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**Thredbo's FIS Ski World Cup, 1989**

**Chas Keys**

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Some things that happen in the world of human beings are inherently improbable. In prospect they might even seem to be outlandish, difficult to contemplate and impossible to achieve. Could Australia, for example, host racing in the Men's alpine skiing World Cup? Surely not!

Let's look at the realities of the Australian and international skiing scenes in the early 1980s. Australia's ski fields were (and of course still are) severely disadvantaged in competition with the skiing resorts of Europe and North America: they were 10 or more degrees of latitude closer to the equator and located on mountains which lacked the altitude and the long slopes of the major winter playgrounds of the Northern Hemisphere. Snow in Australia's high country was inherently and notoriously unreliable, sometimes late to arrive or early to melt and far from being guaranteed to be of the quantity or quality that the World Cup, one of the summit events of professional skiing competition, demanded. And artificial snowmaking with the potential to overcome these deficiencies had not yet arrived.

Moreover none of the ski resorts of the Australian Alps had a name to rival St Moritz, Val d'Isère, Kitzbühel, Wengen, Vail or Aspen or many others of the resorts of the Northern Hemisphere, and few of our skiers had ever been numbered among the world's best. No medal had been won by an Australian in the Winter Olympics, though Malcolm Milne's efforts in winning a World Cup event and a bronze medal in the World Championships were outstanding. In international skiing terms, Australia was very much in the backblocks of skiing, a bit player and lacking significant influence on the slopes or in the administration of the sport at the top level.

And yet, and yet. In 1989 there was a small miracle when Thredbo staged the slalom and giant slalom in the Men's Ski World Cup. All the big names of men's skiing at the time made the trip to the Snowy Mountains, and the racing was conducted successfully on the southern flank of the Ramshead Range.

Some questions are raised. How, given its latitudinal and altitudinal disadvantages, did Thredbo secure the event? And how did it manage to run it so well that the Technical Director of the Fédération Internationale de Ski at the time, Austria's Hans Schweingruber, declared on its completion that it had been "the best Men's Alpine World Cup event ever"? That was quite a claim, given that Men's World Cup competition had been going on for more than two decades, with well over a hundred separate events contested in several countries and at many of the world's best and most famous ski resorts.

It's not a long story, but it is an interesting one . . .

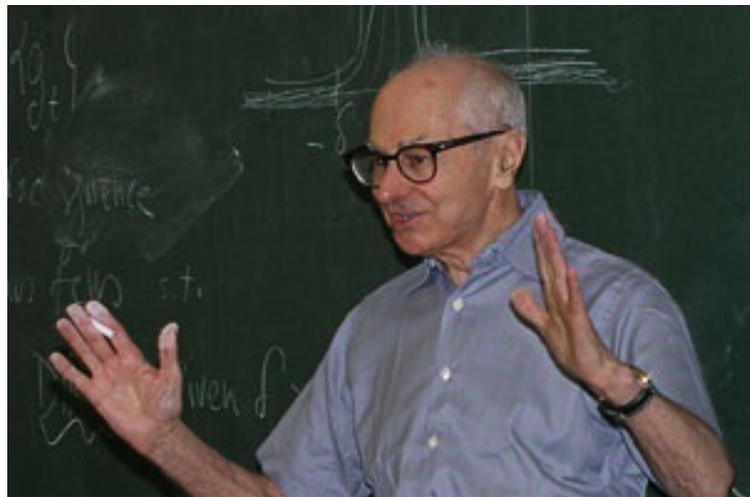
### **The Idea of the World Cup in Australia**

The FIS Men's Alpine Ski World Cup was first staged in early 1967. It took nearly three months to complete, with racing in six countries (West Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, Italy and the USA) across the downhill, slalom and giant slalom disciplines. Over the following twenty years the number of countries hosting Cup events increased, between seven and

eleven staging races in one or more disciplines in individual years, and the number of disciplines included also grew. By the mid-1980s the Super G was a regular part of World Cup competition as was the Combined event which was made up of a downhill race and two slalom runs.

