

Engadin Ski Marathon, 2005

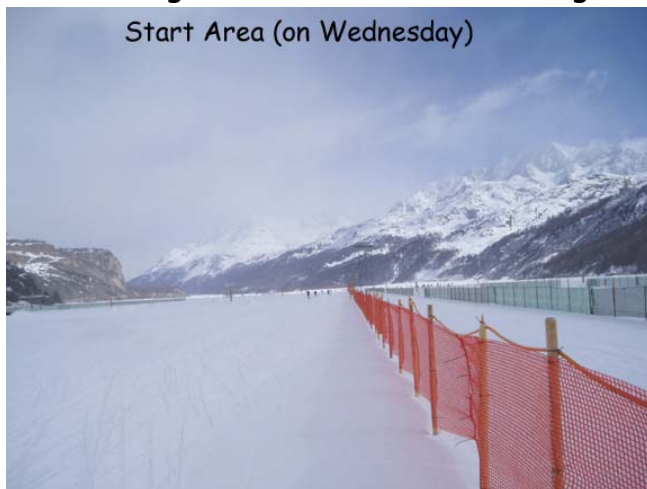
Scott Smith

I'm in Pontresina, Switzerland for the Engadin Ski Marathon, staying at the Engadinerhof Hotel which is at the halfway point of the ski trail. Wednesday I skied to the start and back with Bob Pallister and Bengt Karlsson. Bob is a Canadian whom I met at the Kangaroo Hoppet last August and Bengt is a friend of his who lives in Rhode Island. Bengt, who is originally from Sweden, also has a home on the hill leading up to Eagle Mountain House in Jackson where our club had its week-long trip this past February.



I felt terrible on the first day of skiing because of jetlag but Thursday was much better as we skied to the end and back (Photo). This is a skating race, held on Sunday, and most of the course is flat (on lakes or great open meadows). But at 1850 meters (over a mile high), any hill is a killer so there's plenty of pain to endure. The views are spectacular. As for bottlenecks, picture this: 12000 skiers, all doing the same race, in 4 waves, and several places where the trail narrows down. It's going to be nasty.

We arose at 4:30 on Sunday, dressed, and were ready for breakfast when the dining room opened at 5. I caught the bus at 6 and the ride seemed endless to get to the start. On arriving, I ran out to drop skis and poles in



Start Area (on Wednesday)



the start area, securing a spot in the first row. Unlike American Birkie, each wave starts in place so I had to ski

100 meters further than the elites. The first 12 kilometers across lakes are totally flat and you get tired of the absence of hills, believe it or not. The temps were perfect and there was no wind.

Unburdened from my equipment, I had to walk half a kilometer to find a warm place. I finally went into a cafe packed with skiers. I felt weary from rising so early and eventually crawled under a table to get prone and lay there for an hour. Not too comfortable but warm. I could hear people chuckling when they saw me there. Others didn't see me and stepped on my boots or sat on the table above me and swung their feet, kicking me. And I got so tired of listening to the German chatter which, of course, I didn't comprehend. An hour before race time I got up and waited in line for the can for a half hour. Boy, I was glad to get to the beginning of that line.

They had 50 trucks ready to take your bag to the finish area for this point to point race. It was quite a search to find the right one. I got back to my skis just as the 2nd of 4 waves left. Great inspiring music was playing and with the snowy mountains and blue skies it was an awesome feeling waiting 15 minutes for our start in the 3rd wave. They count down in German, but when they got to drei the gates went up and everybody took off. "Hey, what's with that?" I thought. Anyway, I was in pretty good position in the wave and, although many passed me, the bulk of the wave was behind me. The first couple of minutes are so painful. I suppose everyone wants to get to the hills first to avoid delays and so they go all out. The start area is shown in the upper left part of the photo.



Almost all the hills in this race are from St. Moritz to Ponticina (12 to 20K). The steepest hill on the course faces you as you approach St. Moritz but it's mercifully short (top photo on next page). There were plenty of skiers on it but no backup so I was able to attack it immediately up on the right side as was recommended by a race veteran. Feeling fresh and strong it was not a

problem. The trail led across a plateau for one to two hundred meters where we immediately gave back the elevation in an exciting plunge to the flats leading to St. Moritz Bad. We had been here Wednesday for bib pick-up and to explore the race expo, a series of tented display areas. With 12000 participants, they do not use chips. Hello, is anybody home at race planning here?



The worst snow on the course was here, I suppose because of all the people at the expo walking in the area transformed the snow to ice. Leaving St. Moritz, we head into the hills and came upon a nasty backup of racers immediately. I went up the right side and got into a group that was kind of side-stepping up a little faster than those herringboning in the middle of the trail. Finally at the top the pace quickened but there were forks in the trail and you had to guess which one will be less congested. I chose poorly - twice! The elites have none of these problems.



Up on top for several kilometers, we passed a hotel with a large, fountain-like, ice sculpture.

The last downhill, which had been scraped down to ice by the time I got there, is full of trees which have been wrapped with orange padding to protect skiers. Hence its

name: "Mattress Hill". I came here on Thursday to try to find the best line for running through the trees and decided the left side would be best. It's natural to swing out to the right so I thought it might be less crowded and better snow on the left. When I got there in the race, of course, it was mobbed. There was nothing to do but jump in and try my luck. Running as far left as possible, I made it past the leftmost orange mattress you see in the photo, but I was gaining on a guy and had little control. I tried to get around him but to no avail as I cut him down from behind and we both hit the deck to the cheers of the onlookers. Or maybe they were cheering a guy in a clown outfit with an orange mop wig who successfully glided his way through the trees. I apologized, for what that was worth, and scrambled up. Once through the trees, there's a big screaming run off to the right and I just held on, hoping no one would go down in front of me. Then it's a sprint through a couple of underpasses (railroad and the main road into Pontreicina.)

At this point, halfway through the race, I was feeling pretty good but I was now running into the back of the second wave. So it was dodge around here and wait for them to climb a little hill there. I was glad I had the chance to

ski the course earlier both to gain familiarity and to get some shots of the fabulous scenery.

The second half had just a few hills toward the end. So it was a scamper to the finish in 2 hours 40 minutes. I think I could have shaved 10 minutes off that had I started in the second wave. But it was a great



experience. Post race food was pathetic and then I had to catch a train back to my hotel.

So that's it folks, if you're a racer I can highly recommend this race for its atmosphere, scenery, and flatness. It's not cheap to stay here but it's a once (or hopefully, more than once) in a lifetime experience.