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SLOVENIA AND ITS NATIONAL WINTER PASTIME: IN PURSUIT OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF ALPINE SKIING

Vlado Kotnik

Institute for Anthropological Research, Ljubljana

Introduction

In the Alpine countries of Europe and in Scandinavia, skiing has been developed as a distinctive and tremendously significant sport. According to Otmar Weiss, half of Austria's tourism is based on alpine skiing (1997: 571). Also, the central role of skiing, particularly of its Nordic type in Norwegian, Finnish, or Swedish society is well noted (Sörlin 1995: 147-164). Compared to these examples, Slovenia's case is maybe less known but certainly not insignificant or negligible. This text therefore tends to reveal only a few aspects of how alpine skiing became a supposedly indigenous national winter pastime in Slovenia.

Slovenia is a young nation-state situated at the crossroads of Slavic, Hungarian, Germanic and Romantic Europe; neighboring Croatia on the southeast, Hungary on the northeast, Austria on the north, and Italy on the west. Its contemporary political form is the outcome of turbulent events that infused the people of the Balkans with nationalist aspirations in the 1990s and resulted in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The mere geographic and territorial situation provoked constant national struggles, which the inhabitants of this region have been facing ever since the concept of the nation and of national identity emerged and spread throughout Europe in the late 18th and, especially, 19th centuries and was later, in the 20th century, incessantly reestablished (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Gellner 1987; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith 1986; Thiesse 1999). For decades, the Slovenian public, from such elements as the cultural, political, and sports milieus to the media, has come together in the belief that alpine skiing had an important referential part in building the self-image of the modern Slovenian nation. Alpine skiing, referring to the marvelous landscape of a unique land and remarkable natural monuments of national importance, thus perfectly fit the essentialist ideology of national sport. Internationally recognized Slovenian ski centers, particularly Kranjska Gora and Maribor as two ski resorts hosting World Ski Cup races, are intensively involved during winter seasons in building glorified national sporting iconography.^{ci}

Skiing as "Anthropology at Home"

Skiing is a quite new, unusual and "exotic" topic for anthropology. On the other hand,

anthropology still seems to be a very strange, unusual and "exotic" approach to the ski imaginary. It is with these two initial ascertainments that we can well denote the current state of the relationship between anthropological discipline and ski sport. In the past, it was biomechanics, kinesiology, physiology, and perhaps psychology and sociology that dealt with ski sport and the issues related to it, such as equipment, skier anatomy, injuries, therapy, rehabilitation, ski techniques, development of ski industry and technology, typology of snow, ski tourism, etc. (Fritschy & Richard & Leach 1994; Müller *et al.* 1997; Horek & Spitaler 2003; Yacenda 1992; Lind & Sanders 1996; Howe 2001). The majority of this learn-to-ski literature deals more with the know-how aspect of ski *imaginaire* while social or cultural aspects are discussed less. However, this paper argues for an extension of these boundaries and research interests by bringing into this broad, eclectic field an anthropological perspective. Traditionally, anthropologists perceived all kinds of sports as something outside their academic enterprises and "anthropological locations" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Since anthropologists were longing to visit distant places and symbolically different, particularly non-Western cultures, it was understandably not easy for them to meet sports as their potential terrain.

Given that modern sports emerged as part of a wave of *invented traditions* (Hobsbawm 1993) in Western centered cultures associated with nation-building at the end of the 19th century, it is not surprising that different disciplines have incorporated sports into their research agendas. Although anthropology has perceived sports as a research object with certain disciplinary delay, today we know that it can contribute importantly to the sports issues by producing original and fresh understandings on sports whose significances can be best understood when we locate them through ethnographic enterprise. The appearance of a few anthropological works and articles on sports (Blanchard 1995; Sands 1999; special issue "Anthropology and sport" of the *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 2002, edited by Catherine Palmer; Philip Moore 2004: 37-46) is promising in a sense that the link between anthropology and sport is possible and even productive. Thus, anthropological studies on sport have noticeably widened the field, firstly, by

stressing the ubiquitous nature of sport (Blanchard 1995), and secondly, by showing that sport is a culturally conditioned imaginary or social category that, along with material artifacts, social customs, and ideologies, is transported across cultural lines (Sands 1999). Also, by flavoring each and every national community, sport has become, as shown by Richard Lapchick's volume (1996), its own medium of communication, and has important ramifications for national, international and multicultural relationships.

