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# Skiers of ”Nature” versus Skiers of ”Culture”: Ethnic Stereotypes within Swedish Cross-Country Skiing from the late 19th Century to the 1930s.

## Introduction

Due to several historical circumstances, cross-country skiing has over a long period of time been considered as a Swedish national sport.[1] In the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century national romanticism, its association with nature, wilderness and Swedish winter landscape went well together. Moreover, skiing has been related to masculinity and heroic achievements performed by polar explorers. But the most prominent symbol of skiing as a Swedish national sport has its roots in a mythical tale on how the Swedish nation was founded on skis by Gustav Vasa, the young nobleman who later became king of Sweden in the 1520s.[2] Cross-country skiing has thus been an element in Swedish national identity formation. Simultaneously, it has been strongly connected with the Sami, the indige-

nous population of the Nordic countries who live in an area that stretches across the national borders of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Already in Olaus Magnus' comprehensive work *The History of the Nordic People* from 1555, skiing is mentioned among the Sami, even as a competitive activity, but not among the "Swedes". When cross-country skiing emerged as a modern sport in the late 19th century, several Sami athletes would dominate the most prestigious races.[3] Thereby, the history of cross-country skiing in Sweden is strongly affected by two parallel identities: skiing as a Swedish sport and skiing as a Sami sport. In this context, it can be argued that over the decades, the picture of skiing as a Sami sport has been neglected in favour of skiing as a Swedish national sport. My focus will hereafter be directed towards cross-country skiing in Sweden from the late 19th century to the 1930s, particularly regarding how the ethnic and national identities coexisted within the sport at the time. The aim is to shed light on the contrasts between "Swedishness" and "Saminess" that appeared when the athletic skills of the individuals, who belonged to the elite layer of Swedish cross-country skiing, were compared and discussed in press material and skiing literature.

## The superior Sami

In the late 19th century, the Sami, as skiers, were depicted as the skiing masters over all other people in the Nordic countries.[4] Thereby, when the *Association for the Promotion of Skiing* was founded in 1892, great emphasis was put on encouraging the Sami to take part in the grand nationwide skiing competitions – a precursor to the Swedish championships – that were annually held in the 1890s and early 20th century.[5] Among the leaders of the early ski sports movement in Sweden, the skills of the Sami were to be understood as an innate ability, as they were "skiers by nature".[6] In this way of thinking, Swedish skiers, i.e. non-Sami skiers in Sweden, were regarded as inferior.

## When training surpassed talent

According to the ski sports movement's grand narrative of Swedish ski-

ing history, a turning point occurred in the years around the turn of the century, as skiers from the south began to challenge the Sami hegemony. In 1899, a non-Sami skier, C. J. Johansson, finished in second place in the national race over 100 kilometres. Although he was beaten with 32 minutes by the superior Sami skier Lars Olofsson, Johansson had nevertheless defeated seven Sami. The achievement was regarded as a sensation. Working as a forester in Jokkmokk, Otto Vesterlund had closely followed the late 19th century development of cross-country skiing in Lappland. He perceived Johansson's feat as proof that "culture people" through training and exercises were able to exceed the talent of the skiers whose skills were the result of "inherited racial traits".[7] The outcome of this reasoning, which successively became widespread among Swedish ski enthusiasts, sports leaders and journalists, was an approach of the existence of two different types of elite cross-country skiers, whose athletic skills had two diametrically different origins. The performance of the skiers of "culture" was the result of a rational mind and successful training methods. On the other hand, the skiers of "nature" performed within the limits of their inherited talent. But since their skills were not regarded as personal, they could not be improved by training.

Optimism is another important element in the narrative of the early Swedish history of ski sport. The leaders of the *Association for the Promotion of Skiing* and the *Swedish Ski Association* (founded in 1908) supported heavily the improvement of ski manufacturing to get skis that were specially made for elite skiing more than recreational activities. As the goal was to persuade the Swedish skiers to strengthen the Swedish reputation in international competitions, especially the ski race in Holmenkollen in Norway, Swedish ski leaders also worked hard to improve elite skiers' training methods and technical skills.[8] The elite skiers of the 1910s and the 1920s were thereby regarded as malleable and adaptable individuals as they were perceived to be able to fulfill by rational methods the aims of the skiing associations. This approach, however, did not include Sami skiers who were not considered able to adapt to the modernization of skiing. As the "sportification" of skiing continued with an increased focus on competition, achievement and rationalization, the Sami were "doomed as skiers", as Sven Lindhagen, sports journalist and member of the Swedish Ski Association, put it.[9]

## Folk heroes and anti-heroes on skis

When ski sport progressed and reached an ever increasing popularity in the 1920s, a picture emerged of the elite male cross-country skier as a ”folk hero”, strongly associated with forestry work. Swedish historians have characterized this hero image as a representation of a silent, hard-working forestry worker. In that way, people in general could identify with the folk hero as he embodied both the ”law of Jante” (one should not think one is special or push oneself forward in any way) and a particular Swedish mentality of silence.[10]

However, instead of treating the picture of the skiing folk hero as an object of popular identification, it can be more fruitful to view it as a construction which was reinforced by contrasts between skiers who fulfilled the hero image, and skiers who did not. Moreover, these contrasts can be understood as a consequence of the stereotypical way in which Swedish and Sami skiers had been compared from the late 19th century onwards. In that way, heroes and anti-heroes must be analysed within contemporary power relations in society. This brings us to two ideal types of cross-country skiers in the interwar period, which represent the contemporary dominating way of discussing athletic skills within Swedish cross-country skiing.

