

# The Italian Experience

*By Alexander Lewis*

Upon our arrival in Martello, Italy, it seemed that the desolate backwater was not doing much to make us like it. We stepped out of the car into howling winds and icy temperatures. The trip was pretty good. On a whim, we had stopped at the Cross-country World Cup at Toblach-Dobbiaco where we immersed ourselves in the exciting atmosphere of European spectators.

We watched as the best of the best sprinted around the track including Norwegian cross-country legend, Petter Northug. Huge screens projected the televised race as helicopters buzzed overhead. We would have stayed longer but cold feet ensured we left after the male qualifying round.

Our accommodation was cosy, and with a bit of imagination, we were able to fabricate a wax room in the garage down below. We were lucky enough to have Dan's family with us this week so we enjoyed warm, home-cooked meals. All was good – except for the towels, which had a texture rivalling that of sandpaper!

Our official training was held in blizzard-like conditions and strong gusts spat snow in our faces whilst knocking our bullets out of the bull.

We met up with fellow Australians Hamish Roberts and Gabriel Cigana who were also racing. As biathlete Lucy Glanville had joined us for the week, the Australian contingent consisted of six – quite a sizable representation for a small nation.

## **Race 1: 7.5 km Sprint**

Before we knew it, race day had arrived and we travelled the treacherous road to the range. Australia was allocated lane 29 – no surprise there – and after testing skis, we sighted in.

*Below: Damon Morton starts the pursuit, finishing 8<sup>th</sup>.*

Everything felt good, but little to our knowledge; we had just acquired a significant disadvantage.

We started the race with intervals of twenty seconds in between each athlete. I was bib number 49 so did not start till over twenty minutes after the first starter.

The first lap's skiing felt good, I even overtook a few people. I fell in behind a tall Austrian boy who was a little faster than me and matched his rhythm. It was like an invisible rope was connected behind him, dragging me along. I entered the range having skied the first lap in quite a respectable time.



I checked the wind flags (which were indicating quite a different speed and direction than from the ones down the end that we zeroed) and adjusted my sights.

I set up into position smoothly and settled into the shots well – only to miss all five! I was tremendously confused as I left the range – they all felt like they should have hit. As I skied the penalty loop a dizzying five times, all I could do was refocus and push the prone shoot out of my mind.

The next lap was harder. Not only physically, but mentally. I felt demoralised and found it hard to muster up the energy or motivation to go faster. I came into the range for standing.

I hit the first shot, a sigh of relief. But then, I missed the next three only hitting two out of five – disgraceful! I just could not understand what was happening. Eight penalties all up was very uncharacteristic shooting for me, especially considering how well I was shooting the day before during official training.

I skied my time in the criminal loop and finished the course. I was pretty tired but certainly not alone. I remember vividly one of the boys coughing up blood as medics shoved tissues in his face. It turned out that I had gotten off lightly.

Also, I soon found out that I had not been the only one on our team to shoot eight penalties. Apparently, all my prone shots grouped in the same spot, the problem was this spot was just to the left of where they should have been. This was because the wind was coming from almost the opposite direction on the prone end of the range to the standing end, which was where we sighted in.

Sighting in where we did proved to be a huge disadvantage. Upon speaking to some Italian range officials, we found out that the wind actually spirals at the standing end of the range, causing miss leading flag readings and hugely affecting our bullets. According to them, Martell was the most difficult range in Europe to shoot at.

We shrugged it off, knowing that as a small nation there was no chance of being allocated a better lane. At least we had more of an idea of what to expect for the next day's pursuit.

## **Race 2: 10km Pursuit**

We woke up Sunday morning for the 10km pursuit event, refreshed and with renewed spirit. The weather was similar to the day before, except to our advantage, there was slightly less wind. I had seen pursuits on television before, but had never actually competed in one, so I was looking forward to the day's race.

A pursuit is an exciting biathlon event, held usually the day after a sprint, which involves the athletes starting the race at the time they finished behind during the previous day's race. For example, if I finished 22 seconds after the leader, I would start 22 seconds after them in the pursuit. The competitors literally head off in pursuit of the sprint's winner and due to the spontaneous nature of biathlon; one can easily gain over twenty places.

Due to my terrible results the day before, I was put into a mass start, which started five minutes after the leader left. To my disgust, I was given the bloodstained bib (number 43), from the day before. The splattered red covering the front gave more of

the impression that I was about to enter a gladiator arena than a biathlon event – and I was certainly in the right country for it!

There were four lanes, much like the ones used for cattle back home and we were all lined up, shivering in our lycra. A large digital clock ticked in view of the competitors. As soon as they saw their time, they would begin the race. To an uneducated onlooker, it would seem that everyone was going off at random due to the closeness of the times.