My personal acquaintance with skiing goes back to early childhood and to the fact that I have systematically watched the World Ski Cup races on TV from 1987 onwards. As a child born in the mid 1970s, I was quickly, in a "natural" way, initiated into the mythical national imaginary of the Slovenian national skiing story. As far as I remember, taking school courses in skiing, organized trips to local ski slopes, and watching television transmissions of World Ski Cup races were seasonal rituals performed almost on a daily basis during the wintertime. At first glance, it is to be understood as a pleasant family event or, at most, a socializing passion of the young generation. But beyond this social attire, such winter rituals actually educated people to be good national members. Skiing was therefore an effective canal through which each and every individual felt invited into the egalitarian proletarian socialist community. It was a slip into the "good nationalism" of socialism. During the 1980s, skiing grew to such proportions that the successes of Slovenian professional skiers were immediately turned into the feature inherent to all Slovenians. Slovenian ski wins and medals were celebrated with great public festivities and heated receptions of crowds. Sometimes, some of them were, whether directly or in taped versions, presented to the broader television audience. In this way, the entire national community participated as one in the success of the nation. Watching television images of these nation-gathering ceremonies and public festivities^{cii} was like a free entry into this enchanting world. I remember that on the day of important ski races, such as the Olympics or the World Ski Championship, lessons in our school were interrupted and children were hauled into classrooms with television sets to watch the Slovenian competitor ski. At the peak of the World Ski Cup season, it often happened that classes were dismissed so that pupils could watch the competitions. This phenomenon is well described by Slovenian anthropologist Gregor Starc, who carried out a detailed scrutiny of Slovenian nationalism and sport:

Having recently discussed this custom to people of my age from different parts of Slovenia, they confirmed that the same ritual took place in their schools as well, especially when Slovenian

skiers, after the first run, stood chances to win medals in the second run. (Starc 2004: 167)

He sees this romantic practice as an informal part of compulsory education from the 1980s when skiing became so popular that office hours, as one of his informants stated, were stopped short whenever there was a skiing event on TV. Some of my informants delivered similar experiences in interviews. The ritual of families' or friends' arrangements sitting in front of the television every time it showed Bojan Križaj or Mateja Svet, both treated today as the two greatest legends of Slovenian skiing, is proof of the successful, using Irena Šumi's words (2004), "domestication of ideology". Consequently, the media, television in particular, turned audiences into fans which consumed not only successes of skiers but also products of the then Slovenian ski industry (for instance, Elan manufacturing skis or Alpina manufacturing ski shoes), and, in the last instance, skiing culture as such (winter tourism, ski holidays). If a Trobriand, Hopi, Nuer or Aborigine anthropologist came to Slovenia, he/she would most likely be amazed with the Slovenian passion for skiing. When analytically pursuing these issues even I, myself, am amazed by this cultural congruity which I internalized and to which I was subjected so collectively. This finding was for me, as an anthropologist, additional evidence that practicing "anthropology at home" (Peirano 1998: 105-128) is far from being entirely familiar with the society in which one lives.