But to that point none of the World Cup racing had been held in the Southern Hemisphere. It was confined to Europe (Scandinavia, central Europe and, briefly, Spain), North America (the USA and Canada) and Japan. In 1985 Argentina became a host, La Leñas in the Andes staging a downhill racing component. The World Cup had ventured south of the equator.

By this time the idea had stirred in Australian Ski Federation circles that Australia, too, could aspire to hosting World Cup skiing events. According to the biography of long-term skier, ski jumper and ski administrator Kurt Lance (*Flame of Leviticus*: Chate and Howard, 2013), the notion had been floated with him by Serge Lang in 1983 at the Sydney Congress of the FIS. Lang was in effect the father of the FIS World Cup: during the mid-1960s he had proposed a season-long programme of races in several countries and incorporating the various ski disciplines. This multi-discipline, multi-country, multi-resort concept created the structure of the World Cup as an annual event, its climax at the end of the Northern Hemisphere winter being the crowning of the world champion of the sport of alpine skiing. Men's and Women's versions of the World Cup developed simultaneously.



*Serg Lang*

Lance, by the mid-1980s a former president of both the New South Wales Ski Association and the Australian Ski Federation, a senior FIS administrator who had led in the management of the Congress at Sydney and a highly experienced ski race manager and course inspector, had for some time toyed with the idea of Australia playing host to a major international skiing event. Some national ski teams had visited Australia to train and race for FIS points, and there had been Inter Dominion (Australia v New Zealand) competition for decades, but there had so far been nothing by way of international events of real scale. Lance realised that any big event could only be held at Thredbo, the resort with the most potential for ski racing in Australia. Now, bolstered by encouragement from a prominent skiing identity (Lang) with genuine influence on the world stage, he and the ASF were keen to take up the challenge of seeking to host events that were part of the World Cup.



*Kurt Lance officiating 1970s*

Running the downhill element was out of the question, given that Thredbo like the other Australian ski fields lacked the required course length, but the staging of the slalom and giant slalom races seemed possible. Kosciusko Thredbo, the company that ran Thredbo, had to be brought on side as the entity to take on the financial risk that the World Cup would inevitably involve. Clearly, staging it could be a distraction from, and even impede, the company's focus on its core business of public recreational skiing in the short and uncertain local ski season, and this might have been a matter of concern to KT. But the company came on board.

KT's Managing Director Wayne Kirkpatrick, a marketing specialist, saw benefit for Thredbo in holding the event. It would follow on from the significant investment being made by the company in Thredbo in a staged development involving large-scale snowmaking, new and fast high-capacity detachable quad chairlifts, a new beginners' area to be named Friday Flat and a large area of carparking. All this would showcase to Australia a 'new, improved Thredbo' which would surely cement its position as the premier ski resort of Australia and New Zealand. Staging the World Cup, which was subject to securing FIS backing, major sponsors and publicity and high-quality coverage by TCN Channel 9's Wide World of Sports, would reinforce Thredbo's strengths and gain it a competitive edge in the Australian skiing market. Hosting such a major event would demonstrate to Australia that Thredbo was noticed by the world. Its value as a resort to buy in to would be reinforced and enhanced.

The company and the ASF in effect formed a partnership and sought to get FIS and the Australian and New South Wales governments onside. Government backing was achieved, including some funding, which made a statement to FIS that the event would have support at high levels. FIS came to the view that Thredbo would be an appropriate host for the slalom and giant slalom races in 1989 since the two race courses proposed had been homologated by FIS technical directors who judged them to be very good. Only two critical elements remained to be put in place. First, the snow cover had to be developed to a standard that would comply with FIS's requirements and second, FIS had to be convinced that Thredbo could run the actual racing effectively together with organising the many things that were ancillary to the actual skiing but vital to the venture's success.

A few in Australian ski circles were sceptical about the project, thinking the event an indulgence. It was, after all, unlikely in its aftermath to entice Northern Hemisphere skiing custom to Thredbo. But the notion that hosting the World Cup would be a coup for a country and a resort on the fringes of the world's skiing scene, and would convincingly demonstrate Thredbo's attractions to Australians, won out.

