

The Alpine Combined event

Before Arnold Lunn introduced the Alpine Combined event, downhill races were only occasionally organized, and slalom races hardly at all. In 1921, he reintroduced the slalom race (which were first organized in 1903, in Lillienthal by Mathias Zdarsky), but besides on time, the race was decided on points for the style as well. These were much more subjective than the stop watch, so when he abandoned the marks for style, results for the slalom could be added to the ones in the downhill and the alpine combined event could be put on the same footing as the then dominant nordic disciplines. Actually such alpine combined event adding the times from downhill and the slalom would be more objective than the Nordic Combined event since at the latter, the marks for the style in ski jumping were included.

But there was a problem. Winning time in the downhill were in those days rarely below 5 minutes, while in the slalom it was barely 2 minutes. Since time differences in slalom race were much smaller than in the downhill, simply adding the two times together would favourize better downhillers.

Lunn solved the problem of disproportion between the winning times simply by regarding them as a 100% achievement, equaling 100 points. Points for the rest of the field were calculated when winning times were divided by the time of each competitor, telling us how many percentage points they were slower than the 100% - winning time. Adding such percentage points (let's say 98% in the downhill and 96% in the slalom) and dividing them by 2, we would find that the combined result is worth 97% (97 points), meaning that this combined time is 3% behind the winning times.

For instance, if the winner's time in the downhill was 5 minutes (300 seconds) it would be considered as a 100 % time and would get 100 points. A 10% slower racer at 5 minutes and 30 seconds (at 330 seconds) would get 90 points, those clocking 6 minutes (360 seconds) would get 80 points etc. By the same token if the slalom winning time of 2 minutes (120 seconds) would get 100 points, 10% slower racer finishing in 2 minutes and 12 seconds (132 seconds) would get 90 points, and 20% slower racer, finishing in 2 minutes and 24 seconds (144 seconds), would get 80 points etc.

Yet this was not so obvious for those who were introduced to this point system for the first time. For instance, organizers of the first Arlberg-Kandahar race in 1928., being unaware of the calculating system, merely added the downhill and slalom times, showing that Hannes Schneider's brother Fridrich has won rather handsomely ahead of Benno Leubner of Innsbruck (he had advantage of almost 11 seconds in the downhill, and deficit of only 7 seconds in the slalom). After about half an hour of celebration they were shocked to hear from Allan d'Egville (Lunn's envoy on behalf of the Kandahar ski club), that in fact it was the other way round, that Leubner was the winner ahead of Fridrich Schneider.

To people from Arlberg it was bad enough that someone from Tirol has beaten their guy, but that on top of everything he was from Innsbruck was an insult to the injury. In a rather painful way they have learned that, due to a shorter course, the *absolute* time differences in slalom were considerably smaller than in the downhill (as mentioned winning times were around 2 minutes in the slalom compared to 5 minutes in the downhill), so the *relative* importance of time difference in slalom was (roughly 2,5 times) *greater* than the one in the downhill.

Ever since the FIS officials were trying to find a formula which would balance the two disciplines more carefully – in vain.

Also, Lunn's solution which solved the problem of equalizing winning times, and was practised for several years, required able mathematicians to help calculating all the points, and in the absence of nowadays calculators, a lot of time to do so. In the early days when this system was introduced, it was not of particular interest, but when alpine skiing became widely popular it mattered. This slow process of calculation meant that only a handful of results were published in daily papers, and full result list could be found only in specialized ski magazines and almanachs.

In retrospect it is a pity that a rather obvious solution was not taken, at least regarding the considerable reduction in calculation time. Namely, if winning time in the downhill was divided by the winning time in slalom (let's say 5 minutes by 2 minutes) a factor by which *all* the slalom times would be multiplied (in our case it would be 2.5) would emerge. Such a procedure would enormously cut the calculation time, from a couple of hours into a matter of minutes or rather far less than half an hour. Instead of this, rather obvious solution, something similar, but more timid was introduced.

By the mid 1930s, instead of dividing winning time in the downhill by the winning time in slalom, to get the correct multiplier by which to multiply slalom times of all racers, FIS officials introduced a factor of 1.3 by which all slalom results were multiplied to get them to a closer footing with the times in downhill. (At first, this multiplier for the slalom times was coupled with a multiplier of 1.2 for the downhill, but for obvious reason, as a step in wrong direction, it was rather quickly abandoned).

This attempt of ballancing the outcomes in both disciplines was only a first step on a long and winding road in search for an ideal solution, but its immediate victim was Arnold Lunn's elegant one, with 100% points for the winner. Namely, you had a combined time, where slalom time was multiplied by some factor, and added to the downhill time (let's say close to 8 minutes in our example) but you could not anymore compare the outcome of different races. The meaning of the winners combined points was lost, and hardly anyone could be sure what this score represented.