Domestication of Skiing History

Skiing has been represented in Slovenia as the prototype of Slovenianness, as the allegedly first Slovenian skiers already existed as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. There is a documented legend, probably well known to all Slovenians, which says that traditional Slovenian downhill skiing was born in the region of the Bloke plateau, a semi-forestall tableland region placed south-westwards of Ljubljana's basin. Following this legend, the traditional Bloke skier continued to be present in Slovenia as the proto-skier of Slovenian modern skiing since the 19th century, and got some new meanings and accentuations in media, particularly in daily press and on television in the last decades of the 20th century. Particularly in the last decade, details of this legend were often summoned by television anchors, sports journalists, field reporters, studio commentators, sports analysts and play-by-play announcers with a perceivable attention and passion. They liked to mention that the baron Valvasor wrote precise reports on skiing activities in Slovenia as early as the 17th century. More concretely, the skiing of Carniolan^{ciii} peasants – known as "smukanje" (an

archaic Slovenian term for “down hilling”) – was described in 1689 in the nationally glorified book *Die Ehre Deß Herzogthums Crain* [The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola] written by the Baron Janez Vajkard Valvasor (1641-1693), a nobleman, scholar, polymath, and member of the London Royal Society. Valvasor's book is a description of Carniolan geography, nature, history, customs, and language. In this monumental work, he also described an “odd practice of sliding down snow-covered slopes” of the peasants on the slopes around Turjak, the Bloke Plateau, and its surroundings (Valvasor, 1977 [1689], p. 94). This famous part of the early documented ski history has been discussed just recently by Slovenian sports scientists, ethnologists and chroniclers. Their leading ideas such as “the Slovenian origins of European skiing” (Rajtmajer 1994: 97-101), “the Bloke Plateau as the cradle of Slovenian skiing” (Urbanc 1999: 412-413) and “the revived skiing on wooden skis” (Dolžan Eržen 2004: 124-125) show that the history of Slovenian ski history is still strongly domesticated in the realm of homeland studies and ideology.

If gymnastics was, on the one hand, the first sport that was institutionalized among Slovenians in the 19th century nationalist gymnastic movement then skiing, on the other hand, represented an important point of Slovenianness and Yugoslavness, especially during the last two decades of the Yugoslav Socialist state (Starc 2004:11). In this respect, skiing was used particularly to build divisions between ‘us’ and ‘others’ which usually varied according to particular historical periods and contexts. For instance, in the 19th century, the Others were mostly Hapsburgs and Austrians, in the first half of the 20th century, the Others were Germans and Italians, in the second half of the 20th century the Others were sometimes Serbs, sometimes Croats, or both.

Modern skiing was introduced to Slovenia at the beginning of the 20th century. Early skiing enthusiasts united in a group called Dren [Cornel] and one of their members, Rudolf Badjura, who is today considered the main historian of Slovenian skiing, wrote that the members of Dren first started skiing in 1911 (1956: 7). However, this group, and especially Badjura himself, were responsible for the dissemination of the belief that skiing is a Slovenian national sport. Rudolf Badjura (1881-1963) was one of the most diligent skiing activists. He used ethnographic methods to prove that skiing was an ancient Slovenian tradition. On the basis of his findings he invented the Slovenian skiing terminology and eagerly defended it against foreign, especially German words. He was the author of the first documentary film about Slovenian skiing (Badjura, 1931, quoted in Starc 2004:102). The first

alpine slalom competition in Slovenia was held in 1932 (*Slovenski narod* [Slovenian Nation] 1932: 3).

However, after the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, the Slovenian/German opposition was turned into the opposition between the Slovenians and the Serbs/Croats respectively. In that period, skiing as popular sporting practice also became, consequently, a signifier of Slovenianness in new Yugoslav relations and realities. Skiing was therefore particularly perceived as a traditional Slovenian sport that was revived after three centuries. Because of its alleged long standing tradition and distant origin, downhill skiing was presented as an exclusively Slovenian sport, i.e., a non-hybrid, original national sport. Its reputation as the Slovenian national sport was further legitimized by the fact that it was poorly practiced in other parts of Yugoslavia.

