Skiing Nation:
Towards an Anthropology
of Slovenia’s National Sport

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of alpine skiing in Slovenian culture and society by focusing on the construction and maintenance of a sporting national story. The research, which is based on discourse analysis and the ethnographic method, suggests that in Slovenia, alpine skiing, with its natural sceneries, amateurish background, sporting events, media attention and national heroes, is one of the main sports arenas in which the Slovenian nation-imagining, nationalism and national identity have been exercised throughout the twentieth century. The national importance of alpine skiing was further confirmed after Slovenia’s secession from Yugoslavia. The findings also suggest that the media, especially television, perpetuated the myth of skiing as the Slovenian national sport and as an autochthonous Slovenian sporting practice.

Introduction

For decades the Slovenian public, from the cultural, political and sports milieus to the media, has shared the belief that alpine skiing has been important in building the self-image of the modern Slovenian nation. Alpine skiing, with its references to the extraordinary landscape of a unique land and natural monuments of national importance, fits perfectly with the essentialist ideology of national sport. During the winter ski season, internationally recognised Slovenian ski centres, particularly Kranjska Gora and Maribo (ski resorts which hosted World Ski Cup races), are intensively involved in the building of a national sporting iconography.¹

In Slovenia, alpine skiing, with its natural sceneries, tradition, ancillary amateurish sporting events, media attention and national heroes, is one of the main sports arenas in which Slovenian national consciousness has been
constituted. After Slovenia’s secession from Yugoslavia with the so-called ‘ten-days-independence-war’ in 1991, it maintained this role. Among the sports practiced on the (inter)national level in Slovenia, skiing certainly took the most prominent role in constituting the nation. However, any reflection of nationalism in sports in Slovenia still elicits negative connotations. It is usually subjugated to a discussion of the ambivalence between shame and pride, justification and denial. This situation constrains rather than assists an analysis seeking to focus on the Slovenian nation building processes, and the role of national sporting identity and the media in this.

The aim of this article is to examine a limited part of a much wider story about alpine skiing by focusing on the components that made this sport ‘the’ national sport of Slovenia, and embodied it as indigenous and authentic Slovenian sporting practice. I will argue that the Slovenian case is worthy of study as the results of this analysis can contribute to theory-building about sport and national identity.

This article is a component of wider research carried out during 1999-2003 and supplemented by work in 2006. As an anthropologist, I draw the analysis from ethnographic method to discourse analysis of selected television materials and academic literature on the topics of nation, sport and the media, and textual analysis of print media and other sources. The ethnographic part of the research was carried out in 2006. In order to provide additional insight into the subject matter, I interviewed a small selection of people, including a retired TV sports broadcast director who had specialized in skiing broadcasting; an editor of a ski magazine; a sports journalist from a Slovenian newspaper; and a small group of skiing fans who regularly watch Slovenian sports television. As the exact identities of the interview subjects are irrelevant for the goal of my analysis, I identify them by their ethnographic social position instead of by their names.

National Sports: Are They Really Indigenous Practices?

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 nineteenth century, it is not surprising that different disciplines, including history, kinesiology, sociology, anthropology, sports studies, media studies, media-sport studies and other domains, have traditionally taken the nation-state and national identity as a key point of reference and context (e.g. in relation to Britain: Barnett 1990; Whannel 1992; Hargreaves 1987; to Australia: Goldlust 1987; Mewett 1999; to Norway: Klausen 1999; to Sweden: Sörlin 1995; to the United States:
Chandler 1988; Pope 1993, 1997; to various countries or regions: Porter and Smith 2004; Bairner 2001; Wagg 2005). A great deal of the literature which considers the topic of national sporting identities in sustaining national, regional or group identities through different types of sports (Archetti 1999; Crolley and Hand 2002; Guilianotti 1999; Haynes 1995; Gruneau and Whitson 1993; Mangan 1996) confirms that sports have helped shape national identities, and further, that national cultures have shaped contemporary sports. A succession of authors who conducted sociological or other kinds of research on the link between sports issues and society, media and political, national or class ideologies (Barnett 1990; Hargreaves 1982; Hoberman 1984; Vaugrand 1999; Brohm and Bambuck 1992; Dunning 1971; Bourdieu 1978; Blanchard 1995; Sands 1999) have comprehensively shown that national mythmaking through sport is common across continents. Also, the constantly growing, intersecting and transforming relationship between sports, national identity, nationalism and the role of media is discussed in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary terms (Rader 1984; Goldlust 1987; Rowe 1999; Wenner 1989, 1998; Whannel 1992).

