

УДК 796.922.093,3

## ANALYSIS OF EMERGENCE PREREQUISITES AND COMPETITIVE ACTIVITY OF VISMA SKI CLASSICS MARATHONS

Andrii Kazmiruk<sup>1</sup>, Olexandr Chenikalo<sup>1</sup>, Olha Zinkiv<sup>1</sup>, Yurii Liubizhanin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ivan Boberskyi Lviv State University of Physical Culture, Lviv, Ukraine, andriy.kazmiruk84@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.29038/2220-7481-2022-03-77-83>

### Abstracts

The article highlights the historical aspects of the formation, features and prerequisites for the emergence of new disciplines in ski racing on the example of the Visma Ski Classics. **Purpose of the Research** is to analyze the reasons for the emergence and features of the competitive activity of Visma Ski Classics. **Stuff and Methods of the Research.** Achieving the goal was ensured by using a number of general scientific research methods. In particular, the analysis and synthesis of theoretical data was chosen because they allowed to describe a relatively wide range of issues in a more diverse way. The information relating to various aspects of the preconditions for the emergence of Visma Ski Classics has been taken into account. **Results of the Research.** Based on a detailed analysis of scientific and methodological sources and available information on the Internet, it was established that Visma Ski Marathon was based on the stages of the Tour de Ski multi-day skiing competition. The basis for which, in its turn, were multi-day cycling competitions, namely Tour de France. This is a positive component in the development and popularization of ski racing, because it, like most winter sports, is a conservative sport. The modern world requires dynamic changes; so many commercial starts began to appear. One of them is a series of Visma Ski Classics. The article features 12-season history of the marathons, the peculiarities of rules and regulations and highlights the events of the last season, namely the weather conditions, Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine and how it affected the course of the competitions. **Findings.** On the whole, authors view Visma Ski Classics marathons as a positive trend in the development of cross-country skiing as they enable wide range of people to enjoy this kind of sport.

**Key words:** ski races, cross-country skiing, competition, athletes.

**Андрій Казмірук, Олександр Ченікало, Ольга Зінків, Юрій Любіжанін. Аналіз умов виникнення та змагальної діяльності лижних марафонів Visma Ski Classics.** У статті висвітлено історичні аспекти становлення, особливості та передумови появи нових дисциплін у лижних перегонах на прикладі марафонів Visma Ski Classics. **Мета роботи** – проаналізувати причини виникнення та особливості змагальної діяльності лижних марафонів Visma Ski Classics. **Матеріали й методи.** Досягнення мети забезпечувалося використанням низки загальнонаукових методів дослідження. Зокрема, аналіз та узагальнення теоретичних даних обрано тому, що це дало змогу більш різноманітно описати відносно широке коло питань. Ми врахували інформацію джерел, які стосувалися різних аспектів передумов виникнення лижних марафонів Visma Ski Classics. **Результати.** На основі детального аналізу науково-методичних джерел і наявної інформації в мережі «Інтернет» встановлено, що в основу марафону Visma Ski Classics покладено етапи багатоденних лижних змагань Tour de Ski, основою для яких стали багатоденні велозмагання, а саме Тур де Франс. Саме це є позитивною складовою частиною в розвитку й популяризації лижних перегонів, адже вони, як і більшість зимових видів, є консервативним видом спорту. Сучасний світ вимагає динамічних змін, тому стало з'являтися багато комерційних стартів. Серед них – серія лижних марафонів Visma Ski Classics. У статті йдеться про 12-сезонну історію марафонів, особливості правил і норм та висвітлюються події останнього сезону, а саме: погодні умови, пандемія Covid і війна в Україні та як це вплинуло на хід змагань. **Висновки.** Загалом, ми вважаємо марафони Visma Ski Classics позитивною тенденцією розвитку лижних перегонів, оскільки вони дають змогу захоплюватися цим видом спорту широкому колу людей.