In the post-WWII Socialist Yugoslavia, skiing remained exclusively attributed to the Slovenian people. The myth of skiing as the essence of “Slovenian nature” had begun to circulate all over the Yugoslav federation before the WWII. Even in the discourse of brotherhood and unity that successfully united the Yugoslav nations until the 1980s, skiing preserved its “Slovenian character” and was posited as one of the most distinctive signifiers upon which Slovenianness was built without much objection. The reasons for this are argued by a Slovenian sport journalist, one of my informants, as follows:

Look, the myth on “Yugoslav skiing” as the Slovenian national sport has been built not only by the Slovenians but also with the help of other Yugoslav nations. It was not only the Slovenians who believed in the ethnically determined talent of the Slovenian nation for skiing. It is really interesting how people from the other parts of Yugoslavia shared a similar belief on this. [...] As far as I can remember, we, as Slovenians, were named as skiers by other Yugoslavs. Since our competitors in skiing achieved better and better results, this perception of course created even bigger impression about us as skiing people ... Certainly, radio and TV direct broadcasts of skiing which became so popular during the 1980s, fortified the Slovenian superiority in skiing. Television in particular permeated enormous and multiple identifications with this sport.

But at the same time, as Gregor Starc points out, the distinction between Slovenianness and Yugoslavness was preserved in the idea of national purity of skiing (2004:104). In late socialist Slovenia, the social resonance and symbolic status of alpine skiing became also politically determined and

obtained a prestigious position among sports. Especially when antagonisms between Slovenianness and Yugoslavness arose, alpine skiing fortified its position as the most purely Slovenian sport, and, therefore, was used as a tool of socio-political and identity distinction between the “Slovenian sporting identity” showing its closeness to the “western European identity”, and imaginings of the Balkan communities of the other Yugoslavs, nick-named “the Southern Brothers”. Antinomies, such as “Slovenians embody individualism”, “southern Balkan brothers are better in collective sports”, paved the road from pre-Yugoslav and Yugoslav sporting body to emancipated Slovenian skiing identity noticeably.

In the turbulent late Yugoslav political reality, skiing not only kept a privileged position in the national imagination of Slovenianness, but growing international successes of Slovenian skiers during the 1980s gave it epic proportions. Alpine skiers, such as Bojan Križaj, Mateja Svet, Boris Strel, Rok Petrovič, Jure Franko and Nataša Bokal were the athletes who, by winning several World Ski Cup podiums and victories, small crystal globes for the season’s best runner in a particular ski discipline, World Championships podiums or titles and Olympic medals, materialized the myth of skiing as the Slovenian national sport. Their astonishing accomplishments were promptly transformed by radio broadcasting, the press, and particularly by television into a matter of national pride and cohesion, which reminded of the important social position of skiing (*Dnevnik* 1984; Mal 1983; *Delo* 1987). During the 1980s, Križaj and Svet became Slovenian as well as Yugoslav heroes beyond all comparison. Križaj became perceived as the beginner of the successful Slovenian ski story and as one of the greatest legends of Slovenian skiing who, in his best times, was one of the greatest rivals of the legendary and almost unbeatable Swedish skier Ingemar Stenmark. Svet was perceived as Slovenia’s most successful female alpine skier by far. As one of the world’s best female skiers in the late eighties, she was one of the greatest opponents of the brilliant and infallible Swiss skier Vreni Schneider (Kancler 1987). Both were also awarded the title “Best Yugoslav Athlete”. One of my informants, a ski fan, elaborates:

I take the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo particularly important for the Slovenian people because these Olympics further strengthened the Slovenian superiority in skiing. The entire nation, I mean the entire Yugoslav federation, was forged on couch in front of TV sets during this event. After these Olympic Games, our

southern Balkan brothers related us to skiing even more.

Given the absence and bad results of skiers from other parts of Yugoslavia and the successes of Slovenian skiers, both the Slovenian media and public embraced the belief that skiing talent must be an ethnically, i.e., genetically determined feature in the nation itself. The Slovenian superiority in competitive skiing was fully confirmed on the international level. When turning into one of the most characteristic features perceived as naturally inherent to all Slovenians, skiing became ultimately exploited by the *Blut und Boden* ideology. The national distinctiveness of Slovenian culture found additional argument for its social necessity as the first political tensions appeared in the wake of Tito’s death, and especially in the years that followed.