Many of the abovementioned western-centered studies presuppose the nation as a fixed, independent, ready-constituted and self-evident organisational form which is able to exploit its social resources, sports being one of them, to achieve its national goals and unity. Nations with long historical continuity and established cultures often have greater potential to dominate in the sporting arena, producing great athletes and sporting stories. However, this framework does not entirely fit the Slovenian case. The development of Slovenian national identity as well as the nationalisation of sports in Slovenia occurred in the absence of a self-governing social formation. Lacking an autonomous and sovereign structure, these kind of phenomenon in organised nation-like communities tend to be the outcome of complex events, contingent on specific circumstances.

Slovenia is a young nation-state situated at the crossroads of Slavic, Hungarian, Germanic and Romance 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, in Starc’s words (2004:6), constant national struggles which the inhabitants of this region have been facing ever since the concepts of the nation and national identity emerged and spread through Europe in the late eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries and which, later in the twentieth century, were incessantly reestablished (Anderson
In Slovenia, skiing has been represented as the prototype of Slovenianness. The first Slovenian skiers allegedly existed as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is a documented legend, probably well-known to all Slovenians, which says that the traditional Slovenian downhill skiing was born in the region of the Bloke plateau, a semi-forested tableland region located southwest of Ljubljana’s basin. Following this legend, the traditional Bloke skier continued to be present in Slovenia as the proto-skier of the Slovenian modern skiing since the nineteenth century, and received new meanings and accentuations in the media, particularly in the daily press and on television in last decades of the twentieth century. Particularly in the last decade, details of this legend have often been referred to by television anchors, sports journalists, field reporters, studio commentators, sports analysts and play-by-play announcers with a perceptible attention and passion. They like to mention that the baron Valvasor wrote precise reports on skiing activities in Slovenia as early as the seventeenth century. More concretely, the skiing practices of Carniolan peasants – known as ‘smukanje’ (an archaic Slovenian term for ‘downhill’) – were described in 1689 in the nationally glorified book Die Ehre Deß Herzogthums Crain [The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola] written by the Baron Johann Weikhard von 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 of the time. 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 1977:94). This early documentation of skiing history has only recently been discussed 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’ (Dolan Ernen 2004:124-125) show that the history of skiing in Slovenia is still strongly domesticated in the realm of homeland studies and ideology.

Skiing was particularly used to build divisions between ‘us’ and ‘others’ which varied according to particular historical periods and contexts. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the ‘others’ were largely Hapsburgs and Austrians; in the first half of the twentieth century, the ‘others’ were Germans and Italians; in the second half of the twentieth century the ‘others’ were sometimes Serbs, sometimes Croats, or both. However, this is not surprising, if we consider that
the Slovenians were a relatively small population that never in its entire history formed an independent state or any other kind of autonomous political formation. For centuries, the Slovenian people were always dependent on foreign rule and bureaucracy. Despite constant foreign rule, a population ‘on the sunny side of the Alps’ – as the post-independence tourist slogan has it – somehow managed to maintain a shared sense of history, even though it was poorly formed and predominantly based on linguistic continuity. This population, which for the last two centuries was collectively self-imagined as a ‘suppressed nation’, always represented by or through other ‘nations’, or through different political formations (Napoleonic Illyrism, Hapsburg monarchy, Austrian-Hungarian Empire, First Yugoslavia – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Second Yugoslavia – the Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), succeeded to establish both a nation and, recently, a nation-state.

In the Socialist Yugoslavia particularly, skiing became a signifier of Slovenianness. It was therefore perceived as a traditional Slovenian sport that was revived after three centuries. Because of its alleged status as a long-standing tradition, downhill skiing was presented as an exclusively Slovenian sport, that is, 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. The myth of skiing as the essence of ‘Slovenian nature’ was preserved even inside the discourse of brotherhood and unity that successfully united the Yugoslav nations until the 1980s. The reasons for this are argued by one 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.