**Ключові слова:** лижні перегони, лижний спорт, змагання, спортсмени.

**Introduction.** Cross-country skiing is a winter activity that unites all generations. The first steps on skis can be made at the age of 2-3 years and can last a lifetime. On the other hand, cross-country skiing has shifted from entertainment to serious sports and is included in the program of the Winter Olympics, as well as the World Championships and World Cup stages. The International Ski Federation (FIS) was founded in 1924 and unites 111 national ski associations [6].

At the beginning of the 19th century, the world's first ski association was established. A bit later, the first ski club was set up in Finland, after which such clubs appeared in many countries across Europe, America and Asia. By the end of the century, cross-country skiing competitions began to be held in almost all countries of the world. Skiing as a sport was also included in the program of the first Winter Olympics in 1924 in Chamonix (France). Competitions for women began to be held only at the 1952 Olympic Games in Oslo [2, 6].

In 1925, the former Czechoslovakia hosted the first World Ski Championship, with only two distances of 18 km and 50 km in the classic style. This continued until 1933, and only then was the 4x10km relay introduced into the competition program for the first time. From the middle of the 20th century the World Cup began to develop dynamically, expanding its geography and competitive disciplines. For the first time outside Europe, the World Cup was held in 1950 in the United States. Women first won the right to compete in Falun (Sweden) in 1954. The 1993 World Championship marked an innovation – the first 15 km men's and 10 km women's pursuit races were held. In 2001 individual sprint races were included in the competition program for the first time. The World Championship in Oberstdorf, Germany (2005) was marked by men's and women's team sprint competitions, and in 2007 the competition moved from Europe to Sapporo, Japan for the first time [4].

The modern world requires transformations of conservative kinds of sports, including skiing. This led to a new turn in the development of commercial launches.

The last major innovations in the calendar of cross-country skiing starts were the multi-day Tour de Ski race and the Visma Ski Classics marathon series. Road cycling became the basis for the new formats of cross-country skiing competitions. Therefore, the Tour de Ski, with its original idea, has become, in fact, an addition to the calendar of the World Cup in cross-country skiing. But the organizers of Visma Ski Classics, in our opinion, went much further, and created a model of professional skiing competitions [13].

Tour de Ski (TdS) consists of 7 or 8 stages: each stage lasts one day; an athlete must complete the stage so that his time is registered and summed up. In general, women, as of 2020, covered 62 km, men – up to 90 km. Winners are determined in the following nominations: general classification – the lowest total time of all stages, sprint test - according to the sprint points scored [10].

So, as we can assume from the abovementioned, the prerequisite for the creation of Visma Ski Classics was the multi-day ski competition Tour de Ski.

**The research objective:** to analyze the reasons for the emergence and features of the competitive activity of Visma Ski Classics marathons.

#### **Material & Methods**

Achievement of the goal was ensured by using a set of general scientific research methods.

In particular, the analysis and synthesis of theoretical data was chosen, as they allow a more diverse description of a relatively wide range of issues. Still, various sources of information were used to minimize subjective views and judgments, but primarily literary and documentary. At the same time, we used a critical approach to the choice of available sources of information. The formation of a range of literary sources took place after their search in the following databases: Scopus, SPORT Discus, Web of Science. We took into account the information from sources that were related to various aspects of preconditions for the emergence of ski marathons Visma Ski Classics. The following keywords were used in the search: *history, skiing, marathon, multi-day Tour de Ski*, as well as corresponding abbreviations and combinations. The temporal aspect for the appearance of information on certain topics was also taken into account. Similarly, there was a direct study of printed literary sources, including information from journal articles. Thus, more than 30 sources were selected, after which the last review was conducted and 13 sources of information were singled out, the material of which was processed using general scientific methods, including analysis and synthesis, systematization, generalization.

**Results.** The history of the Visma Ski Classics marathons is quite recent. A series of ski competitions began in 2011 and was called Ski Classics, and since the 2015 season Visma's sponsorship changed the name and logo [7].

Visma Ski Classics is a series of marathon competitions in cross-country skiing. The length of trails varies from 24 km to 90 km. These are separate commercial, non-official competitions held under the auspices of FIS and funded by numerous sponsors and partners.

