

***Respect for equipment



by Raymond Pittet,
columnist on the « Tribune de Lausanne »¹

When Marie-Thérèse Nadig set out on her Olympic slalom equipped with only one ski stick, people complained bitterly of bad luck. They could have given vent to their indignation towards her and the team officials.

Before the Games the Swiss delegation was somewhat scoffed at because it contained 57 officials for 63 athletes, and justification for such a massive presence was sought. Eight leaders for eight disciplines, the welfare men, the doctors, one president, one secretary, one press attaché, one treasurer, one representative of this, one representative of that—Swiss sport is so organised (National Physical Education Association, Swiss Olympic Committee, Federations, etc.) that everybody has to be satisfied, Uncle Tom Cobley and all.

“Keep calm!”

Well, all right, even if we are irritated by certain overwhelming presences while other able people working voluntarily throughout the year have to pay for a standing place in the crowd. But let us leave these inevitable changes in fortune and look at just one aspect of the problem—technical preparation. The fact that the handle of Marie-Thérèse Nadig’s ski stick came away in her hand just as she pushed off from the starting gate is proof of the thoughtlessness (as far as she is concerned) and incompetence of those who prepared her. The trainers, technical directors, equipment assistants who are in charge of our athletes are not there to comment on the events, to note with the public and journalists that “it went well” or “badly”. They are not there to say afterwards “Well, that’s sport!” They are not there to purse their lips and clench their fists, telling the champion thirty times over “Please, keep calm!”. They are there to put all the assets on the

side of those they are supposed to manage. They must therefore keep control of themselves, keep an eye on everything and see everything. Perhaps the handle of a ski stick which comes away is an extremely rare event. But it should be foreseen. The men responsible for placing the athlete in the best conditions are there to think of his place, to look at the minutest details.

The example of Anquetil

Jacques Anquetil is sometimes made fun of. Not too serious, a sound drinker and eater, Jacques is said to have achieved a brilliant career on account of his magnificent ability to catch up. But this is forgetting that Jacques Anquetil used to look after his equipment with jealous and unheard of attention—at the beginning of one leg of the Tour de France he delicately took off the little pieces of rubber from the tyres slightly worn by the road. “What are you doing?” “If you do a sprint finish, the friction of these little things can mean ten centimetres...”

Whose fault?

Pampered and mollicoddled, our champions finish up by hardly looking after their equipment any more and leaving it up to the technicians. That is a serious mistake. One of the prime qualities of a champion is not to start out on an Olympic run with a shoe or boot that hurts, a shirt that is too tight at the waist, a hockey stick with the binding coming off, a badly balanced bob. Respect for equipment is one of the qualities which shows that the champion “loves” his sport. The trainers’ duty is to watch over this almost maniacal passion and encourage it. Studs, running numbers, sticks, bindings, hats, everything contributes to victory. Not to know this and then to speak of bad luck afterwards is nowhere near good enough.

What would we say about a surgeon who botched an appendicitis, and explained: “I don’t quite know what happened, but the suture forceps were badly adjusted...” He would be up before the board.

The lesson is valid for the champions themselves. Because, as you will have guessed, there are some to whom such incidents never happen. And, as if by chance, they are the best.

R. P.

¹ Although this article was published by the « Tribune de Lausanne » on 23rd February 1976, it is still of current interest.