metre, things sounded promising as we set out from a snow free Vienna and continued along a snow-free lowland area before starting the climb into the mountains. But nothing to worry about yet, recent experience of Folgaria, Lake Placid and the Czech Republic had taught me that the snow would show itself as we got higher, up to the giddy heights of 800 m of which Mariazell is so proud. Stopping at one branch of the Chawko family at half distance, from where the previously mentioned reports had come not three weeks previous, the story had taken a slight twist. Days of rain and plus temperatures had reduced this half a metre to half a centimetre.

No matter, we still had some distance to go, and some height to gain, and things would surely be okay. Then we arrived and things looked a little less than okay; and the early evening recce of the track showed but sparse snow, in some places no more than an imported ribbon, bare brown patches starting to show through, and all the signs of a repeat of the Folgaria and Grindelwald debacles, of icy conditions in early morning then slush runs after 11 o'clock. With the above mentioned skiers' dream starting to inveigle its presence in my mind much like a early morning fog rolling in off the Norfolk fens (*What's all this? This Newsletter has no chance in the Booker prize, so cut the poetic stuff and get on with it. Ed*) we headed back to our fifteenth century monastery (sorry, mid-market, all mod cons three star hotel).

The morning, however, gave the lie to this early perception. In the exposed starting area the tracks did leave a little to be desired, but once into the trees and up the valley we found plenty of snow and a pretty well laid out and prepared track. The slush run perception proved true, however, made worse by the interspersions of hard icy patches in the shade, which required concentration at the transitions, and some of the parts of the track (including the longest and steepest downhill, which I thought looked somewhat ambitious even in good conditions) were *hors de service* while they worked on it. Once out of the trees and back into the lower, open areas, the mud patches were clearly showing through but, on the whole, the track was not at all bad, and perfectly skiable. Nowhere near as good a Kiruna but to be fair to the organisers, they had done, and continued to do, a sterling effort to keep the track in good condition, partially through the import of many lorry loads of snow, when one got the impression that less competent organisers might well have thrown in the towel. We were told the following morning that the steep downhill had been removed from the circuit and, at my suggestion, the steep uphill and corresponding downhill had been removed for the ladies and older men's races, but other than that (and the fact that there had to be a short section of single file, two directional track), the track was in place.

Other members of the British team arrived over the next day or two until, more or less complete, we assembled for the opening ceremony on Friday evening where we managed to get our photo into the local paper (the “Western Gazette” of Austria, as far as I could tell). In between times we’d had an entertaining evening when the Australians came to call and there was the chance to renew acquaintances with people from previous events and, incidentally, my Ukrainian ex-friend was very miffed that none of you had taken up his offer of a holiday on the Black Sea. Shame on you lot, and I fear that diplomatic relations between GB and Ukraine are now at a rather low point.

Then came the racing, and the first day (Saturday) saw Bert Scholten (BMCCSA), Alasdair Wilson, John Murray and Norman Clark make their debuts. Bert was complaining about a lack of training and a certain lack of interest this season, while Alasdair had not skied on snow since Christmas. John and Norman, however, over from the States, were looking in good shape, John much improved over Grindelwald two years ago, and Norman storming away from the start but fading somewhat after that, not finding the heavy snow much to his liking, although at just a shade over 15 % of the winner’s time, he was still the best Brit. John was strangely reticent about talking to me during this trip because, as he himself said, there’s always a danger that anything he says gets printed in this Newsletter. Well, really?!