The Visma Ski Classics concept is based on traditional ski marathons, most of which have a long history and are very popular. And this is not another copy of the Worldloppet series, which is not a competitive format, but a collection one (collecting medals of the participant). Worldloppet is designed for a wide range of ski enthusiasts who are not professional athletes. The main issue is “collecting” medals of finishers and stamps in the skier's passport.

The organizers of Visma Ski Classics occupied a competitive niche, which, in fact, remained vacant even despite the efforts of the International Ski Federation (FIS) to launch its own official marathon cup.

The main innovation and key feature in the Visma Ski Classics series is that it is a competition of professional ski teams rather than national ski federations, in which, as in professional cycling, the nationality of an athlete does not play a key role. The participating teams are funded by sponsors and they are formed, first of all, based on budgets and ambitions, and only then – based on the territorial affiliation of the team's office.

Visma Ski Classics combines the most famous and prestigious ski marathons in Europe: Vasaloppet, Marchialonga, Birkebeinerrennet and seven other marathons, as well as a qualifying race in Livigno, Italy. Also in the series of marathons is the so-called Grand Classic, which includes four main marathons: Marchialonga, Jizerská padesátka, Vasaloppet, Birkebeinerrennet. The Grand Classic Trophy, which is a part of the prize fund of the competition, is nominated for these competitions. Until this season, the Visma Ski Classics calendar included only marathons that were held in the classic style – hence the name of the series. The first turning point in Visma Ski Classics in the 2018/19 season was the iconic Swiss Engadine, which has been held in freestyle [12].

A few years ago, the organizers expanded to the east and Chinese Vasaloppet appeared in the calendar of the season, but this idea was not further developed and a year later Visma Ski Classics returned to its former, purely European borders. The main reason for refusing to expand was the unwillingness of teams to spend heavily on long-distance travel.

In fact, finances are the main deterrent to the development of Visma Ski Classics. There are no fees that can attract the main stars of skiing. This fact explains in general low audience interest, compared to the World Cup competitions in cross-country skiing.

We cannot determine the exact amount of prize money at Visma Ski Classics, as they are calculated on the basis of the amount of points per season. According to our assumptions, the maximum amount provided winning all categories of competitions is  $300,000 \times 0,32 = 96,000$  euros. The prize fund for the 2021/2022 season is 300,000 euros. The fund is divided into different categories of competition series among men and women. For example: there are competitions with a rating of 300 points, 200 points and 100 points. According to the amount of points scored, the athlete receives the appropriate T-shirt yellow (of the champion), pink (young, under 26), brown (leader in mountain starts), green (for maximum points in the sprint) and grey (for veterans, aged 44 or above) [3].

On the other hand, the winner of the World Cup in cross-country skiing 2020 /2021 earned 216,500,000 Swiss francs. One can see the difference indeed.

However, it should be noted that this format of competition is relatively “young”. Following the trend, we can predict that in a few seasons time the prize format will level off.

Also, the large volume of competitions and the length of the distance deter the world's elite from participating in these starts. Hence the difficulties with the sale of broadcasts and, consequently, with the attraction of new sponsors. And this is a kind of vicious circle, to break which is not so easy.

For the past two seasons, the stages of Visma Ski Classics have been broadcast on YouTube. But, unfortunately, many people do not want to search for broadcasts on the Internet because, firstly, few people know about these broadcasts, and secondly, only a very much in love with cross-country skiing viewer will be able to enjoy a long-lasting broadcast.

In cycling races, long-lasting broadcasts remain more spectacular, mostly due to interesting commentary and broadcasts on regular television channels. And they are really popular, despite the significant timing. We are sure that with high-quality Ukrainian commentary, ski marathons could become the highlight of Eurosport TV channel.

Visma Ski Classics are really worth watching. The organizers of the series skillfully experiment with formats and innovations. Traditionally, the season opens with a team qualifying race. The idea was borrowed from the “old but gold” Patrol Race, but in a modified format. First, a men's race is held in the split start mode:

the teams go to the distance one after another, and the final result of the team is recorded by the third participant finishing it. And then in the format of distance pursuit competitions. Women also compete in teams. Unfortunately, there are far fewer women in Visma Ski Classics than men, so the final result of the team is the finish time of its first participant.

