

# The Art of the Dual

BY EDITH THYS MORGAN

*Head-to-head racing kicked off in the early 1960s in Aspen and will debut as a medal event at the Winter Olympics in 2018. Two-time Olympian Edith Thys Morgan looks back at—and toward the future of—alpine racing’s most exciting format.*



The head-to-head team event at the 2015 FIS Alpine World Championships in Vail, held on parallel GS courses on February 10.

JONATHAN SELKOWITZ/SELKO PHOTO

In February 2018, when the Winter Olympics are held in PyeongChang, South Korea, team dual skiing will be included as a medal event for the first time. While parallel racing has shown up on the World Cup calendar throughout the years, most often at the Finals, it had mostly been viewed as a novelty, fine for exhibitions and end-of-season celebrations, but not on par with real World Cup racing. Nevertheless, team dual skiing has held FIS medal status since 2005, and individual parallel races now count for World Cup discipline points. This March, national teams will duel it out at the 2017 Audi FIS World Cup Finals in Aspen, in front of an audience that can rightfully ask, “What took you so long?”

### EARLY DAYS OF THE DUAL

Although the earliest record of a modern dual ski race dates back to March 1941 at June Lake in California, Aspen has a legitimate claim to be the birthplace of dual format skiing. It was here, in 1960, that Aspen Ski Company co-founder Friedl Pfeifer first envisioned the concept while watching a “ski off” between 1952 Olympic medalists Stein Eriksen (then Aspen Highlands ski-school director) and Toni Spiess (then Aspen Mountain ski-school director). Pfeifer, who had been denied Olympic competition in 1936 due to the politics of amateurism, staged the first professional ski race on January 29, 1961, with \$3,000 of his own money as the purse. Pro racing—not yet in dual format—grew into a tour that traversed the country and featured a roster of skiing’s greatest champions, including Anderl Molterer, Pepi Gramshammer, Stein Eriksen, Christian Pravda, Ernie McCullough and Ernst Hinterseer.

In 1963, to add interest to his ABC televised event in Aspen, Pfeifer featured a dual format that he had experimented with on the tour. The courses were side-by-side, but not identical. Though not true head-to-head racing, the final between Adrien Duvillard and Gramshammer was a dramatic

crowd-pleaser. (For a history of men’s and women’s pro racing, see the May-June 2013 and July-August 2013 issues of *Skiing History*.)

By the time the World Cup started in 1966–1967, Pfeifer had given up the hard work of finding sponsors and TV coverage for his pro tour. Dual racing, however, returned to Aspen in December 1968, this time as an informal amateur team challenge between the French and U.S. Ski Teams. The race on Little Nell featured the top men and women from each team taking one run on each course and scoring a point for each win. Among the women were Barbara Ann Cochran—so new to the team that she had to borrow a uniform—and Kiki Cutter, who prevailed against French sensation Michèle Jacot. Bobby Cochran recalls the nip and tuck American upset as “the most exciting event to watch,” and was among many who assumed the format would become a tour standard.

### WORLD PRO SKIING AND THE ART OF THE DUAL

Bob Beattie, U.S. Ski Team coach and co-creator of the World Cup, retired from the Team in the spring of 1969, frustrated with the politics of both the national team structure and the FIS. With nothing to do, but plenty of ideas on how to make racing more exciting, Beattie moved to Aspen. “We wanted to create our own identity with World Pro Skiing,” says Beattie. “So we just did it.”

“Bob was all about the audience,” says Mike Hundert, who came on as Tour Director in 1977. “Everything we did was about what was best for the spectators and fans. If we disappointed them it would fall apart.” To keep viewers engaged, the format featured head-to-head elimination heats. After qualification runs on Friday, the top 32 racers moved on to the “Round of 32” for two weekend races.

The basic set up was two side-by-side courses—one red and one blue—set as identically as possible. Each course was set over “pro bumps” that served three purposes: adding interest; allowing



ASPEN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Friedl Pfeifer (left) watches as Anderl Molterer crosses the finish line in the first International Professional Ski Racers Association (IPSRA) competition in Aspen in 1961; he added a dual format in 1963.