After Slovenia’s separation from Yugoslavia, skiing immediately became a euphemism for independence. Skiing was positioned as an all-encompassing symbol of the Slovenian struggle for independence. All previous skiing victories were perceived as Slovenian and were denied its Yugoslavness, even though they were still accomplished under the Yugoslav flag. Thus, after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia was faced with a situation that called for a clear definition of the Slovenian nation (Starc 2004:75-76, 137-139, 165-167, 171). Represented as a vehicle promoting the story of “small nation, great issues”, skiing saw a strengthened position as the Slovenian national sport and as the signifier of the Slovenian nation. Thus, the nation-building process mobilized skiing as the “real Slovenian thing”.

The 1992 Winter Olympics were the first at which Slovenian skiers competed as a team from independent Slovenia. The presence of Slovenian skiers at this highly recognized international sporting event was, in the Slovenian press and television sports broadcasts, exposed as Slovenia’s journey from “the Balkans” into “Europe”. Live participation of Slovenian audiences in this giant televised sporting event enabled national imagining in an enormous dimension. Press and television discourses of skiing followed this omnipresent revitalization of affirmative nationalism in the 1990s while presented as a continuation of much earlier developments. Culture, as the guarantee of national survival, and sport, as the guarantee of international recognition, were two essential domains walking together hand in hand constituting the new social reality labeled the “Slovenian transition”.

Under the transitional political ideology, the myth of Slovenian lady skiers as “Slovenian Golden Foxes” and “Devilish Slovenians” was created by the

national media. This sexualized myth, also known under the slogan "*The female Slovenian skiers are flying*", was about four Slovenian female skiers, Urška Hrovat, Špela Pretnar, Alenka Dovžan and Katja Koren who represented, after the overwhelmingly glorified skiing story in the 1980s, a new wave of "Slovenian hope and success". In those politically unstable times, such slogans had strong political connotations connected with the idea of a "small" and "endangered nation," once pertaining to ex-Yugoslavia; a nation no longer prepared to surrender to anyone else. Since the plebiscite for Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia, the media embarked on an extensive recounting of the story "of how Slovenians became the Slovenians" due to skiing. The new country activated old traditions and symbols in order to provide a positive self-image and coherent national narrative. The successes of ski racers, which had, since the time of Yugoslavia, been treated as the national sport became a significant catalyst in constructing the new nation-state identity.

All in all, it can be established that people living in the territory of today's Slovenia developed their own sense of particular ethnic, cultural and national identity. We could say that this identity is the outcome of many contingent socio-historical events that influenced people's communal imagining and consequently enabled them to build and fixate their specific homogeneous national feelings, belonging, and identity.

Commodifications of Nationalism

A great amount of literature, which has considered the topic of national sporting identities in sustaining national, regional, or group identities through different types of sport (Archetti 1999; Gruneau & Whitson 1994; Mewett 1999), confirms that sports have helped shape national identities and, further, that national cultures have shaped contemporary sports. Many western centered studies focused on nation and sports often presuppose that the nation is a fixed, independent, ready-constituted and self-evident organizational form which exploits its social resources, sports among them, to achieve its national goals and unity. There can be found an inherent tendency to confirm the fact that great nations and well established national milieus, as historically long-continued and well fixed social categories, dominate in producing great national sports issues. However, this frame does not fit the case of the Slovenian national milieu entirely. Namely, the sustenance of the Slovenian nation, as well as the nationalization of sports in Slovenia, was never in its history dependent on its own independent social formation. As there was no such formation, both phenomena were more the outcomes of a

complex but rather contingent and situational constellation.