Likewise cycling during the season in Visma Ski Classics bibs of the best sprinter, the best mountain racer and the best young rider are played. Points for sprinters and mountain stayers are played in the intermediate sections and this enriches the marathon competitions, creating a struggle throughout the distance, provoking breaks and skillfully twisting the result of the ski race.

The organizers put a lot of effort into the quality of the competition. Shooting is conducted not only from static cameras, but also from helicopters, snowmobiles and drones, which makes broadcasting more dynamic and spectacular.

A big plus for Visma Ski Classics is that the competitions of the series (in addition to qualifying starts) are held as a part of public ski marathons, which can be attended by anyone. And we are talking not only about thousands of amateurs, but also about elite skiers who periodically take part in Visma Ski Classics for one reason or another. For example, such professionals as: Petter Northug, Martin Johnsrud Sundby, Sergey Ustyugov, Maxim Vylegzhanin, Alexander Bezsmertnykh, Teresa Johaug. Many of them were noted in some races of Visma Ski Classics. Also, the most famous Ukrainian skier, Valentyna Shevchenko, took part in these races a number of times and even won the Jizerská padesátka stage in the Czech Republic. This season was not an exception as well: many stars of traditional cross-country skiing took part in the competitions. That was an interesting spectacle, definitely worth watching.

**Discussion.** Observing a decline in general interest to cross-country skiing, the Visma Ski Classics marathon series is “like a breath of fresh air” that can create a healthy variety and attract attention. The popularity of marathons included in Visma Ski Classics is quite high and has several thousand of participants. The most numerous was the ski marathon Vasaloppet 2021, which numbered 15,800,000 athletes, and the average number of such marathons ranges from 9 to 12 thousand.

Besides, we need to identify and discuss the main common and distinctive features of Visma Ski Classics from traditional competitions, which are included in the calendar of the World Cup stages in cross-country skiing, held under the auspices of the FIS.

Let's start with the World Cup. During the year, 9 stages are planned, which take place in different parts of Europe. Mostly the stage consists of 2, sometimes 3 starting days (they are called mini tours). Also there is the Tour de Ski (TdS). At each stage there are similar races in disciplines, for example, two distance races or two sprint, sometimes in mini-rounds; additionally relay competitions are included. Athletes show their result, for which they are awarded world ranking. There are also nominations for the Big and Small Crystal Globe. Big – for stayer disciplines, Small – for sprint, as well as red and yellow T-shirt of the leader. There is also a blue T-shirt – the best young skier (up to 23 years) [5].

All these competitions are subject to the rules of the International Ski Federation (FIS), which are often changed and adjusted [8]. The most significant changes that have been made in recent years are the limitation of the height of the equipment for the classic style: ski poles should be no higher than 83 % of the athlete's height. There also have been changes in the techniques applied i.e. on the ascended segments of the track, it is forbidden to use double poling.

Subsequently, they began to use slopes with a steeper ascent, but still left in the rules the recommended height differences (for Visma Ski Classics, these rules do not apply). Because all the elite athletes who participate in these competitions, run only in double poling technique, without the use of wax, despite the long duration of the competition. Height differences in these competitions (as shown in Fig.1) allow to move in this style, because as we know it is the fastest in the classic techniques [1].



Fig. 1. Vasaloppet Marathon [11]

Visma Ski Classics has developed its own competition rules. Scoring, nominations in disciplines, enrollment of teams in the competitive season, payment of entry fees, etc., which are added and adjusted according to each subsequent season.

During the season in Visma Ski Classics, as a rule, 9 stages are planned. Locations and some stages change every season. The peculiarities of these competitions are that the route mainly passes from city to city, i.e. from point A to point B (as shown in fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Vasaloppet Course [12]

This year, the organizing committee of the competition has increased the number of Pro Team competitions and changed the locations. So, this season 14 stages have been held. As we can see, the popularity of this event is growing, forcing the organizers of the competition to make changes and make additional sports starts in the calendar.

