

HILL RUNNING IN EUROPE – THE SPIRIDON MOVEMENT

MEL EDWARDS

In the early 1970's, a movement was born in Swiss athletics, known as Spiridon. Before this, the Swiss authorities catered only for top athletes and were uninterested in fostering the sport at grass roots level. Noel Tamini, the founder of Spiridon, felt that the sport should be for all, no matter what age, sex or ability and started to organise races in which everyone could take part, naming the movement after Spiridon Louis, the winner of the first Olympic marathon in 1896.

The movement grew quickly and now there are clubs throughout Europe, with excellent magazines containing race news, results, photographs and articles of interest. Spiridon GB has a membership of over 300 and provides information on road and hill races on the continent.

Although the main purpose of Spiridon is participation, it does cater for competitive hill runners by way of CIME or Coupe Internationale de la Montagne Europe. There is a series of mountain races (there were 68 in 1982) categorised Super, A, B and C, from which runners can accumulate points and there are separate championships for juniors, seniors, ladies and veterans. 80% of the races are held in Switzerland or France, with the remainder in Austria, Italy, Germany, Spain and Great Britain (Snowdon).

The characteristics of many of the races are early starts, frenzied dashes over the first half mile or so, flagged courses lined by enthusiastic spectators with their encouraging shouts of 'hup, hup, hup, hup', crowds of villagers at the finish and, after the prizegiving, extensive hospitality.

I have crossed the Channel on four occasions to sample continental hill racing; the Sierre to Zinal event in 1977, 1978 and 1981 and Oberhaslach to Rocher de Mutzig in 1982. Sierre lies in the Rhone valley, 20 miles due north of the Matterhorn as the crow flies and Zinal is equidistant from both, up the Val d' Anniviers at an altitude of 1678 metres. This Category A hill race is usually held in the middle of August and attracts a field of about 1300 runners and 1300 walkers. It may be thought that the latter have the easier time on this 28 km (17.5 miles) trek which involves an ascent of 1900 metres (6200 feet) but they start at 4.30 a.m. whilst the runners can have a Sunday long lie in before their 8 a.m. start!

The event is exceptionally well organised by local runner, Jean-Claude Pont, who always manages to participate in the race. Most of the runners come from Switzerland and France, but the race has become so well known that some 60 to 80 British athletes make Sierre to Zinal an integral part of the annual holiday. The walkers or 'tourist classe' as they are known, set off before dawn and when the runners, who are staying in Sierre fall out of bed at about 6 a.m., it is an eerie sight on the hillside as

the walkers climb by torchlight. The race starts in a large lay-by on the major road from Lausanne to Milan and by one hour before the start, the road is lined with parked cars. The runners have collected their numbers on the previous day and the invited runners have red bands across their numbers indicating that they may start in the front two rows – a big advantage as there are about 50 rows. The count down starts – 5 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds, then the gun and a mad scramble for 100 metres before the field sweeps sharp right onto the tarred road to Zinal. The climbing has already begun and continues gradually for a mile before turning left off the road onto the hillside on a narrow track where for some time it is impossible to pass. After about 10 minutes, the going becomes very steep, although picturesque, through woodland and everyone is forced to a brisk walk, bent over, hands pushing on thighs. Even the leaders have to walk and this continues for some 45 minutes from the start, to Ponchette, altitude 1859 metres (6100 ft) where at long last the 1 in 4 gradient slackens and one can break into a running rhythm. It is at this stage that a panoramic view opens out to the west and the 1219 metre (4000ft) drop to the valley floor can be seen at the edge of the track.

At around the 10km mark, things liven up as the runners pass through the village of Chandolin, which is thronged with spectators offering encouragement and refreshment to those runners they are supporting. A number of times I have heard 'Ecoisais' mentioned as the watching crowd linked my number to the programme and the words 'Aberdeen, Scotland'. It is in Chandolin that the walkers begin to be caught by the runners and marshalls along the route issue fierce blasts on their whistles to warn the walkers of the approaching pounding feet.

The field order is settling down by now and one wonders to which nationalities one's close rivals belong, as time passes and as concentration is also focused on the, at times, narrow and stony paths, punctuated by refreshment stations where water, lime, tea and Reville, a local soft drink, are on offer in plastic cups on large tables. The scenery is now magnificent as the Hotel Weisshorn appears, perched on the edge of the cliffs which fall to the Zinal valley. There is always a large crowd at this point, where it is reckoned that the runners have expended three-quarters of the required effort. For the first time, the going becomes a little boring, with featureless stony paths, as the highest point of the race is reached at Nava (2425m). The final refreshment station brings relief – it is a cowshed! The runners' numbers are punched by a marshall at the entrance, then darkness envelopes the athletes as they jog through the shed, afraid to risk taking a drink which they cannot see!

From this point, the legs get a break for the first time, on a gradual decline where those runners who still have energy reserves, can take advantage of the decline and increase their pace. However, by this time, most runners have been on the go for almost three hours of relentless

pressure and glycogen depletion is beginning to take effect. All of a sudden a sign appears, "3 km to go" and the gradient steepens to a fearsome 1 in 4 on a winding path to Zinal. There, the crowds appear, cheering enthusiastically to the 10th or 810th runner and paint on the road proclaims 800 metres, 700 metres and so on to the finish. Through the finish line and the competition number is removed and a beautiful bronze medal placed around the neck.

There is a story behind the medals of Sierre to Zinal. Every year, one of the five major peaks surrounding Zinal is adopted as the patron mountain for that year's race and is depicted in relief on the medal. The mountains are Weisshorn, Zinalrothorn, Obergabelhorn, Cervin (Matterhorn) and Dent Blanche and they are adopted in successive years, in that order. There is keen competition to gain a 'set' of five medals and I have to return in 1984 and 1985 to gain my set (or 1989 and 1990!)

After finishing, there is a long queue at the swimming pool, so most runners do not bother to wait. Within an hour, the results are coming from the computer. There are normally about one thousand finishers and my positions have been:—

1977	99th	3hrs. 22mts. 59secs.
1978	64th	3hrs. 12mts. 57secs.
1981	109th	3hrs. 16mts. 48secs.

The latter performance would have given me 10th place in the over 40 class.

The winning time is usually about 2hrs. 40mts and the winner is usually American or Swiss.

Sierre to Zinal is one of the typical European mountain races and features a long prize-giving with free food for the runners and performances by Swiss bands.

An event which has a much lower profile, but which is by no means less enjoyable, is the annual Oberhaslach to Rocher de Mutzig race, to the west of Strasbourg on the French/German border. The race is 20km. long and has an ascent of only 732 metres (2400ft) and a field of 200, mostly from the surrounding area. It is organised by an English runner, Rob Towler, now working as an architect in Molsheim. The climbing is through beautiful woodland and the weather is invariably hot, so despite the running time being about 1½ hours, the final five miles or so is very fast downhill running and this makes the race a hard one. Last year, the race was won by a veteran, Caraby of France and I was placed 3rd in that class. The Oberhaslach race abides completely by the ideals of Spiridon, with no expenses being paid to foreign runners (unlike the expenses paid to the Americans for the Sierre to Zinal race) and has a small prize list, with awards donated by local stores. This is a tremendously enjoyable event following the true amateur spirit of athletics. I am a firm believer in open

athletics with athletes being paid whatever their performance deserves, but I still relish events like that at Oberhaslach.

I have mentioned only two European hill races in this article, but I hope that I have given an insight to and flavour of the sport and the commendable ideals of Spiridon.