## **Preparation**

The task that KT and the ASF had set was a challenging one. To begin with, the lack of reliability of the snow cover had to be addressed: to have embarrassed FIS, the ASF and Thredbo itself with sub-standard cover in the days leading up to the races and during the competition itself would have been unthinkable. The potential for damage to be done to Australia's and Thredbo's reputations must have weighed upon the ASF and KT in particular. As it happened Kosciusko Thredbo had been investigating the making of snow as a means of improving its resort's saleability, and the feasibility of successfully applying snowmaking technology had been demonstrated. The company's master plan for Thredbo anticipated a \$40 million investment to bolster the quality and reliability of its skiing environment and increase the

numbers of skiers that could be handled: snowmaking, extensive slope grooming (including the removal of rocks and tree stumps and the re-grassing of the slopes to prevent erosion), the introduction of quad chairs and the development of Friday Flat as a second base facility after Valley Terminal were all parts of the master plan.

KT was sold to the Greater Union company (a subsidiary of Amalgamated Holdings and later re-named Event Hospitality and Entertainment) in 1986. The sale allowed the Lend Lease Corporation to divest itself of something of a fringe element of its empire and focus on its much larger interests in construction, property development, retailing and financial services. To a degree Thredbo had been a hobby interest of Dick Dusseldorp, the corporation's head, but by the middle of the 1980s Dusseldorp was winding back his involvement and Lend Lease was seeking to sell its Thredbo asset. The trialling of snowmaking and the planning for the mountain and Friday Flat had been undertaken when KT was part of Lend Lease, and all that was left after KT's transfer to Greater Union was their implementation.

The manufacturing of snow was focused on the portions of the mountain on which the World Cup races would be run and from the middle slopes to Valley Terminal. This solved the problem of Thredbo's uncertain cover. Without the ability to make snow, no guarantee of high-quality racing surfaces could have been provided to FIS.

Then there was the need to satisfy FIS that Thredbo could actually run the races well. Part of this involved the organising committee staging a major race, featuring seven national ski teams, at the intended venue. This slalom race, the Coca-Cola Bi-Centennial Cup, was run in August, 1988 as part of the national bicentenary celebrations. Despite the fact that the preferred course, Kurt's Downhill (the one intended for use during the World Cup event) lacked snow at the critical time — 1988 was a poor year for snow in the Australian Alps — the race went well on an alternative course from above Kareela Hutte to near Tower 10 on the Ramshead Chair. FIS's technical directors observed the event and pronounced themselves satisfied.

The scene was now set for the main game a year later. Thredbo would be the first host of the World Cup of 1989-90 and one of only twelve resorts in the world to stage the Men's Alpine Skiing World Cup races that season.

Now came the creation of the administrative personnel and structures for the event. Kirkpatrick brought in John Kean as the World Cup Director: Kean had been the Chief of Staff of Minister for Sport Michael Cleary until the ALP lost power to the Liberals under Nick Greiner in the state election of early 1988. Management teams, principally involving KT executives and employees to develop the courses and organise the races, were put together. The many ancillary activities demanded by what would be a big international sporting event



*Logo for the 1989 World Cup event in Australia*

also had to be organised — signing up sponsors, catering for media coverage (in particular securing the involvement of Channel 9 for the telecasting of the event), providing spectator

facilities, managing the racers, coaches and team officials (all told there were nearly 200 such individuals), providing a rescue capability and medical practitioners to deal with injuries, organising accommodation in the village and nearby, looking after large numbers of FIS, government and sponsors' VIPs and running the necessary off-snow social events. There was much to put together.

Some very big companies became sponsors of Thredbo's World Cup event. Coca-Cola Bottlers, the biggest of them all, was the lead sponsor, Qantas looked after the travel needs of the overseas competitors and visiting FIS delegates and transported the skiers' gear and the computing and timing equipment to Australia, and Telecom Australia laid four kilometres of fibre optic cabling for the telecast and the timing of the races. Other sponsors included MLC (a major financial advice and superannuation company and part of the Lend Lease empire), Bond Brewing (of Tooheys fame), Caffe Lavazza, Canon, Airlines of NSW, Olivetti, Omega and various manufacturers of skis, bindings, goggles and boots.