We would like to present a brief overview of the 12<sup>th</sup> season as it was full of unpredictable moments, e.g. Covid pandemic, weather conditions and war in Ukraine.

The highlight was the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> stage, where athletes had to overcome the distance in several laps. The 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> also presented some innovations, namely for the first time in the history of Visma Ski Classics there was an individual separate start. The 11 km long distance ran along a route that constantly went up with height intake of 400 m vertically. Another feature of this stage was its starting place in the highlands (the start was located at an altitude of 1900 m and finish at 2300 m). This has been a significant innovation in the competition program. After all, as we know, in the previous seasons, participants started and finished at an altitude that did not exceed 1500–1600 meters above sea level.

Another feature of the season was the exclusion of Russian and Belorussian athletes from competition calendar. Due to the war against Ukraine that Russia started on February 24, 2022 Russian and Belorussian (as Belorussia is the allies of Russia in this war) skiers were forbidden to take part in further marathons. On February 20, 2022 the 9<sup>th</sup> stage Tatu Marathon has finished and the next one – Vassaloppet (Sweden) was announced to be held without athletes of country-aggressor. This initiative was supported by the organisers of the 11<sup>th</sup> stage – Birkenbeinerrennet (Norway). The same did all the rest organisers of the competitions [9]. We want to note that the Visma Ski Classics organisers were very quick to respond to this outrageous war. Even quicker than the FIS itself.

The 13<sup>th</sup> stage of the marathon series – Resistadlopet (Norway) distinguished by very difficult weather conditions (severe wind and snowstorm), so skiers were forced to use diagonal stride, not typical for them (usually skiers overcome the distance in double poling technique). It is the weather that has made adjustments for the distance, we also want to remind you that this stage is considered to be one of the most difficult, as it includes a large set of vertical heights and long climbs. Skiers from the traditional ski races Andrew Musgrave and Martin Nyenget also took part in this stage of the competition. The latter was able to win in these difficult conditions and made an unexpected surprise for the fans of the marathon series. In our opinion, the emergence of traditional skiers was due to the fact that the World Cup season was over and nothing prevented them from participating in Visma Ski Classics marathons.

On the whole, the Visma Ski Classics marathons ended on April 9, 2022 with the 14<sup>th</sup> round of Ylläs-Levi (Finland).

Having discussed the characteristic features of the Visma Ski Classics marathons in general and the 12<sup>th</sup> season in particular, we are obliged to mention rules and regulations for officials and participants of the marathons.

The rules for Visma Ski Classics apply in addition to the FIS rules and must be followed by athletes. A person appointed as the director of Visma Ski Classics has the right to make changes to the rules and regulations of the competition. The competition director has the right to react accordingly in case of violation of the rules and is a member of the competition jury.

Athletes must be registered as members of the official Visma Ski Classics Pro Team no later than 48 hours before the start of the competition and have a valid FIS license to compete for Visma Ski Classics points and prize money.

Participation in Livigno Pro Team Tempo and Livigno Prologue competitions is mandatory for Pro Teams.

Athletes are prohibited from changing Pro Teams during the season, and Pro Teams are prohibited from deregistering athletes during the season. Athlete registered with the Pro Team receives a valid FIS license [8].

As we can see from the above information, the prerequisite for the emergence of Visma Ski Classics was the Tour de Ski (Tour de Ski). In its turn, the Tour de Ski (TdS) owes its origin to multi-day road cycling. If we talk about the rules, we can say with confidence that they are fully within commercial interests, not the interests of national teams or federations. Although the Visma Ski Classics marathons are held under the auspices of the International Ski Federation, but in fact it has virtually no impact on the organizers of the competition. We see that under certain conditions the organisers can change or adjust the rules of the competition, which is not the case in competitions controlled by the FIS. The FIS may want to take these competitions under its greater care, but fears that this could lead to negative consequences, especially for the federation itself.

