



An American in Davos

8th Annual Masters International Davos Meeting

There is an old adage that it is not what you know but whom you know that really counts. Some years ago, I met Patrick Kelly while speed skating at the Olympic Oval in Lake Placid. Last year he told me about his plans to organize a European Speed Skating Tour which would begin in Davos. Since I turn 60 this year, I decided to indulge myself and join his Tour. For me the experience was as though I had died and gone to heaven. And Davos was the pearly gate.



I have only been competitively speed skating for two years, so I had a lot to learn and a lot of room to improve. I had never stretched a day in my life; so the experience of stretching and bending each morning with Patrick and his wife, Karen, who is a certified Pilates instructor, at our hotel was a first. We skated at the rink in Davos for the first time on Thursday. I didn't tie my laces properly and promptly blistered my inside right heel and the outside metatarsal protusion of my left foot. So Patrick taught me how to tie my skates.

On the ice, he worked on my cross-overs and accelerations, and no doubt I was beginning to improve as a skater. Then Patrick measured the rock of my blades and decided that their unevenness would diminish my performance. He spent three hours refining the rock Friday evening before the races.



Saturday dawned crisp and clear. Thursday's rain and Friday's warm temperatures may have conspired to thin the ice, but the Davos crew rose to the challenge and the ice was fine for racing. Although I felt a bit like a guppy in a goldfish pond as the only American, the friendliness of all the contestants and the American accents of many of the Dutch skaters made me feel almost at home. And I got to practice my rusty French.

For me, the racing was almost anticlimactic (I was disqualified in the 3000 for forgetting to change lanes even though I skated an extra 25 meters in what was then a personal best time). Watching Patrick Kelly fluidly coast to his second straight all-around Masters championship was gratifying. Watching Jan Bos and Jochem Uytehaage from the Netherlands fly around the rink was positively inspirational. Watching Karen Courtland Kelly gracefully practice her figures, spins, double toe loops and axels during the races made the experience pleasurable as well. And sitting outside in the sun in short sleeves in mid-January, to watch all this, transformed the whole experience into an Alice-in-Wonderland adventure. That this year's times may have been slower than last year's times didn't matter.



The races caused me to focus on skating, learning technique and improving my stamina. This was good. On the other hand, Davos is one of the ski capitals of the world, and because of the races I was discouraged from skiing. This was not good. Nevertheless I managed to ski Parsenn on Sunday after the races were over. Up high the snow conditions were perfectly skiable and the treeless alpine vistas incomparable.

Eating five-course gourmet meals every evening at our hotel was perhaps not the best way to prepare for races (and I, but not Patrick, indulged in wine to boot), but these meals, the rink and my late afternoon saunas a la Suisse made my stay in Davos truly memorable, to the point that I hope to return next year with my wife.

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