ASPEN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dual racing returned to Aspen in 1968 with an informal challenge between the U.S. and French teams. Above, Jim McKay of ABC’s *Wide World of Sports* interviews American racer Rick Chaffee. The U.S. won in an upset.

spectators to easily tell who was winning; and providing a place to put the sponsor banner. Instead of tipping individual start wands, racers went out of side-by-side “horse gates” (think Kentucky Derby) that opened simultaneously. The “barge rule,” which eliminated competitors if they rushed the start gate more than once, was created to protect the delicate, temperamental contraptions. The gates evolved—from rickety, manual latch-operated aluminum fixtures attached to buried 8x8s, to solid affairs with a solenoid switch for simultaneous control—but the barge rule endured. The only time recorded for each heat was the time differential between the two racers. After switching courses, the racer with a positive



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Above: By the mid-1990s, slalom specialist Felix McGrath was the top American racer on the pro tour. He's shown here racing against Mathias Berthold of Austria.

Left: Terry Palmer (top left), who joined the tour in 1973, races head-to-head against Jean-Noel Augert (foreground) of France.

Right: Bob Beattie interviews French racer Henri Duvillard, who joined the pro tour in 1973 after an upheaval on the French national team.



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time differential was eliminated and the winner moved on. If a racer fell or interfered with the other racer—as often happened in courses so close to each other—he received an automatic +1.5 second time differential. This maximum deficit kept a competitor (and suspense) alive, even if disaster struck.

When the tour staged downhill competitions, starting in 1977, the format involved a first-run elimination based on individual times. For the second run, the top 16 finalists started in reverse order of finish time. This meant the fastest racer would come down last, enticing the crowd to stay. This same idea was eventually adopted by the FIS in the Flip 30 formula that is now the World Cup standard in technical events.

## THE RACERS

Pro skiing's rapid rise in popularity

had to do with its spectator-friendly format, but also with the level of competition, as many of ski racing's biggest names went pro. Billy Kidd joined the tour and took top honors in 1970, fresh off his World Championship gold and bronze medals. He was joined the following season by teammate and subsequent tour winner Spider Sabich, as well as 1968 triple gold medalist Jean Claude Killy (*for an exclusive interview with Killy on his triumphant 1966-1967 World Cup season, see page 18*). After the 1972 Olympics, when Avery Brundage's crusade for pure amateurism reached its crescendo, the ranks of the pro tour swelled with top national team members from every alpine skiing country, like Norway's Otto Tschudi and Americans Tyler Palmer and Hank Kashiwa. In 1973, when the most elite athletes on the French

team, including Henri Duvillard, Jean-Noël Augert and Patrick Russel—then considered the best team in the world—were dismissed in an upheaval, they defected to the pro tour, further legitimizing it (see "The Great French Ski Controversy" in the July-August 2016 issue of *Skiing History*). Americans Bobby Cochran and Ken Corrock soon followed. According to Terry Palmer, who joined his brother on the tour in 1973, as soon as he turned 21, "I'll bet in '74 there were as many World Cup winners on the pro tour as on the World Cup." Beattie concurs: "We never invited any skier to join us. They just couldn't get there fast enough."

## THE TECHNIQUE

Trying to get to the finish line faster than another racer who's skiing next to you on a parallel course

requires different skills and strategies than racing alone on a single course. In conventional slalom and giant slalom you race on two distinctively different, much longer courses; the cumulative time of the two runs determines the winner. In parallel course racing, you must survive multiple elimination heats on two nearly identical courses to win the competition, beating competitors one at a time. For a long time, this was the principal difference between World Pro and FIS World Cup racing.

In the pro format, the racer springs out of the start gate in a perfectly timed lunge off loaded ski tails, staying forward and balanced off each jump and working a deepening rut. It requires physical stamina to outlast a side-by-side competitor for ten runs at an all-out sprint. More importantly, it requires mental discipline and steeliness.

Three-time tour winner Henri “Dudu” Duvillard was the master of both focus and adaptation. As Kenny Corrock noted, “You could only get him on the first run. After that, he had the course wired.” The sheer act of racing for ten runs in a day, while grueling, was also a big part of the draw. “Once you got into it you realized, ‘This is so much fun!’” recalls Palmer.

### MEANWHILE, ON THE ALPINE WORLD CUP...

During the Pro Tour’s rise, the party line with the FIS was that parallel racing could not be taken seriously and did not attract the best racers. Nonetheless, the exodus of so many top athletes was troubling. In 1975, the IOC took steps to loosen the rules for amateur standing, allowing amateur athletes to be paid by sponsors through their federations. Later, the FIS would add prize money to the mix. Parallel races appeared on the schedule, but suffered a credibility setback in the 1975 World Cup Finals, where the race for the World Cup overall title was decided between Ingemar Stenmark and Gustav Thoeni in a tie-breaking parallel that FIS President Gian Franco Kasper refers to as “a great scandal.”



