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ON THE GAMES

Telemark Proves It's Hip to Be Square

By STEFAN FATSI

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SESTRIERE, Italy -- After every Olympics, the suits who run the Games hold very important meetings to determine what events deserve to be part of the Olympic "movement" in the future. Pronouncements are made about fairness and merit. Then politics and marketing take over.

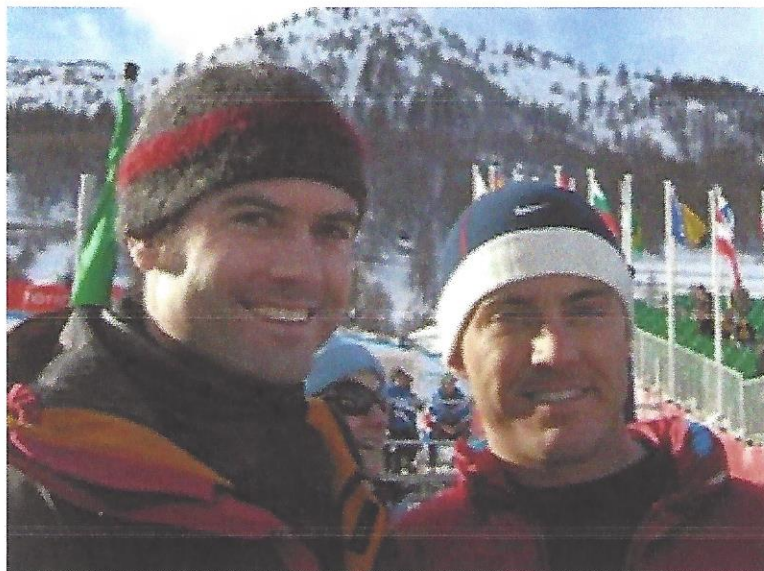
Snowboard cross, welcome, you are worthy. Baseball and softball, off with your heads.

The question of what makes an Olympic sport came up over the weekend at a ski resort here three bus rides from Turin. On the mountain where the downhill was staged a few days earlier, Scott Macartney of the U.S. raced to seventh place in the super giant slalom, or super-G. Watching slopeside was his brother, Matt, who competes on skis, too, just not a kind endorsed by the Olympic czars.

Matt Macartney is a telemark racer. Telemark skiing is arguably the purest discipline on snow. It dates to the mid-19th century, when a farmer named Sondre Norheim from the Telemark region of Norway popularized a distinctive bent-knee turn. The style combines the unfixed-heel, straight-line movement of cross-country skiing with the speed-gathering and turning ability of Alpine skiing. It's graceful and precise, requiring strength and balance.

"There's more to it than getting around the gates and down the hill," Scott Macartney said admiringly of his brother's sport. "It's the style, too."

Until the early 1900s, skiers controlled their speed with telemark turns. But the easier-to-perform Christiania, or Stem Christie, parallel turn came along, and telemark fell out of vogue. It's been beloved mainly by woollies-and-leather back-country types. "Free the heel, free the mind," the saying goes.



Stephan Fatsis

Matt Macartney, left, is a telemark skier, a sport so far shut out of the Olympics, while his brother Scott, right, competes in Olympic downhill events.

Over the past decade, the introduction of hard-plastic telemark boots has helped both recreational and competitive "freeheeling" surge. Telemark has a World Cup circuit -- several races in Europe and a couple in the Western U.S. and Canada -- with competitors from nearly 20 countries.

That's not many considering that 104 nations belong to skiing's governing body, FIS. The super-G here included entrants from Albania (last), Senegal (next to last) and Brazil (didn't finish, just like Bode Miller). Compared with the months-long, big-money, rock-star European Alpine circuit, telemark races are quaint. The ethos is a bit like snowboarding's once was: independent and just fine, thanks.

"We weren't racing for anything," two-time World Cup champ Reid Sabin of Whitefish, Mont., the only American to make a mark in telemark, told me before the Games. "That was kind of cool."

Telemark's signature race is called the "classic." One part of the course is a giant slalom. Gates must be negotiated in telemark style: heel flat on the forward, outside ski (the opposite of Alpine); heel raised with knee bent and almost touching the inside ski. A "super telemark" section features round turns. There's at least one jump. Time penalties accrue for too-short jumps and improper turns and landings.

Finally, there's a fascinating cross-country section. Racers who were speeding

along at 50-plus miles per hour slow into a series of banked turns, including a 360-degree *reipelykkje*, pronounced rap-uh-LOOSH-uh, "rap" for short. For a stretch, they ski and skate uphill like cross-country racers.

So is telemark Olympics-worthy? Its biggest hurdle is that it's not hot, young and hip. With the exception of curling, only thrills-and-spills events have been added recently: short-track speedskating, snowboarding, freestyle skiing, skeleton.

In its favor, telemark wouldn't require a separate venue. It's cool to watch. And then there's its biggest virtue: It *isn't* hot, young and hip. The Games should make room for events that reflect history; the Olympic flame has been lit three times at Sondre Norheim's cottage.

So why aren't tele supporters in Turin lobbying the International Olympic Committee? They tried in 2002, but the blazers told them to slow down. "We want to put pressure but not too much because the IOC is a very complicated family," says Anthony Favre, a Frenchman who heads FIS's telemark committee. Women's ski jumping, team luge, team Alpine, and some daredevil ski and snowboard events could get the nod for 2010.

As snow fell and the super-G was delayed, Mr. Macartney told his telemark story. He raced Alpine but wasn't as good or dedicated as his brother. He took up tele for fun and rediscovered the competitive urge. A 30-year-old mechanical engineer who lives in Bellevue, Wash., Mr. Macartney won't race in Europe this season -- his wife is pregnant -- but plans to in North America.

After the super-G ended, Mr. Macartney gave his 28-year-old brother a big hug. Earlier, he said he'd like to take him telemarking, which the two-time Olympian has never tried. "He'd be on his head most likely," Mr. Macartney said, smiling.

Write to Stefan Fatsis at stefan.fatsis@wsj.com

- **Graphic:** Photo Slideshow

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