This suggests that skiing practice therefore served not only as a tool charged with nationalist ideas, but also as an imaginary in which people through skiing practice produced knowledge of what it meant to be a Slovenian. In
other words, the national commodification of alpine skiing offered opportunities for the Slovenians to develop a strong sense of being ‘one people’. This nationalisation of skiing in Slovenia was not so intensively driven by an erratic period of capitalist and commercialist ideologies, as this was the case in the twentieth century grand multicultural and multiethnic national milieu, such as the television’s commercialisation of cricket in Australia (Goldlust 1987:159-171; Mewett 1999:357-376), or ‘Americanisation’ of sports in a capitalist way in USA (Pope 1993:327-340). Rather, it was summoned by different cultural traditions and political constellations in which skiing was identified as a part of integral cultural activity gluing a unified Slovenian national culture and life.

The idea of national purity in sports confirms, as shown by the endeavors from David Mayall’s volume (1998), firstly, that sports largely employ ethnicity, and secondly, that ethnicity matters in sport. Eduardo Archetti (1999), for example, found the process of hybridisation one of the most crucial mechanisms that turned football, polo, and tango into Argentinean national sports. But as far as the Slovenian case is concerned, Gregor Starc found the direct opposite side of this phenomenon. 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 discourse has also affected television, radio broadcasting and print media. Due to this ideological matrix, certain sports, for example football, cross-country skiing (also known as Nordic skiing) or Telemark skiing, were perceived as somewhat ‘alien’ to Slovenianness. This was not of course the case for alpine (also known as downhill) skiing which is treated as a traditional type of 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. There is a consensus within international encyclopedic knowledge (cf. articles on ‘skiing’ and ‘alpine skiing’ in Encyclopædia Britannica, Encarta Encyclopedia, The Columbia Encyclopedia, Wikipedia) that skiing was born in Scandinavia. From Norway, the Nordic type of skiing was exported and introduced into Central Europe at the close of the sixteenth century. Nordic techniques were adapted for the steeper alpine slopes, and the alpine version of skiing was born. As early as in the first half of the eighteenth century, alpine skiing was developed as a form of recreation of moving down snow-covered slopes. The alpine skiing technique that evolved during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the mountainous terrain of the Alps in central Europe is ascribed to Austrian ski inventors who pioneered the idea of competitive
modern alpine skiing. In Slovenia, this part of skiing history is rather unnoticed and therefore kept away from any potential confrontation with the Slovenian version which says that downhill skiing originates from the Slovenian soil. As a well-preserved isolated island in the middle of Europe, the Slovenian myth of the indigenousness of downhill skiing could expand nationally without any objection and also live vividly through media discourses, particularly ski telecasts until today.

Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, for example, remark that ice hockey has often been portrayed as having an ‘enduring link to the idea of “Canadianness”’ (Gruneau and Whitson 1993:7, quoted in Rowe et al. 1998:121). The idea that hockey is Canada’s national game – represented as ‘the ubiquitous Canadian pastime’, ‘the Canadians beloved game’, ‘the Canadian specific’, ‘our common passion’, or ‘the language that pervades Canada’ – is essentially the product of a myth of national origins. According to Gruneau and Whitson, the myth of hockey as the Canadian national sport was ‘invented’ and sustained by the needs and alliances of certain agencies and institutions, such as the professional hockey league and the modern communications industry. Hockey’s association with the media, particularly television, seems to be of crucial importance which provides strong and effective articulation of a collective sporting national imagining. This idea of hockey representing a unified Canadian identity is, Gruneau and Whitson demonstrate, mythical in Roland Barthes’ sense (2000:109-159); it is about stories the Canadians tell themselves about themselves (Rowe et al. 1998:121).

Similarly, the corroboration of the myth of the Slovenian skiing nation was, from the 1960s onwards, predominantly conditioned by the first televised broadcasts of alpine skiing. The myth was certainly not invented ex nihilo by television, as its origins go back to the seventeenth century, well before the age of television. Rather, in the last few decades, it has been put on a national pedestal as a re-invented, re-created or revived tradition. Competitive alpine skiing’s association with television and its related projects (such as popular prize-giving television shows promoting the ski industry) was of such crucial importance that today many contemporary Slovenians imagine themselves as members of a unique skiing nation.