By the time the digital reading reached five minutes, there were about a dozen of us left and in a tangle of poles and skis, we sped fourth from the chute. I worked my way into the middle of the pack, free skating with my poles in the air so as to avoid breaking them but luckily by the time we reached the flat, everyone had spread out a little.

It felt as if I was in the middle of a conga line, with everyone skiing the ‘double dance’ technique. We powered up the hill, coaches and officials from all different teams screaming at their athletes to go faster. By that time, the pack had split into two and I managed to maintain a position in the middle of the first.

We came into the range at a pace well within my limits. I shot two penalties, but so did the two guys next to me so I raced them into the penalty loop. The course then swung out of the range and rounded up a steep hill crawling with spectators. On the descent, I picked up a lot of speed so it was a miracle that I heard Isabel Walker’s directions to change my sights.

“Down one, right two” became my mantra as I skied the next lap. I felt relieved because I knew I would shoot well on the next prone shoot. I stayed with an Italian and Slovenian; occasionally I would make a break for it and pass them, only to slip back behind on the up hill.

It was not long before I reached the range again – the loops were shorter than the day before. I came into shoot prone, ensuring my position was stable and I was breathing correctly. I shot clean, taking extra care to hit the last one and to my relief was able to ski right past the penalty loop and continue on with the course.

To my dismay, the Italian had shot clean too! I followed him up and around the hill, taking note of all the people struggling around the penalty loop I had passed. This was some consolation, and certainly hammered into me the importance of accuracy.

The next loop was hard. I wanted to keep up the pace my Italian friend was maintaining yet knew that I had standing next. I wanted to avoid feeling too fatigued so I could actually hit the targets.

I came in too quickly and missed three! Luckily, I was not the only one so I was still in the race. I came into the penalty loop and to my surprise; fellow Australian Hamish was doing time. He had started a few minutes ahead of me and some how I had caught up!

He left the ring just before me and I tried to keep up with him as he rounded the stadium. Luckily, my skis were fast and I gained on him for the first half of the course (which was mostly flat and down hill). When we reached the famous hill, I put in extra effort to try and catch up to the Slovenian he had just passed. I managed to overtake

the Slovenian just past the bottom – I could tell he was hurting – and this time, took it a lot slower into the range.

I skied into my lane for my final shoot – right next to Hamish! I was quick to my first shot, and managed to hit. Frustratingly, I squeezed the next two a bit low. I ended up missing three again and followed Hamish into the loop.

He had shot one better than me so that was the last I saw of him until the finish, likewise with the Italian. By this stage I was feeling really annoyed with myself and was practically stalling up the knoll in the stadium as I lacked energy and motivation.

The long down hill skate gave me time to refocus and collect myself to finish the race. I formulated a plan: to conserve my upper body for the rest of the downward gradient and push really hard over the hills.

I reached the slope and with all my conserves, jump-skated. I was gaining slightly on a group of skiers who were skiing over the top. There were no cheers for me as I pushed through, quite rude considering I yelled encouragement to foreigners when they were racing! I philosophically shrugged it off as again, a small nation's burden.

I came through to the stadium to ski the hill one last time. Cameron, my coach was shouting something at me. I turned around and saw an athlete, with a bib number substantially lower than mine, gaining fast. My arms and legs were like jelly; all I could do was maintain my tempo and hoped that I reached the finish first.

I knew if I could stay in front to the top of the rise, he wouldn't be able to catch me on the downward run (provided I did not fall!). I felt him on my quarter, and he began his move to pass.

Somehow, I managed to muster some strength out of nowhere and I sprinted to the top, regaining my lead. All I had to do now was stay upright. I was fast approaching the corner, which had been washed out. The man shovelling snow onto the apex jumped out of the way just in time as I skated around it.

I rounded the last bend with contempt and glanced back, luckily he had fallen behind again and with the finish line 50 metres ahead, I sprinted.

I crossed the line in 33<sup>rd</sup> place, having gained ten places during the race. I fell to a heaving heap onto the snow. Even though it was not the greatest result, I felt a huge swell of satisfaction. It had been my best race so far and I had learnt heaps from it.

I was glad to hear that these races sported the toughest competition that we would compete in this trip. The winners of these events would most likely be the winners of IBU cups in a few years time as the only members left in the sport in my age group over here, are the serious ones.

Despite being sixteen, I am still only at Primary School level in terms of development within the sport. This highlights the importance of this trip to me as I now have a vision of where I stand in relation to where I need to be and how I can go about getting there. I can see the next twelve months being packed with training as I move closer towards my goal of making World Youth Juniors in January, 2013.