

Arlberg-Kandahar - “the mother of all alpine ski races”

1. The Founding Fathers

The story of *Arlberg-Kandahar* races, has to start with at least a short portrait of the two founding fathers of Alpine Skiing, of Hannes Schneider and Arnold Lunn.

Hannes Schneider (1890 – 1955) was born in St. Anton in Arlberg region of Austria, He became famous for his back-to-back victories at the Suisse skiing championships just before the World War I, in 1913 and 1914. These victories recommended him to become the head of St Anton’s ski school, and when the war broke out, to be the head instructor for the alpine units of the Austrian army. Connections he made at the time helped him after the war in many ways.

With German filmmaker Arnold Fank from the year 1920. onwards, he made several films about wintertime in the mountains, and soon skiing in Arlberg became “a must” for the circles in high society. Particularly when Ernest Hemingway appeared there in the winter of 1926. So, when Hannes Schneider noticed that Arnold Lunn is doing interesting things in Swiss Alps, he invited him to St. Anton in 1927, to see what they can do to further promote alpine skiing.

Arnold Lunn, was about the same age (1888 – 1974), and has inherited the business of his father who was a leading British tour-operator, bringing as many British tourist away from the fog and into the fresh air and idyllic landscapes of Swiss Alps. To add some extra attraction for the British tourists, Arnold organized ski races almost on a daily basis. But since long climbs of several hours for the delight of some fifteen minutes of downhill, were not what all guests were willing to undertake every day, he introduced much shorter slalom races, which could be repeated several times a day.

And although he considered both slalom and downhill skills as mere supplementary skills for a good mountain climber, he practically invented alpine ski racing by combining those two races into an alpine combined event, as a supplement to the nordic combined event (were ski jumps and cross country skiing were combined). These alpine combined races became quite popular among his guests, actually so popular that soon British Championships were held (from 1924. onwards). That year at his winter seat in Muerren, with several co-founders, he established the Kandahar ski club, whose member list soon became a kind of “who is who” in the UK.

So, when Hannes Schneider invited Arnold Lunn to St. Anton in 1927, to set a slalom race for local youngsters it was a meeting of the two canny businessmen who were ready to do “whatever it takes” to promote alpine skiing. They quickly agreed that a good move would be to organize a race between the two clubs, the Arlberg and the Kandahar ski club, starting from the next year. It was agreed, also, to invite all the best skiers from other clubs in the Alps (Hannes was to provide the best from Austria and Germany, while Arnold was to bring along the best British, and some of the best Swiss skiers as well). To be sure that all the best would be there, they agreed that race should be held at the end of the season in mid March

Unfortunately, Arnold Lunn was absent for the first edition of the Arlberg-Kandahar race, and his envoy Allan d’Egville was rather stingy in providing us with the race results, but we know that 35 top racers among the men and close to 10 ladies participated in that year of 1928. The race became an instant success and the numbers of participants progressed so fast that soon they had to limit the number of starters, even though they all knew that only the top 40 from the downhill race would qualify for the slalom race among the men, and top 10 among the women. *The Arlberg-Kandahar formula*, established in 1936, meant that results from the downhill determined the bibs for the slalom race, with top 5 downhillers starting in reverse order at both slalom runs. And for a while in late 1950s it became a norm for other big races like Lauberhorn and Hahnenkamm too.

2. Prewar Years

Arlberg-Kandahar race became so popular that it was soon referred to merely as the A-K race. Success of A-K race was such that Arnold Lunn immediately pushed for further recognition of Alpine skiing within the FIS, asking for its inclusion in the yearly FIS race (which were later at 1946 Congress, recognized as World Championships). The FIS responded first by including the Downhill race at the European Championship held in 1929 at Zakopane, and then both Downhill and Slalom, as well as the Alpine Combined event, from 1931 as a regular feature of the FIS race. Or, rather, as it turned out, as a separate Alpine FIS race.

The next step was to ask the Olympic Committee to introduce alpine skiing as an Olympic discipline, which it did from 1936 Winter Olympic Games onwards. And although medals were awarded only for the Alpine Combined event, alpine skiing became such a crowd teaser, attracting over 50.000 spectators each day.

All this promotion have brought incomparably wider media coverage for alpine ski races, among which A-K was towering as the most important one. For the first

three years (1928-1930) the A-K race was held only in St. Anton. But from then onwards during odd years it was held at Muerren, and at St. Anton in the even years. In the thirties, Combined event was mainly a Swiss affair among the men, and pretty much the British affair among the women. For instance legendary Christl Cranz won the A-K Combined event only once, while Toni Seelos had not won A-K Combined event at all! Politics had to do something with it, and particularly in the final prewar years.

In 1938. the A-K race was to be held in St. Anton, and even the Norwegian skiers were to make their debut. But with Anschluss (annexation of Austria by Germany) looming, instead at St. Anton, almost all would be participants started at the Swiss Championship at Wengen, making it the strongest event of the year. A-K race that year was, of course, cancelled, particularly since Hannes Schneider was arrested immediately after the Anschluss. Negotiations for his release lasted till the next year when shortly before the next A-K race he was finally released, and was allowed to emigrate to USA.