Viki Fleckenstein (left) and Marti Martin-Kuntz blast out of the starting gate during a dual downhill event on the women’s pro tour in the early 1980s.

Phil Mahre recalls that Thoeni’s Italian teammates skied out when racing against Thoeni in order to help him reach the finals, but raced Stenmark each and every run when they were against Stenmark. “As you are aware, reaching the finals takes a toll on you physically, and Gustavo didn’t have to make as many hard-fought runs,” says Mahre. The final came down to Thoeni and Stenmark, and Stenmark went out just above the finish, giving Thoeni the win and the overall title. “It was not a good showing for our sport,” Steve Mahre concurs.

Parallels, when included, were more of a novelty (with many a heli thrown off the bumps) and counted only for Nations Cup points. Hank Tauber, coach of the U.S. Ski Team in the 1970s and former member of the FIS council, recalls that “[Marc] Hodler was never a fan of duals. Part of the feeling was that the pros were doing it and that there were better skiers on the World Cup. Also, there was criticism of the jumps being bad for racer’s backs.” Bill Marolt, who succeeded Tauber on the FIS council, was more straightforward when asked why he thought duals were

not on the World Cup, saying, “Because it’s an American idea!”

### END OF THE ERA

March 1981 was the hard stop to Beattie’s World Pro Skiing era, thanks to an athlete-led boycott that coincided with low TV ratings, dwindling sponsorships, and top names that were unfamiliar to American viewers. Ed Rogers, who along with his business partner Mike Collins had been operating one of several skiing “B Tours,” reinvented the tour with a new model that involved producing his own shows rather than selling rights to a network. Through the 1990s the tour would continue and provide a viable way for its top racers to make a living ski racing. Meanwhile the World Cup, as gateway to Olympic competition—not to mention ample prize money—regained its stature.

### PARALLEL U-TURN

Until the late 1990s, the pro circuit had been a one-way street away from World Cup and Olympic competition. Bernhard Knauss—with 76 victories the top-winning pro skier ever—changed that when he left the tour and raced for Slo-



JONAS KULLMAN

In February 2016, a sold-out crowd in downtown Stockholm, Sweden, watched top World Cup racers go head-to-head on a parallel slalom course.

venia in the 1998 Olympics. Erik Schlopy, though less successful on the pro tour than Knauss, made an even more impressive World Cup return. Schlopy had turned pro in 1996 as a way to continue racing when his amateur career stalled due to injury. When he saw the Schl- admiring pro night event—duals right down the face, with 6-foot jumps in front of thousands of fans—he had a revelation. “These guys are just better,” he remembers thinking. Schlopy, known for his relentlessly innovative approach to technique and equipment, embraced the independence and challenging conditions on the tour and was named Rookie of the Year in his first season. The pro bumps were instant feedback, demanding perfect fore-aft balance. Run after run in rough ruts made him physically tough, and the mental discipline of staying focused in side-by-side fire-breathing competi-

tion built consistency.

When Salt Lake City won the 2002 Olympic bid, Schlopy saw the opportunity to race in his hometown of Park City. He restarted his amateur career from scratch and raced for another ten years, winning a World Championship GS bronze medal. Then and now, Schlopy believes dual format belongs at the highest level of ski racing. “It’s closer to fans, with shorter runs and more of them. Head-to-head competition makes it easier to see time differences of 0.1 second, and it requires less real estate. To me, it’s a no-brainer.”

### WORLD CUP SOLUTION

Gian Franco Kasper cites the 1975 “scandal” as one reason for the FIS’s historical reticence to embrace parallel racing as a fully scored event on the World Cup. However, now that World Cup racing is in dire need of a popularity boost—especially with upcoming Olympic venues (Korea 2018 and Beijing 2022) so distant from the epicenter of alpine ski culture—the FIS has re-introduced the format in both team

and individual events. Individually scored parallel slalom returned in 2011 at city events where, rather than bringing crowds to the race, the race comes to the crowds. Munich, Moscow and Stockholm have all staged successful parallels. USSA is exploring New York City for a future city event. Parallel GS joined the men’s schedule at Alta Badia the past two Decembers and the dual team event will again be held at the World Championships.

World Cup events borrow heavily from the World Pro format, starting with the field size of 32: For individual parallels, like in Alta Badia, the top 16 racers qualify from the World Cup starting list. They’re joined by the top four racers in the World Cup overall standings and the top 12 racers from the first run of the previous GS race. One twist in the World Cup version, however, is that starting in the round of 16, racers are eliminated after one run. Fairness, then, depends on closely matched courses, in terrain and set. This is very difficult to manage even on a 20-second GS.