It is hoped that all the efforts of the organizers of Visma Ski Classics to improve their offspring will lead to positive changes and increase audience interest. And, thus, we will be able to watch more interesting and diverse competitions in cross-country skiing.

**Conclusions.** The modern world requires active change from cross-country skiing. This in its turn led to a new round in the development of commercial starts, both under the auspices of the International Ski Federation (FIS) and without it.

Among the reasons for the emergence and development of Visma Ski Classics is the promotion of cross-country skiing, their accessibility for non-professional participants, the opportunity to feel the competitive spirit of a mass ski tournament.

The Visma Ski Classics ski marathon competitions were based on the stages of the Tour de Ski multi-day ski competitions. The Visma Ski Classics marathons are gaining more and more popularity every year, as evidenced by the increase in stages of this season from 9 to 14. On the whole, they have a positive effect on the development of cross-country skiing around the world.

#### References

1. Chenikalo, O., Kazmiruk, A., Stefanyshyn, O., Zinkiv, O. (2017). Osoblyvosti vykorystannya tekhniky odnochasnoho bez krokovoho klasychnoho lyzhnoho khodu v suchasnykh umovakh [Peculiarities of using the technique of simultaneous stepless classical style ski in modern time]. Proceedings from *Mizhnarodna konferentsiia «Problemy ta perspektyvy rozvytku nauky na pochatku III tysiacholittia» – International Conference “Problems and Prospects of Science Development at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium”*. H. Skovoroda Pereyaslav-Khmelnitskyi State Pedagogical University, 189–191 (in Ukrainian).
2. Chenikalo, O., Kazmiruk, A., Stefanyshyn, O., Zinkiv, O. (2016). Struktura ta rehlamentatsiya zmahal'noyi diyal'nosti v olimpiys'kykh dystsyplinakh z lyzhnykh perehoniv [The structure and regulation of competitive activity in the Olympic disciplines of cross-country skiing]. *Journal of Taras Shevchenko Chernihiv National Pedagogical University – Visnyk Chernihivskoho Natsionalnoho Pedahohichnoho Universytetu imeni Taras Shevchenka*, vol. 139(2), 279–282 (in Ukrainian).
3. Competitions (2021). Visma Ski Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.vismaskiclassics.com/pro-skiing/competition/> (in English).
4. Cross-country skiing (2021). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross-country\\_skiing\\_\(sport\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross-country_skiing_(sport)) (in English).
5. FIS Alpine Ski World Cup (2021). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIS\\_Alpine\\_Ski\\_World\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIS_Alpine_Ski_World_Cup) (in English).

6. Kazmiruk, A., Kovtsun, V., Zinkiv, O. (2021). Teoriya i metodyka lyzhnoho sportu (lyzhni perehony) [Theory and technique of ski sports (ski racing)]. Lviv: Lviv State University of Physical Culture named after Ivan Boberskyi: Navch.-Metod. Posib, 7–10 (in Ukrainian).
7. Long distance ski championship to be renamed Visma Ski Classics (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/visma/pressreleases/long-distance-ski-championship-to-be-renamed-visma-ski-classics-3120515> (in English).
8. Rules (2021). Visma Ski Classics Rules and Regulations Season XII. Retrieved from <https://www.vismaski-classics.com/pro-skiing/rules/> (in English).
9. Ski Classics bans Russian and Belarusian athletes and teams (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.vismaski-classics.com/news/articles/ski-classics-bans-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-teams/> (in English).
10. Tour de Ski (2021). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tour\\_de\\_Ski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tour_de_Ski) (in English).
11. Vasaloppet course (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.worldloppet.com/wl-race/vasaloppet/> (in English).
12. Vasaloppet in Sweden (2021). Retrieved from <https://goldfinchteam.com/edem-na-vasaloppet> (in English).
13. Visma Ski Classics. Svezhiy vzglyad na lyzhnyye gonki [A fresh take on cross-country skiing] (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.sports.ru/tribuna/blogs/skiclassics/2290097.html> (in English).

Стаття надійшла до редакції 01.09.2022 р.