But without him there was no A-K race, so instead of one there were two events. In St. Anton there was held the Arlberg Cup, or rather the Tschammer Cup with mostly German, Austrian and a few Italian racers, and the Alpine-Kandahar, held at Muerren with mostly Swiss, British and French racers. As an act of gratitude for “saving” the A-K race, Arnold Lunn promised to the French team that Chamonix would join St. Anton and Muerren as a co-host of the A-K event. But the next A-K race was held only after 8 long years.

3. The First 20 Postwar Years

After the war, A-K retained its special “Grand Slam” status of the race above all other except the World Championships and the Olympic Games. What’s more since World Championships were to be held every other year (and Olympic Titles regarded valid as World Championship titles as well), A-K became the unrivaled race of the year in the odd years. The first postwar A-K race was held in 1947 at Muerren but, as promised, the next one was held in Chamonix, in France. This widening of the circle of organizers of the A-K race was continued when Italians wanted Sestriere to join this exclusive circle of which happened in 1951. and finally in 1954 when Garmisch-Partenkirchen joined too.

Those 5 ski centers were rotating in hosting the race. Occasionally, when there was a shortage of snow in ski center whose turn was to organize A-K race, another member of this circle would jump in, so the risk of cancelling the event was further minimized.

In the early postwar years the schedule for the event was finalized. On Friday there would be women's downhill race. Next day the men's downhill race was held between the runs of women's slalom race, so that Combined results for the women were available on Saturday. Finally, on Sunday, the race was completed with men's slalom after which the results of the men's combined event were calculated too.

When at the Jubilee the 25th Anniversary of the A-K race, held in St. Anton, there was a "Family Reunion" of all former winners and even Hannes Schneider came from USA (two years before his death), it looked as the peak was reached, that it can get not better. Arnold Lunn recalled that in all those years they had almost the best possible weather. According to his account during this 25 years there was only one day when the weather was really bad, and it was cloudy during the other. But the weather was going to become a problem only in the next decade. The bigger problem was erosion of the supreme position of A-K in the odd years.

Namely, in order to support the expansion of alpine skiing in USA, FIS was nudging Alpine ski powers to send a couple of their best racers to Nor-Am circle of racers, held in March (Stowe, Sun Valley, and Aspen). This has made American races much stronger but as consequence some big names, like Toni Sailer have never won an A-K race. And vice versa A-K champions from this odd years were not able to add the World Championship titles to their laurels.

Another problem was with the media. Being held in mid March, A-K had to compete with an array of other sports for media coverage. Thus there emerged a paradox that somewhat less important January races (usually regarded as trial races for bigger events, later in the season) were getting better media coverage than this "event of the year". On top of it, slow calculation of points for the Combined event made reporters impatient, so they were sending their reports with rather short result lists from the men's slalom, and frequently just a few names of the front men in the combined event.

The irony is that precisely the strength of the competition was the reason for this delay in providing the final results for the combined event. Due to growing specialization it was ever harder for best slalom specialists to finish among top 40 downhillers who qualified at all for the slalom race. To solve this problem, organizers would let top 5 slalom specialists to start in "their" discipline but hors concourse. Meaning that their result would count for the slalom race but not for the combined event. Starting at the back of the pack, these slalom specialists would finish close the top in the slalom race, despite starting with bib 40+.

For instance, in 1955. the winner – Fritz Huber jr. started with bib 38, and was followed by Georges Schneider who started as 31st! So the organizers had to wait until the very end of the slalom race at around 15h, not only to publish the slalom result, but to start calculating the combined event results. And on top of that the jury had to decide about any appeals over disqualifications in the slalom race.

All this asked for an earlier date for the A-K race. So, in Garmisch both in 1959 and 1964 the race was held in February, in St. Anton in 1965 even in January. Therefore, A-K was not anymore the final race of the season, bathed in the March sun, but just one of the more important races in the calendar.

That the A-K's love affair with the weather gods was coming to an end was clearly manifested in 1966, when the men's downhill race at Muerren was cancelled due to the fog, and in 1971 when, the downhill was canceled due to a lack of snow.

The real tragedy happened in 1959. edition, when young Canadian downhiller, John Semmelinck crashed into a tree at the difficult Garmisch course, and died shortly afterwards. Some consolation is that his and the death of another youngster, the Austrian Toni Mark, that year provoked much stricter rules, requiring all racers to wear protective helmets, all bumps on the course to be flattened, and some sort of safety net introduced.

Yet for the status of A-K race the biggest problem was that in 1950. Arnold Lunn has left FIS (where he was chairing the Downhill-Slalom Committee for many years). From then onwards his authority as the founding father of the alpine ski racing was slowly dissipating. Therefore, when new forces in alpine skiing emerged that considered his concept of A-K race obsolete, not much could have been done to save it.