#### ***Men’s M1-M6 30 km freestyle***

Fastest	G. Fersterer	AUT	M2	1.09:01.6	
23)	B. Scholten	NED	M2	1.36:26.6	39.7 % (24 starters)
1)	O. Stana	CAN	M4	1.15:52.3	
41)	A. Wilson	GB	M4	2.17:40.5	81.5 % (41 starters)

#### ***Men’s M7-M11 15 km freestyle***

1)	S. Matberg	NOR	M7	39:20.4	
45)	J. Murray	GB/US	M7	1.09:43.7	77.2 % (47 starters)
1)	A. Siraziev	RUS	M9	47:38.1	
13)	N. Clark	GB	M9	54:57.6	15.4 % (20 starters)

The following day started much as the previous one, i.e. warm, and saw the debut of Irene Chawko and the return of Tim East. Irene had been doing a Brian Adams, i.e. changing then changing then, just to be sure changing, the grip wax (in between times contemplating fish-scales). But it all came right and, despite falling on the flat bit just as I was preparing my camera, put in a fine performance to finish to the cheers of her assembled family. Tim complained of a lack of grip (he could no doubt have borrowed some of Irene’s discarded wax) but nonetheless beat two people in his class.

#### ***Ladies F1-F6 15 km classic***

Fastest	R. Zagidoullina	RUS	F3	48:24.9	
8)	I. Chawko	GB	F3	1.16:59.3	59.0 % (8 starters)

#### ***Men’s M1-M6 30 km classic***

Fastest	C. Baldauf	AUT	M1	1.19:24.5	
1)	P. Milz	GER	M2	1.21:15.5	
23)	T. East	GB	M2	2.14:22.9	64.2 % (25 starters)

Britain has a good turn out of DNSs in this Men’s race: new member Patrick o’Connor, Bob Frampton and Adam Pinney (one more and we’d have had a DNS relay team). While Patrick went on to compete later in the week, sadly this was the end for yours truly. The previous afternoon I’d come in from watching the others and had just completed waxing my skis when I thought “I have to go to the toilet here”, a place which I then frequented on and off until 1:00 am. Thinking that it might be mere food poisoning, I resolved to get up in the morning and, if I could eat breakfast, would race. Two spoonfuls of cereal proved

that a third would have been a big mistake, and that was it. I returned to the UK after the above race. Sadly Norman, too, had similar problems and he shipped out on the train following mine.

I asked a friend of mine, who knows about these things, and he suggested Campilo Bacta, a virus which is very popular in Europe and among the middle classes. While I can't confirm this, the symptoms are initial illness followed by a lack of energy for anything up to several months and, while Norman's didn't last this long, mine certainly went on for several weeks, and a friend of mine, Jack White from Canada, also caught something in Mariazell and claimed four weeks to recover. Anyway, that's the end of my reporting. I'll be back just after 10:30 with all the results and headlines, but now it's over to your local reporter, Tim East, for the rest of the news.

"I'd phoned the advanced party before I travelled and had a report of the conditions, but especially after passing the good snow at the venue for the Dog Sledding World Cup near Mariazell, the conditions at the start area were a bit of a shock. Parking by the roadside I stepped out into a puddle of mud and picked my way to an icy layer of dishevelled snow just in time to see the ladies free technique races starting. At least the conditions didn't seem to be slowing them down – I recognised Maria Canins streaking ahead of the others in her usual style!

I was looking forward to a repeat of the Kiruna rivalry (30 km and 15 km to Adam, 45 km to me) between me and Adam as we were both down to do all the classic events. But food poisoning or virus put paid to that as Adam pulled out of racing on Saturday evening and departed back to work on Monday morning. I arrived at the start of the 30 km classic on Sunday – nowhere really to try out waxes. Should have spent more time looking round at what others were using. Put Violet klistar on and hoped. Fortunately the courses had been adjusted due to the lack of snow and some of the uphill had been taken out. Wouldn't have made it round the 3 laps otherwise – had to double pole all the way round. Only place to get any grip was in a patch of snowy mud about two strides long. I realised I wasn't going to be doing much against the competition as they were all ahead of me (bar the really fat guy) 500 m from the stadium. Still, kept two of them in sight for bits of most of the first lap. I remember encouragement from Bert going up the first hill – where I also realised that the wax wasn't going to be working. Finished, eventually, having held off each of the following groups for about half the loop length – much the same as Kiruna. Irene raced in the afternoon. A familiar theme – with the pack for a short while before they pulled away.