## ”Rational ascetics” and ”noble savages”

With reference to Max Weber’s emphasis on the importance of ascetic rationalism in the emergence of capitalism, the first ideal type can be labelled the ”rational ascetic”.[11] Sven Utterström illustrates a couple of characteristics of the ”rational ascetic” as his life story includes a great deal of both rationalism and asceticism. He was one of the most successful cross-country skiers in Sweden in the 1920s and the 1930s and stated once that anyone who wanted to get anywhere on skis must be brought up in the tough tradition of forestry and experience such hardship that he doesn’t feel the pain that he exposes himself to. Utterström also emphasized that cross-country skiing requires a steeled body, strong will and toughness, which are all assets that forestry work provides.[12]

Sven Utterström after his victory in Vasaloppet 1925. Photo: Vasaloppet.

The point here is that the athletic skills are explained as an outcome of intentions put into painful practice through rational methods. Thereby Utterström sums up the characteristics of the folk hero previously mentioned as a ”rational ascetic”. In the industriousness, silence and restraint, as well as the absence of self-praise, he embodies a protestant

ethic which combines the pursuit of success with an asceticism that prevents him from being satisfied with his achievements.

The exaltation of folk heroes took place mainly on the sports pages of the newspapers. Even in poems, reporters glorified the skiers both for their skills as sportsmen and their profession as forestry workers.[13] How should this heroization of the hardworking woodman on skis be understood in its historical context? A clue can be found in the political and social changes that occurred in Sweden during the interwar period. Democratization and a labour movement on the march gave rise to a need for new ideals. Heroes of the ordinary working-class people had to replace the royal and military hero gallery, which had dominated during the turn of the century.[14]

The second ideal type, the ”noble savage”, lacks both rationality and asceticism. Since he belongs to the state of nature where harmony and balance prevails, no aspirations are needed in any direction. In that way, neither discipline, rational training or time perception are the bases for the success of a ”noble savage”. While the ”rational ascetic” was strongly linked to ”Swedishness”, the ”noble savage” represented ”Saminess”. As the heroization of the ”rational ascetic” can be understood in the light of democratization, the ”noble savage” rather makes visible the racist ideas that were prominent in Sweden during the 1920s and the 1930s. With support from the Swedish parliament, a Swedish Institute of Racial Biology was opened in 1922. Extensive studies were published on racial theory with a particular interest directed towards the Sami. By measuring and comparing skulls, scholars concluded that the Sami were to be considered as an inferior race compared to the ”Swedes”.[15]

It is clear that the contemporary ideas of Social-Darwinism were apparent also within the context of cross-country skiing. While the successes of a ”Swedish” skier were explained as the result of individual capacities, the victory of a Sami skier was perceived to be due to external, ”natural”, circumstances. The Swedish word ”lappföre” can be mentioned as a good example. It related to a certain tough weather, trail and track condition which only Sami skiers were considered able to master, due to their ”natural talent”.[16]

## Unexpected victory

Johan Abraham Persson was a skier with Sami ancestry who won the Swedish long distance cross-country ski race Vasaloppet in 1929. His victory gave rise to an extensive stereotypization and exotification in Swedish newspapers. Persson was described as a ”wolf, retrieved from the large forest”, who ”spoke by singing”, not by speech as the journalist from *Stockholms-tidningen* reported.[17] Persson's victory was somewhat of a surprise as the dominating notion claimed that Sami skiers lacked a sense of time and were not able to push themselves to the limit in a ski race.[18] Moreover, since Persson was a Sami, it was taken for granted that he worked as a reindeer herder, and that his strong endurance was the result of the nomadic lifestyle that he had inherited from his forefathers. Sports journalists were therefore surprised when they found out that he had never worked with reindeer, although he was a Sami. The only circumstance that could explain Persson's victory, finally, was that the two most prominent skiers at the time did not participate in the race.[19]


Top three in Vasaloppet 1929. From the left: Olle Lingvall (second place), J A Persson (first place) and Helge Wikström (third place). Photo: Vasaloppet.

The picture of Sami skiers as ”noble savages” must be understood in relation to centre and periphery. The picture had of course a weak bearing on reality and should rather be understood as a southern Stockholm-based mythical representation of the north of Sweden. When it comes to Johan Abraham Persson's victory in Vasaloppet, it can be relevant to shed light on the differences between how newspapers of the north of Sweden wrote about it, compared to the nationwide newspapers which were mostly Stockholm-based. What is striking after such a comparison, is that the nationwide newspapers underlined that the winner was ”Lapp” or ”Sami”, while the newspapers of the north emphasized the winner's local origins in the rural district of Arjeplog. ”Victory for Norrbotten at Vasaloppet yesterday”, was the headline in *Västerbottens folkblad*, while the capital-based *Dagens Nyheter* wrote ”A Lapp won the 8th Vasaloppet”. From a northern perspective, thereby, Persson's regional affiliation was stronger and more important than his ethnicity, while the opposite situation characterized the nationwide perspective. [20]

## Conclusion

To sum up, the heroization of Swedish elite skiers was a process reinforced by the construction of ethnic contrasts with racial connotations between the ”rational (Swedish) athlete”, depicted as an active subject, and the ”noble (Sami) savage”, depicted as a passive object. Only a reindeer herder was considered as a ”pure Sami”, and the skills of a Sami cross-country skier were perceived as inherited abilities provided by the nomadic lifestyle. In that way, as ethnic constructions, the ”rational ascetics” and ”the noble savages” must be considered in the light of the unequal power relations between the Sami minority and the dominating Swedish population during the early 20th century. The prerogative of defining what counts as Sami emanated not from the Sami, but from the surrounding Swedish population's stereotypical representations and notions.

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