4. The World Cup Era

From mid 1930s ski magazines were making their own ranking lists of the best downhillers and slalom racers. At that time there were already 5 or 6 major races besides A-K and the FIS race, enough to determine the ranking orders among the best.

After the war in the 1951. a series of major events was scheduled in such a way that each alpine country as well as Norway as host of the Olympic Games next year, would organize one during weekends in January and February, with March reserved for Parsenn Derby and A-K race. But such a tight schedule with long and slow train trips was too exhausting for the racers. It took several more years before French sports daily "L'Equipe" selected some major races from the FIS calendar, announced its point system, and started awarding the racers who scored most points. Ski journalists were also awarding the "Golden Ski" trophy to the racers who got most of their votes.

Finally, Serge Lang, the ski correspondent for “L’Equipe” and many Swiss Romande journals, at the Portillo World Championships, along with coaches of Austria (Prof Hoppichler) and USA (Bob Beattie), decided to launch the World Cup, with major races taken from the FIS calendar from January to March. The time for an old idea has finally come. To the ski weeks in each of the 5 alpine countries in Europe, the A-K race and 3 events in USA were added. It looked as if A-K race had again the pole position, but it wasn’t the case.

Namely, organizers of the World Cup made a major mistake in discounting the Combined Event from the points awarded. They claimed that this way they were avoiding the double counting since the racers would already get the points for the results of individual races. What they forgot was that the combined event was the glue that hold the downhill and slalom races together. A decade later, organizers of major downhill races even threatened to organize their own circle of races independent of the World Cup. Serge Lang realized the mistake and introduced points for the combined event in various ways, but in a way it was too late to save the special status of the A-K race.

Dispute over the Combined event, had another consequence. Lang et all. insisted that slalom points could be awarded only to races where bibs were decided on the basis of the FIS ranking lists, and not on the result of the downhill race, as in the A-K formula. Lunn, on the other hand did not want to abandon the A-K formula.

The outcome was that only the results of the A-K downhill race were counted for the World Cup. The slalom race next day was from the point of view World Cup organizers just a facultative race, and was disregarded as well as the combined event. At the beginning the aura of the A-K race was strong enough and top racers were still competing not only in the downhill, but in slalom as well. But when the world cup calendar expanded into the December, increasing the number of races considerably, top racers were starting only in the A-K downhill.

Eventually, when shortly before his death Arnold Lunn has retired from an active role in the skiing sport world cup organizers had it their way and slalom racer’s bibs were decided by the FIS ranking list and not by the outcome of the A-K downhill race. Consequently, the Combined event was attracting ever smaller number of racers so at the 50th Anniversary of the race, in 1978. there were only 3 finishers in the Combined event.

5. The end of A-K races

The death of Sir Arnold Lunn, brought and almost abrupt end to the special status of the A-K event. Firstly, from 1968. it was never held in March again. It was

held usually at the beginning of February, and frequently in January, on one occasion even in December (of 1971. in Sestriere). Secondly, the circle of five resorts have been reduced to just three. Namely, Muerren after cancelation of men's downhill in both 1966. and 1971. declared that it doesn't have resources big enough to organize such a big race properly and have withdrawn from the club. In the same year, but in December, Sestriere had to cancel the men's downhill race too and have used similar excuse to withdraw from the club.

That still left three strong resorts willing to organize the race, but with Kandahar ski club, without Arnold Lunn, not having much say over its organization, and with the World Cup ignoring the Combined event, the aura of the A-K race have considerably diminished. Actually even the name became a problem. Chamonix, which was delighted to participate in organizing the A-K events in the late 1940s, 30 years later discovered that they are actually advertising Arlberg region for free, and started calling A-K races, just Kandahar races. Thus aside from St. Anton, only Garmisch-Partenkirchen was still organizing A-K races – for a while.

But, from 1984. Garmisch-Partenkirchen was organizing super-G, instead of slalom races, making a joke out of the Combined event. Later on, organizers of Garmisch-Partenkirchen races followed the practice of their Chamonix colleagues, and referred to their race just as the Kandahar race. This left St. Anton as the lone A-K race organizer. But with the special status of the A-K race gone, there emerged another problem – World Cup organizers were not willing to give Austria two weekends of home races every year, so St. Anton had the opportunity to organize A-K races only once in every five years or so. Thus from the 1984. onwards there were only 3 proper A-K races organized till the end of the century.

Therefore the World Cup instead of promoting the A-K race as the “Grand Slam” event of the Alpine Skiing, accepting even its formula if necessary, actually derogated it to the rank of some ordinary race without such exclusive history. It is a shame that “the mother of all alpine races”, and an obvious grand slam event has been lost, since there are not enough big alpine races with such a pedigree.

Maybe it might be worth considering to re-launch A-K race every year in the calendar, either with its original formula, or as a super combined event. And if the name of the race is in dispute, it may be renamed in honour of the founding fathers as a Arnold-Hannes Cup (in short as an A-H race), preferably on the final day of the World Cup.