National sport focuses substantially on national unity and identity, championing the dominant values, ideals, and resources of the nations in which they originate. Sports are a part of people's everyday lives that allow national identification and nationalism to operate intensively without reflection. It is not surprising at all that this was also the case in Slovenia. Especially not if it is taken that the Slovenians were a relatively small population that never in their history formed an independent state or any other kind of autonomous political formation. For centuries, the Slovenian people were always subject to foreign rule and foreign bureaucracy. However, despite constant foreign rule, a population "on the sunny side of the Alps" – the post-independence tourist slogan is in mind here – somehow managed to pursue a shared sense of history, even though it was poorly formed and predominantly based on language continuity. So, this population which was, for the last two centuries, collectively self-imagined as a "suppressed nation" always represented by or through other "nations", or through different political formations (Napoleonian, Illyrism, Hapsburg monarchy, Austrian-Hungarian Empire, First Yugoslavia – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Second Yugoslavia – the Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), succeeded to develop both a nation and, more recently, a nation-state. It is therefore quite expectable that every activity within such a nation can quickly achieve national importance. Probably this was also the case for skiing, as this particular practice has been documented within contemporary Slovenia since the 17th century and, in the following centuries, it became repeatedly represented as the prototype for Slovenianness. Skiing practice therefore served not only as a tool charged with nationalist ideas, but also as an imaginary in which people produced knowledge of what it means to be a Slovenian.

Due to this, in Slovenia, any reflection of nationalism in sports is still negatively connoted and usually subjugated to ambivalence between shame and pride, justification and denial. In Slovenia, national commodification of alpine skiing represented, in the last few decades, a means of national identification since skiing offered opportunities for the Slovenians to develop a strong sense of being 'one people'. This nationalisation of skiing in Slovenia was formed by different cultural traditions and political arrangements that identified skiing as part of an integral cultural activity unifying Slovenian national culture and life.

Ironies of Indigenism

The idea of national purity in sports confirms, as shown by David Mayall's volume (1998), firstly, that sport largely employs ethnicity, and secondly, that ethnicity matters in sport. Eduardo Archetti (1999), for example, found this process of hybridization one of the most crucial mechanisms that turned football, polo, and tango into Argentinean national sports. However, as far as Slovenia is concerned, I, along with Starc, observed the opposite. Namely, Slovenian state-building discourse has always negated the hybridism of skiing and has tried to turn it into a 'pure', 'non-hybrid', 'authentic' and 'autochthonous' Slovenian sporting practice (Starc 2004: 12; 2005: 67). Such politically motivated discourse has also affected the media. Due to this ideological matrix, certain sports, for example, football or certain features of certain sports, for example, Telemark skiing or cross-country skiing (also known as Nordic skiing), were perceived as somewhat 'alien' to Slovenianness. Of course, this was not the case for alpine (downhill) skiing, which is treated as traditional Slovenian sporting practice.

The idea of downhill skiing as an indigenous Slovenian sport is, in a way, in sharp opposition to the foreign literature on the origins of skiing. International encyclopedic knowledge (*cf.* articles on 'skiing' and 'alpine skiing' in Encyclopædia Britannica, Encarta Encyclopedia, The Columbia Encyclopedia, Wikipedia) mutually agrees that skiing was born in northern Europe, in Scandinavia. Alpine skiing was born when, at the close of the 16th century, Nordic skiing was exported from Norway and introduced to Central Europe where Nordic techniques were adapted for the steeper alpine slopes. As early as the first half of the 18th century, alpine skiing was developed as a form of recreation to move down snow covered slopes. Alpine skiing techniques that evolved during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Alps of Central Europe are ascribed to Austrian ski inventors who pioneered the idea of competitive modern alpine skiing. In Slovenia, this part of skiing history is ignored and removed from any potential confrontation with the Slovenian version, which says that downhill skiing originated on Slovenian soil. As a well-preserved isolated island in the middle of Europe, the Slovenian myth of the indigenesness of downhill skiing could go national without any objection, and thereby live vividly through media discourses until today.