It is interesting to notice that Schneider and Lunn became aware not only of the higher relevance of the time difference in slalom compared to the downhill, but also of the advantage of lower bibs in slalom, so they introduced the Arlberg-Kandahar formula for starting bibs in the slalom, turning the downhill into a qualifying race for the slalom!

Namely, the starting order in slalom was decided by the outcome of the downhill race. The top 5 downhillers would start in reverse order and the rest would start according to their result in the downhill.

This may have helped to tip the balance at the side of better downhillers, but ironically the strength of the Arlberg-Kandahar competition was the reason for even bigger delay in providing the final results for both the slalom and the combined event. Namely, due to a 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, who didn't qualify, to start in "their" discipline but "hors concours". This meant that their result would count for the slalom race but not for the combined event. Yet, starting at the back of the pack with bib 40+, these slalom specialists would finish close to the top in the slalom race. So, media men would have to wait till the last bibs to find the outcome of the slalom race

Postwar period

Besides dilemma whether some points system favours one discipline or the other, there was another problem. Combined event was regarded as the most important of the three, and those achieving considerable advantage in the downhill, were not always willing to risk it all in the slalom, even if they had chances of winning it too (ask Ivica Kostelic about his tactics in Kitzbuehel slaloms).

Therefore an idea emerged to have two slalom races – one for the combined event (with considerable calculations regarding the alpine combined event) and the "special" slalom race – without any calculations among the best racers. This idea was applied at the 1948 St. Moritz Olympic Games. Unfortunately among the laymen it brought a confusion which slalom race was the right one, or more important one, so this solution was rather quickly abandoned. By the time of the next major event – 1950 World Championships in Aspen, there was no more combined slalom, but neither the alpine combined event!

The only reminder of this short lived solution was a practice of labeling the slalom race as "special slalom" for several decades after the combined slalom was abandoned. (Eventually the combined slalom did resurect again in 1982, but then in a company of the combined downhill.)

So, what happened to alpine combined event in 1950.? First, let's notice that for most major races like the Arlberg-Kandahar, Lauberhorn or Hahnenkamm, combined slalom was never introduced, and as well, alpine combined was not abandoned in 1950. But after many a system of calculating points for the combined event was tested without complete satisfaction, a solution to decide who the most complete racer is was to find the answer in a single race instead of two, in an event which would combine elements of both downhill and slalom.

Such an idea was launched before the war and brought a new discipline at a midway point between downhill and the slalom – the *giant slalom*. Dick Durrance, the American prewar champion even proposed two races in the same one, namely, that after 20 or so slalom gates on the steeper part at the top, there would be few control gates for the downhill at the rest of the course. In practice this idea was never tested, but instead, this substitute for the Combined event, was just having a smaller number of gates than in slalom, with a much greater distance between them.

So, in an attempt to get rid of the long time required for calculation of combined points, at Aspen in 1950 World Championships, giant slalom was introduced instead of the alpine combined event. The same thing happened at the next 1952 Winter Olympic Games. But although everyone was enthusiastic about this new discipline, it was no real substitute for the combined event. Giant Slalom simply became a third discipline in the Championships programme, and ironically just adding to the trouble of calculating the alpine combined results, since at World Championships and Winter Olympic Games, alpine combined event became a triple combined event!

The problem with giant slalom was also that there was not much room in the traditional Calendar for it, so most of the giant slaloms were held in the spring time! And, of course, major races continued to keep their alpine combined event all the time.

Alpine combined event was back in the programme of World Championships 1954 in Aare. Yet there was a wide variety of alpine combined event formulas in use as if each major race wanted to have a different one. Though from about 1950, one important change happened in the use of Lunn's 100% formula. Instead of 100%, a zero note (0,00 points) was used to mark the winner's time, meaning that all other finishers instead of having lower percentage points, were now having a score bigger than zero reflecting their time deficit compared to the winning time. For instance 2.38 note, meant that such racer had 2,38% slower time than the race winner. This was requiring fewer digits to write the same results (2.38 would earlier be written as 97.62 points), thus saving space in the papers, so a couple more results could appear in them.

Another improvement was that to address the relative importance of the time difference in slalom. This was achieved by a lower *multiplier* for the slalom time deficit than the one in the downhill. It was usually around 0,5 for slalom, and around 0,9 for the downhill, so the same time lag of 2,38% behind the winning time would be translated into 1,19 points in the slalom, while in the downhill it would be 2.14 points). On top of it, organizers of Lauberhorn and Hahnenkamm races started to apply Arlberg-Kandahar formula, letting only the top 40 downhill finishers to the slalom race.