In late socialist Slovenia, 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 and distinctions, such as ‘Slovenians embody individualism’ (behind this is the reference to the monoethnic nature of sports, such as skiing and gymnastics), ‘southern Balkan brothers are better in collective sports’ (here is the reference to pluriethnic sports, among them soccer, basketball, handball, and other popular collective sports), paved the way from the pre-Yugoslav and Yugoslav sporting body to the emancipated Slovenian skiing identity. Given the absence or bad results, respectively, of skiers from other parts of Yugoslavia, and taking into account the successes of the Slovenian ones, the Slovenian media and public embraced the belief that skiing talent must be an ethnically, i.e. genetically determined, feature of the nation itself. The Slovenian superiority in competitive skiing was fully confirmed on the international level. In being turned into a characteristic national feature, perceived as naturally inherent to all Slovenians, skiing was ultimately exploited by the _Blut und Boden_ ideology. The national distinctiveness of Slovenian culture found additional argument for its social necessity as early political tensions appeared in the wake of Tito’s death, and even more so in the years that followed.

National sports narratives are often imbued with contradictions. Although many differences can be noted by comparing the Slovenian and the Canadian cases, there are two ironies worth mention. The first irony of the Canadian identification with hockey resides in the fact that, probably for economic reasons, professional hockey’s venues are located for the most part in U.S. cities and not in Canadian cities. As indicated by Gruneau and Whitson (1993), this phenomenon has less to do with an evolving Canadianness than with imperatives associated with selling hockey to a non-Canadian audience. The second irony is that this Americanisation of the Canadian imaginary is perhaps what makes hockey an even more quintessentially Canadian product. In the Slovenian case, the first irony is related to the fact that the Slovenians cannot even begin to compete with the success of other nations in professional competitive skiing. For instance, Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, Sweden and Norway have been very successful at World Ski Cup races, indeed some of these countries can count their wins in hundreds. The second irony is that the successes of other nations, which usually correspond to the decrease or the lack of Slovenian ski wins, always fortify nationalistic mechanisms which turn sport’s disadvantage into the nation’s advantage with an 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 the matter of the
innate talent of Slovenians for skiing and not only the matter of forcibly learned competitive skills. This attitude is explicitly shown in the words of one regular consumer of ski telecasts:

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 what 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.

The reference to the blood and soil ideology in this explanation, through its argument that Slovenian skiing exists by nature and not by training, is clear. This biologically founded ideology takes skiing as the genetic feature in/of the nation.

Due to all this, a national sport can be roughly defined as a sport which is considered to be a culturally intrinsic part of a particular country or national milieu. Although it is difficult to find official parameters towards defining why skiing in Slovenia is perceived as the national sport, some general characteristics can be elucidated which explain why the Slovenians feel attached, in a such special way, to this particular sport. Firstly, the rules and objectives of skiing are, in opposition to the demanding nature of its bodily technique, so simple that they can be easily comprehended. When watched on television, an array of cameras offer the audience at home a coherent and dramatic view of skiing events, a perspective that would not be available to those on the ground. Herein perhaps lies part of the answer to why skiing became extremely popular just at the moment when it became televised. Secondly, skiing is widely practiced in Slovenia as it is seen as the best recreational pastime for most Slovenians in the winter. Or, if I quote one 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 Kri•aj or Rok Petroviè. Roughly said, their professional careers and successes began with this simple ‘let’s go ski’ when they were children. … Look at the Croatian family Kosteliæ today, it is the same principle. It’s all about the family. You see, the father as the first trainer.

This statement indicates how deeply skiing is rooted in the collective consciousness, and how vigorously it is determined by a national ideology that teaches that the Slovenians are born skiers. If in Brazil football is considered the national obsession and the ‘opium of the Brazilian people’ (Lever 1969), then in Slovenia skiing is considered the national virtue.6

Thirdly, probably the most reasonable explanation for the eminent social position of skiing is its long-term presence on the Slovenian soil and its privileged role in Slovenian nationalist processes. Besides having a long history of popularity, throughout the second half of the twentieth century skiing has been tremendously reinforced by the rise of new media, particularly by the development of television technology, radio and the rise of the press. However, national sporting identities are articulated and encoded as constantly changing and self-re-creating cultural practices. The global game of football is probably the best example that all national sports – as this particular sport is treated as national in so many countries – are not necessarily indigenous practices. However, in many countries, where this sport is perceived as national, there can be found tendencies to present it as indigenous and authentic. In the case of (alpine) skiing, there are at least three nations, the Slovenians, the Austrians and the Norwegians, which share similar pretensions to treat it as their own indigenous sport.