As Markus Waldner, Chief Race Director of Men's World Cup told *Ski Racing*, "The slope has been prepared with a GPS-equipped snowcat, so that the snow and the shape of the terrain become very similar, and even equal. The course setting is also done by GPS and we manage to get really close. The difference between both courses is less than 1-2 centimeters." The distance between gates is the same as a standard GS, at 23-24 meters, and all male racers must use 34-meter radius GS skis, the current standard (the standard changes to 30 meters for 2017-18, the same as the standard for women). Team events are also set up bracket style, with two racers of each gender on each team in each heat. Each winning run scores a point and the team with the most points advances to the next heat.

With medals at stake in the team event, and more parallels on the schedule, the U.S. Ski Team not only trains specifically for the parallel format but also may stage an open event to determine an Olympic spot in the discipline for 2018.

Despite the influx of parallel

events on the World Cup calendar, Kasper remains dismissive of the format for individual competition: "North Americans are always interested in the parallel. The Europeans are not at all. The athletes don't take it seriously—the top ones don't even come." TV commentator and former World Cup downhiller Steve Porino has a different perspective, as a purist who loves World Cup skiing but understands the real challenges of engaging the audience.

"Parallel sustains itself because it builds to a crescendo," says Porino, who points out that the head-to-head format makes skiing—even on the most boring slope—exciting. "It becomes like bull-riding," says Porino. "I don't want a whole tour of it, and I'm not sure it should be used to score discipline points, but it shows a skier's breadth." The athletes do enjoy it, he contends, and adds: "I have never seen a crowd that has not been animated and excited at a parallel race."

### **BACK TO THE FUTURE?**

Elsewhere, Ed Rogers is back in the ski news, this time advising a

young Craig Marshall in his efforts to restart the World Pro Ski Tour. This time, the tour may be used as a vehicle for younger skiers to develop their skills while working their way on to the World Cup. With the skyrocketing expense of a berth on the U.S. national team, and World Cup athletes peaking in their mid-20s and well beyond, Rogers sees both purpose and potential for the pro tour's return. The trouble, as ever, is finding sponsors. "It's the hardest part," says Beattie. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

This season, the World Cup schedule includes the men's parallel GS, a Stockholm parallel slalom for men and women, and two alpine team events—one at the World Championships in St. Moritz and another at the World Cup Finals in Aspen, where it all started. ❄️

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## **A NEW KIND OF SKI COMPETITION**

In November 1966, the editors of *SKI Magazine* praised the pro racing circuit and its exciting "razzle-dazzle" format that they hoped would make the sport "a more exciting spectacle." Of the various formats on the circuit—a two-run, single-course slalom; a giant slalom with two skiers racing side-by-side down parallel courses; freestyle; and technique demonstrations—they advocated for the dual GS and explained why:

"The improvement by the pros is to have the vision to see that running two racers down the mountain at the same time succeeds far better in giant slalom than in the slalom. Because the gates are more distantly spaced in giant slalom, one racer must get considerably ahead of the other before the two are out of phase with their turns. The result is that two reasonably matched racers can appear to be racing neck-and-neck down an entire course to the finish line. On the other hand, regular slalom, with its closely set gates, allows the racers to get quickly out of phase, lessening the visual impact..."

"From the racer's point of view, the dual giant slalom is exciting. 'No matter how much you concentrate on your own run,' comments one top pro, 'it's just not like a normal ski race. The temptation is always there to whip your head aside for a split second to see how the other fellow is doing.

It's exciting.' Technically, of course, such a sideward glance in a tight slalom would be fatal; in the giant slalom, it is just possible.

"Because no two courses over different terrain can be exactly alike, the racers switch in the second run, so that each competitor has a crack at both courses. The winner is the man with the best aggregate time for the two runs...And for the spectator keen to spot where and how a racer has gained or lost time, the dual slalom is far more instructive. With two well-matched racers on a duplicate courses, the eye quickly detects relative difference in line of approach, edging and turning that add up to fractions of a second on the clock.

"Racers in the second run are paired on the basis of their times in the first, with the result that the second run sees some tense, closely matched racing. Weaving, bobbing and floating through the flags, the racers at time seem like two ballet dancers engaged in an intricate pas de deux on snow. Ten to 15 gates from the finish, the cheering of the crowd rises to a pitch as spectators shout for their favorite to move faster and faster. Often, a pair of pros will pole in a simultaneous wild dash to the finish line. This, indeed, is ski racing as the spectator wants to see it." —*SKI (November 1966)*