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An important Norwegian-language history of winter sports, deserving of an international readership (Book review: De kalde lekene – Norge, skisporten

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An important Norwegian-language history of winter sports, deserving of an international readership

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A book about winter sports could be seen as a cold case, even more so if the book in question was published four years ago and deals with developments taking place about a century ago. However, this history about Norway's role in the early days of international skiing and the formation of the Winter Olympic Games is well worth a read for anyone interested in the organization of international sport. It also, as I will return to soon, gives a deeper understanding of the conflicts between Sweden and Norway and how these conflicts played out in the organizations of international skiing.

The book is divided into two halves focused on two aspects of Norwegian and international ski history. First, the role of Norway in the initiation of the Winter Olympic Games. Second, the battle about whether alpine skiing should be included under the Olympic umbrella. Kleppen has used a wide range of written source material, including minutes and other documents from the IOC archives and the Norwegian Ski Federation as well as personal correspondence from key Norwegian ski leaders.

In the first chapter, some central questions are introduced. Why did Norway take part in the games in Chamonix 1924, if there was such a resistance against the idea of Winter Olympic Games? And why did the Norwegian Ski Association change their stance regarding Winter Olympic Games?

Unsurprisingly, the answer to these questions involve Norway's relationship with Sweden. Kleppen's detailed and engaging account further underlines what sport historians Leif Yttergren (2006) and Matti Goksøyr (2002) have indicated, namely that the complex relationship between the two Nordic countries affected the early developments in international skiing, and that nationalism sometimes collided with international ambitions. For example, the resentment on each side relating to the Norwegian declaration of independence from

Sweden in 1905 seem to have spilled over into the world of winter sports, so that the Swedish idea of Nordic Winter Games alternating biannually between Sweden or Norway was rejected by the Norwegians. During the Second World War, the Swedish decision to participate in the Nazi-organized competitions in Cortina in 1941 caused another fallout between the countries. The Swedish idea that sports were apolitical was, quite understandably, not always shared by the Norwegians. Kleppen presents a good overview of the central actors in IOC and their personal and political networks. It is quite telling that the Swedish IOC president Sigfrid Edström seemingly had no problem with the German IOC member and Nazi Karl Ritter von Halt, while the Norwegians banned von Halt from the Winter Olympic Games in Oslo in 1952 (p. 218-222).

Kleppen shows that there was an underlying suspicion about alpine skiing and its connection to the emerging winter tourism in the Alps, which transformed the mountains into a leisure landscape.

What Sweden and Norway seem to have had in common, though, is a certain arrogance towards the emerging international skiing community. Norwegian leaders had called skiing in the Alps a less serious "hotel sport" (p. 148), in contrast to the Nordic tradition where skiing was part of a national masculinity project with militaristic undertones. And the FIS president Ivar Holmquist from Sweden questioned the organizing capabilities of the North American countries, stating that they lacked the necessary practical



Halvor Kleppen

De kalde lekene: Norge, skisporten og de olympiske vinterlekene [The Cold Games: Norway, Skiing and the Olympic Winter Games]
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experiences (p. 149). Though such attitudes were common in both countries, there were also others who took a much more positive approach to the internationalization of skiing (e.g. Nicolai Ramm Östgaard, p. 142). By referring to minutes of both the international organizations IOC and FIS, as well as the Norwegian Ski Federation, Kleppen shows how the Norwegian relations to the international skiing community was under continuous debate. It is also telling that Norway, despite a hesitant stance towards the internationalization process as carried out within IOC and FIS, did take part in the international competitions with very few exceptions. They were also, like Sweden, well represented in the boards of these organizations.

The second part of the book zooms in on the battle over alpine skiing as part of the Olympic program. FIS stood against IOC because they had a different take on the amateur regulations, so vital for the Olympic movement at the time. While the IOC saw ski teachers as professionals, FIS did not (e.g. p. 160). And while cross-country skiing traditionally had been the sport of a rural working and farming class, alpine skiing was perceived as something much more exclusive (p. 189). Kleppen shows that there was an underlying suspicion about alpine skiing and its connection to the emerging winter tourism in the Alps (p. 171), which transformed the mountains into a leisure landscape (Anderson 2012). This, coupled with a political divide between FIS and IOC about the political implications of the Second World War, kept the conflict alive.

Kleppen has managed to nuance the history of Norway and skiing at the international scene. He problematizes the idea that Norway was against the creation of the Winter Olympic Games. Indeed, Norway was one of the most active proponents of such an idea at an early stage, though in the early 1920s they shifted position and argued against the Winter Olympic Games. This was due to an internal struggle between proponents of the sportification of skiing, including its international organization (e.g. p. 64) and a more protectionist group who argued for the preservation of skiing as a Nordic tradition. While this explains much of the actions from the Norwegian Ski Federation, a more elaborated discussion about the role of the Swedish-led Nordic Winter Games would have been interesting. The high hopes for these competitions look to have been the reason for Swedish resistance towards including winter sports in the Olympics (as suggested on p. 52). To what extent was the early Norwegian enthusiasm for the internationalization of skiing a politically motivated protest against Sweden and its high-flying plans for the Nordic Winter Games? A few more pages of discussion at the end of each of the books two parts would have clarified the main findings and strengthened Kleppen's argumentation.

De kalde lekene, written in Norwegian and richly illustrated with historical photos, is aimed at a domestic audience, an impression further strengthened by statements such as Holmenkollen being the world's best ski arena since its inauguration in 1892 (p. 26). Such a claim that might be valid, but would still need some arguments to back it up for an international audience. With a few clarifications for a non-Norwegian readership, this book could shed new light on the history of the Winter Olympic Games. Even if much of the history of FIS and IOC has been analyzed by historians (e.g. Vonnard, Sbeti & Quin

2018), Kleppen summarizes it well while adding detail and questioning some earlier conclusions. Though a few years have now passed since the book first came out, I would encourage Halvor Kleppen to publish it in English as well.

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