Monday. A quick trip to Mariazell railway station to drop Adam off. He seemed quite pleased by the price of the ticket back to Vienna. The Bahnhof looked welcoming compared to the ones I use in the UK – definitely oldie worldie – befitting its place on the railway tourists map of Europe. Wind had got up a lot more – really blowing the snow around on the plateau used for the start finish area by the time of the ladies free technique races. Del Sasso was soon away from the others in her class, and the others from Irene, on her second race in two days. But Irene looked more than cheerful going round the course – although the atmosphere probably wasn't quite the same as the Marcialonga, and the café stops *de trop* comparatively. Irene's day was made at the end by being cheered in by her relatives, and the award of victory flowers by a gallant Canadian who'd won his class in the morning. Canins was true to form as fastest lady on the course.

Tuesday – stormy and snowy, but also warm, another real pig to wax for but got something to work. Again left standing coming out of the gates – but just about keeping at the tail of the pack for all of half a km. As soon as the first hill came up, though – hopeless! Cheered on by Bob Frampton at his jury checkpoint – grateful he felt able to abandon neutrality, but then I was at the back! The course had changed from the one we'd used before – turned back into the teeth of the wind, tracks gone – filled with snow in the storm – bit like being in Norway. Skidoo and stretcher in the track on a downhill – oops, over we go. Felt something hard on the knee – ripped trousers and a trace of blood. Helped up – on the way again. Back at the climb to start/finish plateau quicker than I thought, and on to lap 2. Disaster on 2<sup>nd</sup> lap. Fell – own fault – looked down and pole had snapped under ski. Made it round rest of course looking like Quasimodo. No spare poles on sight anywhere. I hadn't seen Alastair on the course anywhere, though there were lots of places where you could see significant amounts of the course. He finished in about the same sort of time, which probably explains why I hadn't seen him.

Wednesday – relays. No team for Britain this year so shouting for the Dutch team. Found a bit of track Alistair could use to practice on his new skating skis. But conditions were pretty awful – severe wind still, with snow being blown around all over the place. Wednesday evening – party time back at the hotel. The Swedes had booked a band for dancing! Had a few too many to drink than I should, but good camaraderie with the Swedes and Norwegians. Renewed acquaintance with Swede from Luleo who I'd met drunk (him, not me) at the Kiruna banquet.

Thursday – others all off to practice. I'm off to the WM Annual meeting replacing Adam. Lot of politics from the Germans, unhappy with some of the decisions. The Russians joined in, but I'm not sure anyone really knew what they were trying to say. Now I realise why Adam's the most informed and equipped skier on the circuit. It's the free gifts from the potential bidders! (Sorry – I'm keeping the cheese scraper from Lillehammer). On to lunch – another joy of the sports supremo gravy train – in the President's suite.

Friday. Worst day of the four day storm. Lots of snow coming down and being blown all over the place. Just about recognised Jimmy (Donaldson, down as New Zealand, but from Scotland) to give him a shout on all 3 of his 15 km loops. As on most of the competition days the waxing was odd. Given the new snow and the storm it should have been high flourine wax weather but it wasn't. The course was exposed to a severe wind which dried everything out! Dreadful conditions for Irene's race in the afternoon. From what she said afterwards I think she was glad only to have 2 laps to do. Everyone was looking tired going round, the conditions really hampering the racing.

Saturday dawned about as perfect a day as you could wish for classic skiing. Loads of new snow about, so much so that the organisers managed to bring the proper courses into operation. Windless, some cloud cover and minus 5. Blue Extra day! M2s starting late. Saw Alastair off, and then double checked the wax. Still Blue Extra! Same theme at the start as before, hold on for about a minute and then I've lost them (sorry some mistake here – they lost me!). Feeling really good for the first two laps. Irene and Jimmy keep popping up in the most unexpected, but welcome, places, to offer encouragement and drinks. There is also a really good marshal from the Fire Brigade shovelling snow – he tells everyone they're the best skier in the world, and keeps hollering at you long after you think he's out of sight. Lap three – energy really low. But it's still Blue Extra! Finish. Alastair finished about a quarter of an hour beforehand – so again a pretty even race.