When exploring national sports and questions such as how such kinds of sports came to be so intimately connected with the nation, we have to bear in mind an idea which is one of the constitutive elements in creating national sports. This is the notion of national purity and non-hybridism of national sports. All national sports are shown to be profoundly ideological formations, whose artificiality is exactly matched by their drive to affirm their supposedly organic purity. It can be established that people living on the territory of today’s Slovenia developed their own sense of particular ethnic, cultural and national identity. We could say that this skiing 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 of belonging and identity.
Slovenia’s National Sport as Television’s Concern

Nations, sports and the media are today deeply intertwined, as sports and media provide a venue for symbolic competition between nations. Arguably, this is why the sports that are not successful in the international arena cannot function successfully either as the nodes of national identification. The media vitally urges processes of collective imagining. Mediated sport programmes reproduce dominant ideologies in nations, and confirm the link between the televised sports narrations and national imaginations. Furthermore, mediated sports focus substantially on national unity and identity, championing the dominant values, ideals, and resources of the nations in which they originate. Media and sports are two powerful cultural forces which corroborate intensive national imaginations and identifications. Television, particularly in its relentless drive to accumulate national audiences, has increasingly colonised modern sporting cultures globally. Television is today probably one of the most effective places where mediated ideologies and identities of all kinds are imposed, contested and negotiated. Following this, televised sports broadcasts are a means which enable the transmission of sporting idols, spectacles, and sportsmen’s ‘battles for homeland’ into people’s homes.

In the Alpine countries of Europe and in Scandinavia, skiing has been developed as a tremendously significant and distinctive televised sport. According to Otmar Weiss, half of Austria’s tourism is based on alpine skiing (1997:571). The central role of skiing, particularly of the Nordic type, in Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish society is well noted (Sörlin 1995). Due to these examples, the Slovenian case is maybe less known but certainly not insignificant and negligible. Although this article does not benefit from the employment of some comparative elements, for example comparison with skiing broadcasts in Austria or Scandinavian countries, it does examine some important characteristics about Slovenia, such as a new small state that seeks to find its place in the world, the previous position of a minority nation seeking to establish a role within the multinational Yugoslavia, and ways that national narratives are constructed.

From the very early televised skiing broadcasts in the 1960s, alpine skiing telecasts have maintained a prominent position within the Slovenian sports programming schedule. When interviewing a former director of alpine skiing broadcasting on Slovenian television, he agreed that:
… alpine skiing telecasts occupied a special position in the history of the Slovenian TV sports broadcasting, but also in the history of the Slovenian live TV broadcasting. I, as someone who was deeply involved in this business, I can confirm that television has, without a doubt, significantly helped transform alpine skiing into a national sport. I would venture to say that television decisively accelerated the act of identification … you know, when watching alpine skiing telecast, each Slovenian viewer thought like this: ‘Even I could do this better than Kri•aj or Stenmark’. … Broadly speaking, alpine skiing and TV went hand in hand together till today. Look, the image you and I have on competitive alpine skiing is exactly the one which was imposed by TV picture. … I as TV sport coverage director still perceive live TV coverage of alpine skiing as a synonym of each and every ‘live TV broadcasting’ which is still the only true essence of television.