There was a story to the involvement of Alan Bond as a sponsor. He owned a luxury home in Vail and was holidaying there during the Alpine Ski World Championships in February, 1988. Thredbo was to host a party for FIS delegates and others at the time, and when Kirkpatrick heard Bond was in town he invited him along after arranging for some Toohey's beer to be brought in from Denver, two hours away. The beer arrived just before Bond, whereupon he immediately committed Tooheys to a \$250,000 sponsorship package.

Apart from getting captains of industry on side, KT had to manage government involvement in the World Cup planning: the Australian Sports Commission, the New South Wales Department of Sport, Recreation and Racing, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the New South Wales Department of Tourism and the Australian Army were all to play parts in the lead-up to the event or actually during it. The army provided more than 120 soldiers to boot stamp and water the courses so as to achieve the hard snow that would hold up over many runs rather than deteriorating and thus disadvantaging racers well down the start list. The army also helped KT staff and volunteers in erecting safety fences and nets along with pads around lift towers and trees to protect those competitors who came to grief on the plunge down the hill.

## **The Days of Racing**

The afternoon of Thursday, August 10, saw a street parade through Thredbo: competitors, officials, volunteers and local school children all took part. During the opening ceremony a light drizzle began, turning before long into heavy rain and then snow which continued into the night. This was precisely what — strange to say for a ski resort — was not wanted. The race courses had been perfectly prepared to be ready for racing on the Friday morning, and snow cats along with volunteers and the army personnel equipped with shovels had to work throughout the night to remove the freshly fallen snow from the courses.

August 11, the first of the two days of competition, dawned fine, sunny and cold in Thredbo, with good visibility. The conditions were perfect. The track from Eagles Nest to Tower 10 was hard and fast for the two runs of the giant slalom which went off without a hitch. Sweden's Lars Börje-Eriksson was the top performer on the day.

The next day was given over to the slalom races from above Kareela to Tower 10 and it too went well, Armin Bittner of West Germany taking the honours. Bittner was to become the world slalom champion for the season. Italy's Alberto Tomba, one of the star attractions, lost an edge on his first run and crashed out.