Banquet – brilliant and saw footage from today's video on show. Alastair looking really good doing double pole kick. Embarrassing bit of me doing a racing tuck downhill – at snail's pace on screen. Wine. Beer. Speeches – great one from the oldest competitor. Norwegians getting prize after prize for today's classic race. Everyone enthusing about next year in Canada. Russians, off cue as usual, making their speeches and gift presentations from the stage when everyone else intent on drinking the night away.

Sunday – should have been staying on. Crisp blue sky weather, minus 17. But Vienna beckons. Drop Alastair at the airport for his flight, hand car over and hop on the bus to city centre. Half a day of culture to round things off.

Way better than Kiruna, ignoring the stormy weather. The organisers really worked hard against the odds to give us some superb racing. And the small town atmosphere really helped – a lot more friendly than Kiruna. Shame we were marred by illness and only ended up with 3 of us racing for most of the week."

Thanks Tim. I'm not sure that I'd agree about the "way better than Kiruna", but then I would say that, wouldn't I? Here, then, are the rest of the results.

#### ***Ladies 10 km freestyle***

Fastest	G. DalSasso	ITA	F3	28:12,1	
9)	I. Chawko	GBR	F3	43:16,2	53.4 % (9 starters)

***Men's M1-M6 15 km freestyle***

Fastest	F. Schutzer	AUS	M2	44:24.7	
21)	B. Scholten	NED	M2	58:12.5	31.3 % (23 starters)

***Men's M7-M11 10 km freestyle***

Fastest	S. Matberg	NOR	M7	28:44.6	
44)	J. Murray	GB/US	M7	47:52.2	66.4 % (45 starters)

***Men's M1-M6 15 km classic***

Fastest	G. Vanetta	ITA	M3	53:10.6	
1)	J.A. Enevoldsen	NOR	M2	56:16.5	
25)	T. East	GBR	M2	1.28:12.1	56.7 % (25 starters)
1)	S. Bergo	NOR	M4	55:30.5	
42)	A. Wilson	GBR	M4	1.29:09.0	60.6 % (42 starters)
1)	O. Kvaale	NOR	M6	57:34.5	
41)	P. o'Connor	IRE	M6	1.26:15.5	49.8 % (43 starters)

***Men's M1-M6 4x5 km relay***

Fastest	Austria	1.09:46.3	
5)	Netherlands	1.31:21.0	(5 starters)

***Ladies F1-F6 30 km freestyle***

Fastest	V. Linkova	RUS	F1	1.33:59.2	
1)	I. Doljenkova	RUS	F3	1.37:55.4	
13)	I. Chawko	GBR	F3	2.31:01.8	54.2 % (13 starters)

***Men's M1-M6 45 km freestyle***

Fastest	D. Vedeneev	RUS	M1	2.12:56.3	
1)	A. Koudriachov	RUS	M2	2.15:13.6	
19)	B. Scholten	NED	M2	3.10:37.1	40.1 % (22 starters)

***Men's M1-M6 45 km classic***

Fastest	V. Koskin	RUS	M2	2.18:20.8	
16)	T. East	GBR	M2	3.31:49.5	53.1 % (16 starters)
1)	S. Bergo	NOR	M4	2.24:46.5	
34)	A. Wilson	GBR	M4	3.35:35.7	48.9 % (37 starters)
1)	O. Kvaale	NOR	M6	2.29:21.5	
33)	P. o'Connor	IRE	M6	3.50:38.1	54.4 % (40 starters)

Now some colour action shots by your on the spot photographer.



**Part of the British team take part in the opening Ceremony. From left to right: Mr Local of Mariazell, Irene Chawko, Alastair Wilson, Norman Clark and Adam Pinney**



**Tim East in the 30 km classic, 2 hrs 5 mins away from complaining of no grip and on his way to writing an article for this Newsletter**



**No one we know in this picture, but it shows clearly the condition at the start of the week**



**Irene Chawko in her first ever Masters race climbs the last steep hill about 1.5 kms from the finish**