In Slovenia, the earliest alpine skiing telecasts are connected to the early years of Slovenian national television. Furthermore, televised alpine skiing competitions and events (broadcast live or taped and replayed in the news) were among the first forms of representing sports on television in Slovenia. In this context, the Slovenian television team eagerly followed the well-established Austrian television channel ORF (Österreichisches Fernsehen), the pioneer of direct alpine skiing telecasts. Considered one of the leading television channels in the world, many sports experts still recognise it as the producer of the highest-quality televised alpine skiing broadcasts (Hvala 2001). Interestingly, broadcasts of skiing races were pioneering projects on both Slovenian and Austrian sports television. In the Austrian case, this was the broadcast of the 1958 World Championship in alpine skiing disciplines in Bad Gastein, which represented a true revolution in winter sports television with the use of five cameras. In the Slovenian case, this was the broadcast of three-day ski jumping competitions performed in the Planica Valley (Bergant 1993:40–41), which, during Yugoslavia’s time and after, have had a strong mobilising effect on the Slovenians. Beno Hvala, the director of Slovenian alpine skiing television broadcasts, remembers those times and the first international FIS competition for the Vitranc Cup – Slovenian skiing polygon incorporated in Alpine FIS World Cup – from Kranjska Gora as follows:
In 1961, we, the Slovenians presented ourselves to the big wide world with the first Eurovision broadcast from the then Yugoslavia. Planica was much more important than the ski-runs. It had always had the prime position. … We finally gathered enough technical means and self-taught knowledge to promote Vitranc without any foreign help, in a direct broadcast across the entire Europe from the Budinek’s shed. … For direct broadcasting we were able to place four cameras along the giant-slalom run. Because of unsuitable optics on the cameras, the skiers looked like ants. Think how handy this would be today … small skiers and big advertisements (Hvala 2001).

Due to this, telecasts of skiing and ski jumping were a kind of ‘laboratories’ of the technological progression of Slovenian television as an institution. Alpine skiing races were often used for testing new foreign or home-made technical and realisation innovations. The birth of televised sports in Slovenia is therefore inevitably connected with first broadcasts of skiing. Furthermore, televised alpine skiing played an important role in the development of this particular sport. In more precise terms, it created a potential television and consumer audience. For example, it contributed to a greater interest in alpine skiing among the people; the production of national sporting heroes; the understanding of visiting ski resorts as a synonym for spending winter holidays; and the commercialisation of winter sports, for example, through Elan, the major and nationally-valued Slovenian producer of skis, which was instrumental, although not exclusively responsible, for the masses of Slovenian skiers and their national imaginings. In brief, television created a powerful dialectic of technology and ideology. In a turbulent late Yugoslav political reality, skiing not only kept a privileged position in the national imagination of Slovenianess, but growing international successes of Slovenian skiers during the 1980s gave it epic proportions. Alpine skiers, such as Bojan Kri•aj, Mateja Svet, Boris Strel, Rok Petroviè, Jure Franko and Nataša Bokal were the athletes who, with 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, materialised the myth of skiing as the Slovenian national sport. Their astonishing accomplishments were promptly transformed by radio broadcasting, press, and particularly by television into the matter of national pride and of the nation’s cohesion, which reminded of the important social position of skiing (Dnevnik 1984; Mal 1983; Delo 1987). During the 1980s, Kri•aj and Svet became Slovenian as well as Yugoslav heroes beyond all
comparison. Kri•aj 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 1980s, she was one of the main opponents of the brilliant and infallible Swiss skier Vreni Schneider (Kancler 1987). Both were also awarded the title ‘Best Yugoslav Athlete’. One ski fan, one of my informants, 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 couches in front of TV sets during this event. After these Olympic Games, our southern Balkan brothers related us to skiing even more.

No doubt, television in socialist Yugoslavia was conceived as crucial propaganda aimed at mobilising masses for the construction of socialism and the defense of a multinational homeland. So, it took a visible part in this nationalisation process of the public sphere and the televised sports audience. 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 instead of Yugoslavian, even though they were still accomplished under the flag of Yugoslavia. Thus, after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia was faced with the 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 Slovenian nation. Thus, the nation-building process mobilised skiing as the ‘real Slovenian thing’. In other words, a new country needed a positive self-image and a positive national story, and, in that respect, skiing provided a perfect ingredient in the Slovenian national consciousness.

The 1992 Winter Olympics were the first at which the Slovenian skiers competed as a team of an independent Slovenia. The presence of the Slovenian skiers at this highly recognisable international sporting event was represented in the Slovenian press, as well as in televised sports broadcasts, 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 revitalisation 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 working hand in hand for the new social reality labeled as the ‘Slovenian transition’.