All these small improvements, eventually led to a major breakthrough. Using this refurbished alpine combined points it became possible again to compare the results of racers in all major races and, by adding appropriate penalty, among all the races sanctioned by FIS. As a result, from 1958 FIS ranking lists were published (at the beginning once a year, and later several times a year, while now they are adjusted after each of the World Cup races). Starting lists from then onwards could be decided

objectively on those FIS points (replacing traditional bickering of head coaches in attempt to provide their racers with as low bib numbers as possible). In a way it was a personal triumph for Arnold Lunn proving that he was right from the beginning, and that his formula needed just some slight improvements.

Combined event went on to be the crown discipline for at least a decade. For instance when in 1959. Budy Werner became the first American racer ever to win the Kizbuehel downhill (and only Daron Rahlves, after half a century repeated this feat), reporter in the New York Times, after some lukewarm praise for his victory, noted that he never the less failed to win the Combined event!

The fact that from Sankt Moritz 1948 no medals were awarded to the best finishers in alpine combined event at the Winter Olympic Games dented somewhat into its prestige, but the huge blow came with establishment of the World Cup.

World Cup era

Namely the founding fathers of the World Cup (Serge Lange, the Swiss reporter, Prof. Hopichler Austrian head coach and Bob Beattie American head coach) considered that the World Cup points earned in the downhill and the slalom were sufficient reward for the racers and that giving them extra points for the alpine combined event would be a bit too much of a reward. In other words, spectators would see just two races and points would be awarded for the third (the “invisible”) one too. In their opinion the specialization among the racers went so far, that only a few of them would be able to score big in alpine combined event, making the overall World Cup competition less attractive.

Their decision was particularly harmful for the Arlberg-Kandahar race, where Arlberg-Kandahar rule was applied in deciding the starting order in slalom. Lang et al. insisted that slalom world cup 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 Arlberg-Kandahar formula. Lunn, on the other hand did not want to abandon the A-K formula. The outcome was that only the results of the Arlberg-Kandahar downhill race were counted for the World Cup.

At the beginning the aura of the Arlberg-Kandahar race was strong enough and top racers were still competing not only in the downhill, but in the slalom as well. But, when the world cup calendar expanded into the December, top racers were starting only in the downhill, skipping the Arlberg-Kandahar slalom, and therefore the alpine combined event too. Finally, when shortly before his death, Arnold Lunn has retired from active role in the skiing sport, the world cup organizers had it their way and slalom racer's bibs were decided only by the FIS ranking list and not by the outcome of the Arlberg-Kandahar downhill race. Consequently, the Combined event was attracting ever smaller number of racers so in 1978., at the 50th Anniversary of the race, there were only 3 finishers in the Combined event.

In a way one solution (FIS ranking lists) based on Lunn's idea, took advantage of another (the Arlberg-Kandahar rule), depriving the world cup of the Grand Slam status the Arlberg-Kandahar race had.

Other classical races suffered as well having only a handful of finishers in their combined events by mid 1970s. This in turn brought further specialization and made polyvalent skiers an endangered species. Therefore in late 1970s, Serge Lang, as the only one of the founding fathers remaining in the circuit, finally recognized that ignoring alpine combined was a mistake and the world cup points for alpine combined event were introduced.

Actually, the combined event was introduced as a kind of saviour. First, in mid 1970s the organizers of the downhill races threatened to leave the world cup and organize a rival competition, consisting only of the downhill races, unless their demand were met. Then arrived Ingemar Stenmark who, 3 years in a row, practically won the world cup in mid January, leaving the rest of the world cup season without any suspense. Something had to be done, and points in the combined event were seen as a tool to prolong the suspense in the race for the overall globe.

But once a crown discipline, alpine combined was re-introduced as a sideways shaw, more as a roundabout gimmick to induce Stenmark to start finally in the downhill (which he did in Kitzbuehel in 1981.), than to decide the best skier of the meeting. And by the time the alpine combined event re-appeared (though as a separate, and not the most important discipline) in the World Championships in 1982. very few skiers were able to finish among top 10, let alone to win a world cup race in either the downhill or the slalom.

It is interesting, though, that the problem of calculated risk in slalom re-appeared, and was "solved" in almost a farsical way. Namely to avoid calculated runs in slalom of contenders who did well in the downhill, the alpine combined event event was now combining results of some slalom race in one resort with the downhill race in the following one! This time not only the Arlberg-Kandahar race, but Lauberhorn and Hahnenkamm combined events were sacrificed as well, and didn't count for the world cup! Such travesty went further, since it became normal to combine Super-G in one resort with the Downhill in some other! Thus alpine combined event become an empty shell.