In the case of Slovenia, the first irony is in the fact that the Slovenians are not nearly as successful as other nations in professional competitive skiing – for instance, Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, Sweden or Norway – which participate in the World Ski Cup races, some

counting their wins in hundreds. The second irony is that the success of other nations and the lack of success of Slovenian skiers always fortify nationalistic mechanisms that turn the sport's disadvantage into the nation's advantage with instantaneous magic power. In disadvantageous moments press, sports journalists, television commentators, sports news presenters, field reporters, and radio announcers immediately start delivering, between the lines, an explanation which would go like this if appropriately translated into our analytical language: Slovenian skiing is a matter of the innate skiing talent of Slovenians and not only the matter of forcibly learned competitive skills. This attitude is more fruitfully explicit in words of one regular consumer of ski telecasts, one of my informants, who enlightened me like this:

Look, I will tell you now what is the mystery and mastery of the entire Slovenian skiing story. Skiing is truly the 'real Slovenian thing' not only because of our professional racers and their success but because it is in our blood. You see, the Slovenian skiing is something that is beyond all wins and defeats of our skiers who compete for medals, wins and money. They are important but they are not all that. They maybe lose but Slovenian skiing doesn't ... they can be beaten in the process but our skiing tradition cannot be.

Hence, the reference to blood and ground ideology, which persuades that Slovenian skiing exists by nature and not training, is not difficult to see. The ideology that supports skiing as a genetic trait of the nation is usually explained by different essentialist and naturalist ideas of family as national treasure. Or, to quote one of my informants, a Slovenian sport broadcast director:

You know, the essence of the Slovenian alpine skiing is hidden in this simple sentence 'let's go ski on Saturday or Sunday'. Don't you agree that it seems fairly unusual if there is someone who can't ski? It is naturally presupposed that all Slovenians can ski. You know, I'd like to say that everything began in a family context. 'Let's go ski on Sunday' was and still is a regular family ritual during the winter season in Slovenia. So, without knowing this context you can't understand the success of our skiers Mateja Svet, Bojan Križaj or Rok Petrovič. Roughly said, their professional careers and successes began with this simple "let's go ski" when they were children. [...] Look at the Croatian family Kostelić today, it is the same principle. It's all about the family. You see, the father as the first trainer.

This indicates how deeply this sport is rooted in the collective consciousness, and how vigorously it is determined by national ideology that teaches that Slovenians are born skiers. If, in Brazil, football is considered the national obsession and “opium of the Brazilian people” (Lever 1969: 36-43) then in Slovenia skiing is considered the national virtue^{civ}. Probably the most reasonable explanation for the eminent social position of skiing is its long-term presence on Slovenian soil and its privileged role in Slovenian nationalist processes. Besides having a long history of popularity, skiing has been throughout the second half of the 20th century tremendously reinforced by the rise of new media, particularly by the development of television, radio and the rise of press.

Problems with Hybridism

Skiing took a significant part in the process of Slovenian separation from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In Yugoslav multinational sports arenas it served as the field for expressing Slovenianness in opposition to Others, especially the Croats and the Serbs. Distinctions between “we” and “they” were a product of complex competing political discourses. Many decades before Yugoslav disintegration, there were mythologies that divided the Slovenians from the other Yugoslav republics as well as from the neighbouring north-western Alpine countries.

But in the late 1990s, the sacred Slovenian sport myth was seriously questioned, because the Croatian skiers Janica and her brother Ivica Kostelić began defeating Slovenian skiers in the process in the World Ski Cup races (Starc 2005: 76-78). The idea of Slovenia skiing superiority was losing its persuasiveness at that time since Croats began winning and challenging their superiority in skiing. The successes of Slovenian skiers were now overshadowed by Croatian skiers. The embarrassment was noticeable in the Slovenian media, particularly on television, which has been traditionally skiing’s strongest ally (Starc 2004:59, 208). Consequently, Slovenian skiing nationalism had to adapt its ideas to the new situation. Because of the new situation, skiing provoked ambivalent feelings in the Slovenian public sphere, all the more because the tradition was jeopardized by lack of success. Radio commentators and television anchors have challenged a new explanation that would preserve Slovenia’s skiing myth untouched as follows:

The mechanism was simple, efficient and in accord with the prevailing nationalist idea that stigmatized hybridity as impure: the Croatian skiing was branded a hybrid of the Slovenian

skiing school and a result of workaholic fanaticism on the part of the Kostelić siblings. The alleged impurity of Croatian skiing was the solution to the idea of purity of Slovenian skiing. The dividing mechanism that is obvious in these media responses operated on the basis of various dichotomies such as Slovenian skiing/Croatian skiing = purity/impurity = non-hybridity/hybridity = authenticity/imitation, etc. These dichotomies sustained the idea that skiing was, is, and will remain a non-hybrid, pure, traditional and authentic Slovenian sport regardless of its momentary lack of success. (Starc 2004: 107-108)

Another mechanism to maintain the myth of Slovenian skiing superiority over Croatian focused on the Slovenisation of Croatian skiing. On the occasion of the final season’s (2001/02) slalom race where Croatian skier Ivica Kostelić won and received the World Ski Cup small crystal globe for the season’s best slalom runner, Slovenian television commentator Igor E. Bergant was trying to assuage the Slovenian television audience by referring to Kostelić’s statement in which he may have allegedly admitted: *“I am the product of the Slovenian school of skiing.”* Thus, as Starc further explicates (2003: 923), his accomplishments were represented as part of the success of Slovenian skiing; his bodily abilities for skiing and winning were contextualized as “imported” to Croatia from Slovenia:

Namely, since Ivica’s early youth, his skiing trainer is Vincencij Jovan arriving from town Celje [Slovenia]. (Said by Bergant commentating men’s slalom race on Slovenian National TV 2, March 9, 2002)

Additionally, the media was the meeting point where the hesitations, embarrassments and problems with recent Slovenian skiing superiority and inferiority in relation to “us” and “others” were highly contested, negotiated, and finally, transformed into a new national essentialism. By doing so, Slovenian skiers were turned into the bearers of universally good Slovenianness that transcends the particularities of individual members of the national skiing community.

Conclusions

This article has provided data and results that can be summarized in a few final thoughts. While the majority of the literature on sport and national identity is based mostly on Western European, North American, and Australian experiences, this article concentrates on a nation that is seldom featured in international anthropological literature, but also entirely underrepresented and unknown to many Western academic scenes whose

access to post-socialist worlds is usually taken from second-hand given information. I hope that this paper brings some interesting insights into the peculiarity and specificity of the Slovenian case, and adds sufficiently to the existing literature. As we can see, the 'Slovenian skiing identity' does not exist *per se* but as a mythical narration of a nation. It exists, therefore, in an imaginary of naturalist, organicist and nationalist Slovenian ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries which promote social phenomena being perceived as something purely natural, organic or national. In Slovenia, alpine skiing has become the national sport not as an economic commodity influenced by commercial market constraints, but rather as a vehicle for the creation of meaningful discourse about national identity. This is why alpine skiing has been nationalized predominantly through purist ideology that presents skiing as a pure and autochthonous Slovenian sport and the natural embodiment of Slovenian national identity. Consequently, good scores of Slovenian skiers contributed to the economic status of alpine skiing by attracting more financial support and attention from the state. My focus was not the economic value of nationalized sport but it seems that the link between financial support, market, sports industry and nationalized sport can be confirmed. Even more likely, individual accomplishments of Slovenian skiers have not only served as points of collective identification but have also represented an effective social substitute for political and economic failures beyond the domain of sports. Moreover, alpine skiing has played a distinctive role in the Slovenian nation-imagining process, all the more because it was strongly regulated by the denial of hybridism. Downhill skiing has been prone to be perceived as pure, authentic, and indigenous Slovenian sporting practice.

Notes

^{ci} For a discussion about the construction and representations of host identity issues see Arne Martin Klausen's volume (1999) on producing Norwegian culture for the domestic and foreign gaze on the occasion of the Lillehammer Olympic opening ceremony and later sporting settings.

^{cii} Don Handelmann's work (1990) on public events can be particularly helpful in studying the role of such public events.

^{ciii} In the nineteenth century, Carniola was the region of constitutive importance for creating the Slovenian national territory.

^{civ} On virtue and grace in sport see John Carroll, 1986, pp. 91-98.

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