Post-socialist Slovenian professional skiers who represented, after the glorification of the skiing story in the 1980s, a new wave of ‘Slovenian hope and success’. This fitted perfectly with the idea of a ‘small’ and ‘endangered nation’, once pertaining to the former Yugoslavia, was now 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’, respectively, 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, even during the Yugoslavian era, been treated as national sporting successes, became a significant catalyst in constructing the new nation-state identity.

**Skiing Broadcasts as Performances of Illustrated Nation**

The purpose of televised sports is that it is constructed by television producers as the only real sport. National television services have played a significant role in these social processes. The dynamics, dramaturgy, attractiveness, tradition, and rich amateurish background of alpine skiing were among the conditions which have made this sport so interesting for television broadcasting, which notably contributed to the development of this sport as such, as well as to the formation of audiences’ attitudes toward televised alpine skiing. The privilege in reproducing national sporting folklores, myths and identities, respectively, in the name of the entire nation is granted, among others, to television commentators and telecasters.

In our case, examples of visual evidence, such as televised national landscapes, mountains, slopes and sceneries, are an important part of regular verbal folklore of Slovenian alpine skiing telecasts. As World Ski Cup races took place in Slovenia, such ‘tacit knowledge’ could have reached higher visibility in accompanying television commentaries by verbal repletion and picturesque repetition. The top-level skiers appear as uncontested signifiers of Slovenianness. This national proliferation of ‘typical Slovenian attributes’ is confirmed every year when the World Ski Cup visits Slovenian Kranjska Gora, the regular skiing scene for men’s giant slalom and slalom. These are
two central *mediasports events* taking place in the prestigious pre- or post-New-Year’s period, the ‘prime time’ of the ski season. In this context, Slovenian television viewers attend the following relatively stabilised ritual: the host broadcaster of the events is the Slovenian National TV with many other foreign and worldwide television services as ‘client’ broadcasters being tuned to its picture. Twenty minutes before the start of the race, the TVS 2 tunes to the Eurovision program, and after that immediately starts transmitting the promotional spot of the Slovenian landscape: beginning with images of the prestigious tourist destination town Bled, and its lake with the island sitting in its middle, images of the highest Slovenian mountain peak Triglav, scenic beauties of the Julian Alps, images of the town of Lipica, the origin of the world-famous thoroughbred white horses (better known under the Germanised name ‘Lipizzaner’, perceived by the Slovenian public as the result of an intentional and long-continued historical process of Austrian appropriation having taken place already from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), images of the Slovenian Adriatic coast, images of the Planica Valley (the very symbol of the Slovenian ski jumping boasting the biggest ski jump in the world), images of the alpine ski resort Kranjska Gora with the hilly ski trails of the Vitranc Hill, images of the flat land of Pannonia, images of the Postojna Cave, one of the breathtaking Karst wonders, etc.). All these landscapes transformed into telescapes represent national symbols and not only physical geography or pure nature. These images were sent to more than thirty television stations all over the world. During the fluid demonstration of national symbols the commentator Igor Evgen Bergant was incessantly commenting on these Slovenia’s wonders:

I’m sure this afternoon we are going to be the witnesses of yet another successful Slovenian day in alpine skiing. The Slovenians can truly be proud of our beautiful country. And not only that: we can truly be proud of our beautiful ski centre Kranjska Gora, where the next skiing race for the World Ski Cup is going to take place today (Bergant commenting men’s slalom race in Kranjska Gora on TVS 2, December 21, 1999).

Bergant also stressed that ‘we’ truly have to be proud of ‘our beautiful homeland’, which represents us through such elite sports events all over the world. He furthermore emphasized that the Slovenian viewers were, just like Jure Košir, Mitja Kunc, Rene Mlekuš, and other Slovenian skiers, equally participating in this competition. Consequently, the individuals’ predisposition to skiing was transformed into the typical characteristic common to all members of the nation (Pušnik 1999:802-803). Furthermore, professional
skiers became the keepers of the typical Slovenianness itself (in spite of the fact that the skiers themselves must have had great difficulties in understanding such abstract categories and missions imposed on them) and the media helped preserve this image. Such a media-driven pretext constitutes the way in which television spectators are engaged in constructing for themselves a solid image of a sporting (skiing) nation and are aware of the fact that they, also, form part of it. This kind of commentary invites the viewers into the presenter’s discourse, and thus builds an entrance into the domestic routines of the television audience through nationally shared experience. According to Starc (2004), such nationalization of television audiences is often not strictly intentional. More precisely, telecasters usually do not project national features into the skiers’ successes because they want to constitute the community. They refer to the nation and its ingredients because they automatically assume that the television viewers perceive themselves in terms of national affiliation. Often they do not invent but only reproduce what already exists in a community.