Yet, despite all that, awarding world cup points for the combined event slowly increased the numbers of polyvalent skiers again (Zurbriggen, Girardelli, Kronberger, Wiberg, Kjuus, Aamodt, Bode Miller, Ivica and Janica Kostelic, Paersson, Maze, Pinturault, Schwarz, Strolz), making the race for the overall globe more exciting, but there was rarely enough of them to bring the real suspense in the alpine combined race.

Also, alpine combined event, being treated like some poor cousin from province with only up to three races in the world cup, has not stimulated enough polyvalent racers to emerge, so this come-back was only partial.

Alpine Combined transformed into the Super-Combined event

Throughout this revival of the Combined event, the effort was made to induce more downhillers to participate in the slalom, but it appeared that slalom specialists could much more easily adapt to the downhill speed than the downhill specialist to the succession of quick turns around gates. To tip the balance, instead two slalom runs, only one was required, while on the other side downhill was replaced by the super-G, so the alpine combined event was replaced by the *Super-Combined event*.

But in the meantime a lot has changed. After more than half a century of constant progress in ski equipment and ski techniques, winning times in the downhill have been reduced from 5 to just 2 minutes or even below that. On the other hand winning times in slalom were kept constantly around 100 seconds by increasing the number of gates from 25 to more than 50.

Realizing this, FIS officials finally gave up trying to find the optimal combined event formula and merely added the times from both disciplines to decide the combined event outcome. Precisely like the organizers of the first Arlberg-Kandahar in St. Anton, more than 90 years ago. Ironically, the point system was abandoned just when computers made it easy to calculate the outcome of a combined event instantly no matter how complicated the point system.

Yet, even with all these changes slalom specialists were winning almost all the combined events. What was missing was the Arlberg-Kandahar rule, which let the top racers from the downhill (or Super-G) to start at the beginning of the slalom run, and not at the end of the top 30, as was the case until the last year, when those top 30 were starting in the reverse order.

Namely, with rising temperature, by 13 PM snow becomes softer, so the early bibs in the slalom run turned to be a decisive advantage. Best speed specialists were thus handicapped with the former rule of top 30 starting in reverse order in the slalom run. This rule was introduced to keep suspense about winner till the last racer (the best one in the downhill, or the super-G). But in reality it was a false suspense, since it was obvious that slalom specialist starting much earlier, and having better snow conditions, would score time that would be out of reach for the best downhillers.

Now, when results from downhill determine the slalom starting order where downhill winner is starting first, this advantage for the slalom specialists has gone. This final change, although not following to the letter the Arlberg-Kandahar rule, (where top 5 downhillers would start in the reverse order), enabled for the first time the speed specialist to compete on rather equal footing with the slalom specialists.

In a way this means that the Fathers of alpine skiing were right and that the Fathers of world cup were wrong. But has it all come too late to save the alpine (super) combined event from extinction?

Some final thoughts

Overall sentiment is that there is no need for the combined event anymore. It is a minor distraction, with only a few specialists capable of winning it. But the combined event was sidelined before only to re-appear. For one, it might be worthy to try to make it more respected by increasing the number of alpine combined events in the world cup.

If the problem is to find those extra 5 or 6 days for the combined event, it could be solved in two ways. Either a “combined slalom” would be held several hours after the downhill or super-G which are already scheduled. Or, it could be held *within* the 1st run of the “special” slalom next day. Neither option would require additional days in the world cup calendar.

First option would require flood-lit race (which is not such a big problem since flood-lights are nowadays almost omnipresent), while the second would not, but the course would have to be set more fluently than it would be the case in the “special” slalom.

The second option would provoke some grudging among the slalom specialists, since they will have to wait their turn until top 30 downhillers finish their race, and yet hardly any of those top 30 downhillers would make it to the 2nd slalom run. That is true, but as a result, this 1st run of the “special” slalom, turned partly into a “combined slalom”, would decide the outcome of the Super Combined event. So, the spectators would for the price of one watch actually two events! And if any of those top 30 downhillers would against all the odds, make it to the 2nd slalom run, it would only be for the greater suspense in the race for the overall globe.

If all the January downhills and some of those in December, as well as the one at the world cup finals, would be turned into the first leg of the Combined event, it would regain some of the prestige it had, helping somewhat the downhillers to make the race for the overall globe much more exciting.

28.04.2022.