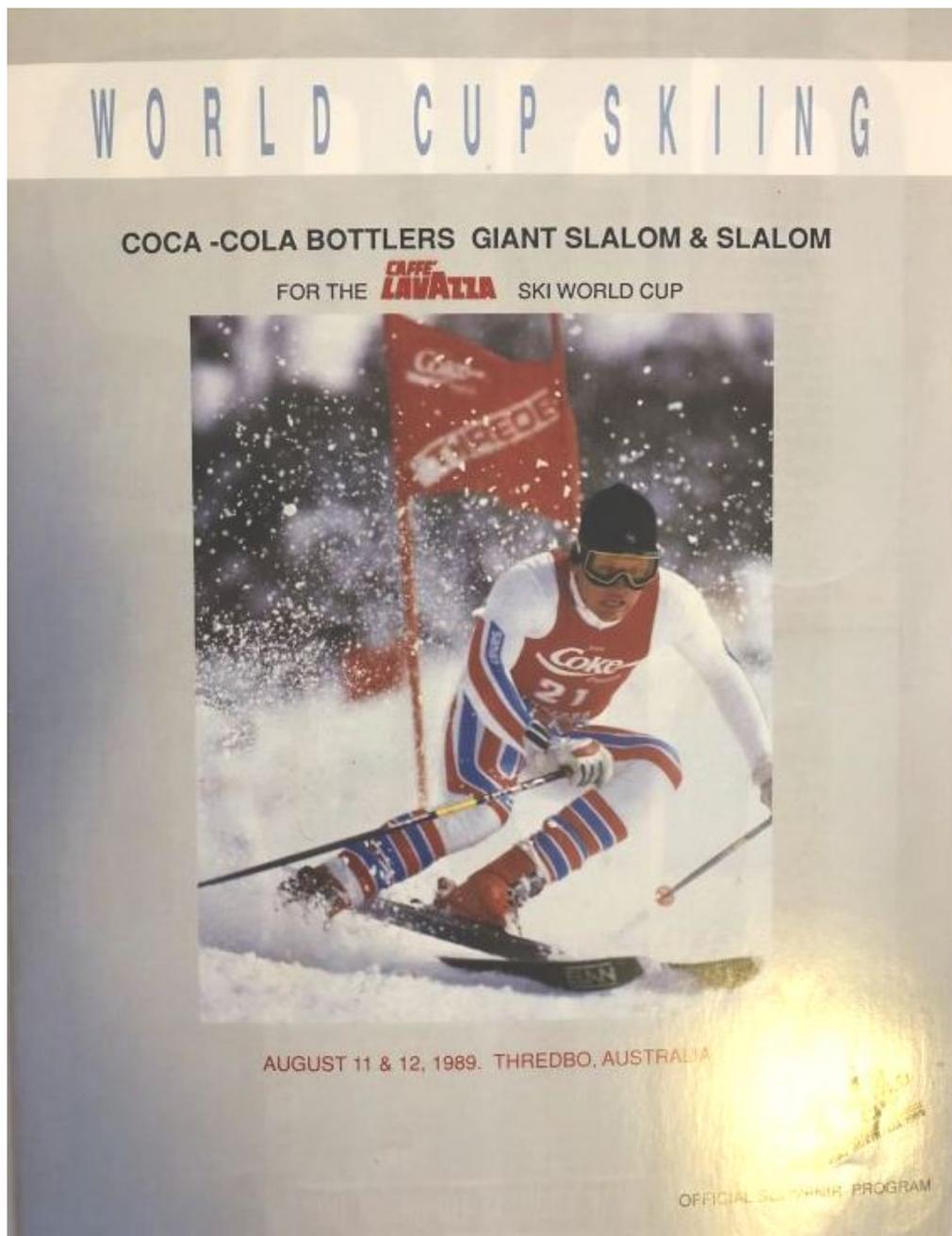
Pirmin Zurbriggen of Switzerland failed to achieve a top-three placing in either event in Thredbo, but he was by a wide margin the champion for the whole World Cup series of the 1989-90 season. In all, he won this title four times during his career. Only two men, Marcel Hirscher of Austria and Marc Girardelli of Luxembourg, have won the World Cup's top prize for men more often: astonishingly, Hirscher has done it eight times in succession. The last of his victories was in the 2018-19 season.

The television coverage by Wide World of Sports was much acclaimed overseas: the event was shown live in Japan and Australia and on limited delay in Europe and North America. Globally, 200 million people watched more than ninety skiers from fifteen countries race down the mountain at Thredbo to the trademark skiing sounds of cowbells and the shouts of spectators. Newspaper and magazine coverage of the event was extensive and laudatory.



*Pirmin Zurbriggen*

Any thought that Australians would be unable to cope, because of a lack of experience, with the on-slope organisation of ski racing at the highest level was quickly dispelled. There had been some concern on this score: the coach of the Swiss team expressed some scepticism to Lance but after the event was over he was gracious enough to say that the races had been very well organised (Chate and Howard, 2013, p248). The competitors were impressed as well, many of them praising the courses and the overall management of the event. Everything had gone as smoothly as could legitimately have been hoped for, without organisational disasters.



*The cover of the programme for the World Cup at Thredbo*

### **After the Ball: the Legacy**

The making of snow was critical to the running of the World Cup races at Thredbo in 1989. Without KT proving it could provide good snow if mother nature failed to do so, FIS would surely have seen Thredbo as too risky a proposition to be granted the opportunity to stage them. Manufacturing snow on site was the only way to guarantee a suitable cover at the appropriate time. The company was intending to develop a snowmaking facility anyway, but having done so and having secured the World Cup as a result, great publicity could be obtained about what KT was doing on the mountain.