Conclusions

I hope that this paper elucidates some interesting aspects and insights into the peculiarity and specificity of Slovenian space 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 which promote social phenomena that are perceived as purely natural, organic or national. Skiing television broadcasts thus vitally contributed to the realisation of this myth in a reproductive way by visualising it in live, as they have played the crucial role in transforming Slovenian traditional skiing through its modern competitive televised version into the national sport. Therefore, alpine skiing became perceived as a distinctive television sport. In the commentary particularly, Slovenian skiers’ successes have figured mostly around the national performative discourse about Slovenia as a young, little and independent country which has achieved success. So, televised skiing imbued with enormous national symbolism also played an important role in the processes of Slovenian separation from Yugoslavia. However, in Slovenia, alpine skiing has become the national sport not so much 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 nationalised predominantly through the purist ideology which presented skiing as a most purely and autochthonous Slovenian sport and as the natural embodiment of Slovenian national
identity. Consequently, scores of Slovenian professional skiers contributed to the economic status of alpine skiing by attracting more financial support and attention from the state. To conclude, 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. It has been prone to be perceived as pure, authentic, and indigenous Slovenian sporting practice. Television has provided full support in this process.

Notes

1 For a discussion about the construction and representations of host identity issues see Blain et al., particularly the section on the construction of identity of Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain as Olympic host in 1992 (1993:156-199). 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 is also recommended.

2 All the examples of live television transmissions of the contests, which took place in the World Ski Cup of alpine skiing, were broadcasted by the second channel of Slovenian national television (TVS 2). The collected material comprises television records from winter seasons 1999/2000, 2000/2001, 2001/2002, and 2002/2003. More than 100 telecasts observed and about thirty-four telecasts of alpine skiing have been analyzed in detail. The empirical material includes all ski disciplines for both men and women (slalom, giant slalom, super G, downhill, and alpine combined).

3 When programming my fieldwork, I was essentially consulted by the texts of fundamental relevance in the field of methodology and epistemology of social anthropology (Sanjek 1990; James et al. 1997; Ingold 1996:sections 1-9, 99-146, 147-198; Bernard 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Leach 1982:24-41).

4 In the nineteenth century, Carniola was the region of constitutive importance for creating the Slovenian national territory.

5 The Kostelciæ family became in the end of the 1990s a famous winter sport family. Janica Kostelciæ is a retired female skier, considered (by winning a total of 30 races, four Olympic gold medals and five World Champ’s gold medals in alpine skiing in the period 1999-2006) one of the greatest female skiers of all time. Her father Ante Kostelciæ was also her trainer and her brother Ivica Kostelciæ is a renowned skier in his own right. However, at the beginning the Kostelciæ family trained professional skiing mostly within the Slovenian Ski Team and under the control of Slovenian trainers as Croatia did not have its own ski team. Because of this some Slovenian journalists and sports experts like to stress the role that Slovenian skiing played for the success of Croatian family.

6 On virtue and grace in sport see John Carroll (1986:91-98).

7 On television as particular technology, transmitter of ideology, cultural form and producer of nationwide audiences, see the following works: Fiske and Hartley 1978; Morley and Brunsdon 1978; Morley 1991; Williams 1990.

8 This set of television shots illustrating national(ised) landscapes somewhat fits the alpine skiing as prominent ‘outdoor sport’. After consulting the work of John Bale (1994) regarding ‘landscapes of sport’, I would argue that landscapes of alpine skiing are particularly related to rural and less to urban sportscapes.
References


Promotional material for the 41st Vitranc Cup, 21-22 December 2001, Ljubljana.


Vlado Kotnik: Skiing Nation: Towards an Anthropology of Slovenia's National Sport