The value of snowmaking in taking much of the uncertainty out of the skiing experience has since seen the snow guns spread over more of the mountain and becoming increasingly efficient as a result of technological advances. Top-to-bottom skiing (a comparatively rare pleasure in earlier times) has become virtually routine for the bulk of the season.

Snowmaking has been a huge success for the company and for the skiing community. It also provides a vital bulwark against a warming climate in which the area of the Snowy Mountains that is covered by snow in winter has been declining and the depth of snow recorded has tended to do likewise. Worse still, the average length of time that 'natural' snow lasts during winter has become less over time, potentially shortening further the already short ski season, and the frequency of really big snow seasons has fallen away: there have been none of these, arguably, since the legendary winter of 1981 (Davis, 2013; Keys, 2018, pp59-68). During the 1960s there were three such seasons in which the snow came early, was deep almost from the start and lasted longer than usual — from May to November in two of them and from June to November in the third. Six-month seasons have, it seems, ceased to exist.

It is sobering to imagine, now, how Australian skiing would have fared in recent decades without machine snowmaking. Undoubtedly, Thredbo and the other resorts would have lost considerable custom to Japan, Europe and North America as Australians came more and more to question the quality of the local skiing experience, skied less often at home and made the northern winter their principal time for skiing. Some might have abandoned skiing in Australia altogether, as a survey undertaken more than two decades ago indicated (König, 1998). The implications for the commercial viability of the ski fields might have been disastrous. As it is, thanks to snowmaking in the Australian ski resorts, Australians can follow the snow and indulge their passion in good conditions in both hemispheres. Many do exactly that each year.

And what did Thredbo and Australian skiing get from KT's investment on the mountain between 1986 and 1989 and the holding of the World Cup in the latter year? Apart from an improvement in skiing conditions and an unprecedented degree of exposure on the world's skiing scene, the spending and the Cup created a sense of excitement in the Australian skiing community and a confidence that skiing in Australia mattered and was worth investing and participating in. More people wanted to be part of Thredbo. The sport itself, already in a growth spurt when the World Cup came to the village, has grown further and Thredbo's place as the pre-eminent resort in Australia for snow sports has been consolidated. The local real estate market benefited and a fillip was given to the expansion of the village to the north of the river in the form of the Crackenback Ridge and Woodridge estates. As Wayne Kirkpatrick put it long afterwards, the village lived off the World Cup event for the next 25 years.



*A young Wayne Kirkpatrick*

## The Credit

Many people made contributions to the Thredbo leg of the 1989-90 World Cup. Among them were Kurt Lance, the carrier of Serge Lang's original idea and during the event the Chief of Race and a member of the juries for the events, John Kean as the World Cup Director, Wayne Kirkpatrick as the CEO of Kosciusko Thredbo which carried most of the organisational legwork and made substantial investments to develop the mountain facilities, Australian Ski Federation president Geoff Henke (who headed the management committee with oversight of the whole World Cup operation) and Chiefs of Course Roland Wanner and Otmar Dorfer. These people and many others put Thredbo skiing on the map as it had never been before. Many who contributed to the effort were employees of KT, reporting to Kirkpatrick.

A fine team effort delivered a major international sporting event with professionalism and style. The benefits to Thredbo and Australia's skiing community were substantial. One might legitimately wonder why there has been no attempt to bring the World Cup back to Thredbo since.

Thredbo's World Cup event was watched with interest by Olympic officials both in Australia and around the world. Australia was at the time moving towards securing the Summer Olympic Games in 2000: these were awarded to Sydney over Beijing by the International Olympic Committee in 1993. John Coates, at the time the Vice-President of the Australian Olympic Committee, and Rod McGeoch (who headed Australia's bid) both spent time in Thredbo leading up to and during the World Cup races, studying what was happening. They were supportive and pleased by what they saw. The staging of the FIS World Cup helped Australia's cause in seeking to host one of the biggest sporting events of all.

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*Thredbo World Cup 1989 – Steven Lee*

