CORRESPONDENCE.

A DEFENCE OF SKI-RUNNERS.

To the Editor of the ALPINE JOURNAL.

SIR,—The article on Alpine accidents in the last issue of the ALPINE JOURNAL contains some severe strictures on British ski-runners. These criticisms might safely be ignored had they appeared in any less influential journal. My object in replying in some detail is not controversy, but conversion. I believe that mountaineers and ski-runners have everything to gain by friendly co-operation, and this letter is written in the hope of eliciting a little more sympathy and a little more understanding of our peculiar problems from the heirs to a great tradition.

I must begin with a reply to a purely personal criticism. Your contributor writes as follows:

'The British and other Ski Clubs issue sensible advice and warnings, but the toll of accidents appears to qualify considerably the statement by a great ski authority that:

'"... the ski-runner ... may claim with justice to be a specialist in one important branch of mountaineering, for he has contributed far more than the foot climber to the science of snow-craft. Snow-craft was, indeed, a rudimentary science until ski-runners began to climb. Guides, like *Christian Almer*,[1] who were credited by their employers with possessing an infallible knowledge of snow conditions, made the most elementary blunders, blunders that a ski-runner who had crossed no pass higher than the Scheidegg would instinctively avoid. ... Even the most casual of ski-runners interested only in tests and races soon picks up more snow-craft than is within the knowledge of the average mountaineer."[2]

'It is hard to estimate the baneful influence caused by remarks such as these, but, *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*.'

The passage quoted with such disapproval by your contributor is taken from a 'History of Ski-ing and Winter Mountaineering' which has been appearing serially in the *British Ski Year Book*. Proofs of this History were sent to an exceptionally large number of distinguished mountaineers, British and Alpine. The remarks quoted by your contributor were not challenged until the *British Ski Year Book* actually appeared. The present Editor of the ALPINE JOURNAL criticized the reference to Almer, and I at once replied that I would omit it when the articles appeared in book

[1] 'The italics are our own.—*A.J.*'

[2] '*British Ski Year Book*, 1926, p. 613.'

form. The phrasing of one sentence quoted by the 'A. J.' was needlessly aggressive and I was glad to have my attention drawn to it. I am not attempting to saddle proof-readers with responsibility for my views, and I wish to acknowledge, with all possible sincerity of thanks, the kind and valuable assistance of the late and present Editors of the ALPINE JOURNAL in reading the proofs of these particular chapters. Had I not been guided by their criticisms, I should have been better prepared for trouble. It is, however, a little trying to be publicly censured for a passage which one has agreed to withdraw.

But though I was prepared to withdraw this passage, I am not prepared, now that it has been challenged, to admit that it was incorrect. The theme of your contributor is the foolishness of ski-runners. Ski-runners may be foolish, but I have yet to meet a ski-runner who would not instinctively recognize that of all paths, safe in summer, but dangerous in winter, the path to the Bäregg Inn is perhaps the most dangerous. A lecturer on avalanches could not cite a more perfect text-book example to illustrate the classic features of avalanche country. Those who follow this path in winter are not only liable to be overwhelmed by avalanches from above, but they also run a grave risk of starting an avalanche; for the path crosses steep slopes deprived of their natural support and left hanging above a vertical cliff below; of all types of slopes the most dangerous.

On January 20, 1874, Mr. Coolidge, led by Christian Almer, left Grindelwald for the Bergli hut, and followed the ordinary path to the Bäregg.[3] The entire party only just missed being overwhelmed by an enormous avalanche composed chiefly 'of snow which had been loosened on the upper portions of the Mettenberg by the previous day's rain.' Directly after arriving at the Bäregg another enormous avalanche fell across the path, 'utterly obliterating our footsteps.' A few years later Mr. Coolidge was actually caught in an avalanche on the path between the Bäregg and the Bänisegg. He 'luckily escaped with the loss of an ice-axe and a pair of spectacles.'[4] After these three escapes the route via the Bäregg was at last abandoned by Almer in favour of the safe and obvious route on the true left-hand side of the glacier, which has since been invariably followed by winter mountaineers and ski-runners.

As a small boy, I regarded Christian Almer with the reverence which small boys yield to their heroes, and I have lost none of my respect for one of the greatest guides in Alpine history. Christian Almer will always be remembered as the pioneer of winter mountaineering, but like other pioneers he made mistakes. Surely it is not impious to suggest that snow-craft no less than rock-craft has developed since the eighties. Facts are stubborn things, and your contributor cannot dispose of the facts I have mentioned by printing

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[3] *Alpine Studies*, p. 110. [4] *Ibid.* p. 117.

Christian Almer's name in italics. It is easy to imagine the strictures which the ALPINE JOURNAL would pass on a ski-runner who followed Almer's route in winter up to the Bäregg Inn. Nor am I prepared to modify my belief that the average ski-runner picks up more snow-craft than the average mountaineer. I use the words 'average mountaineer' and not 'the average member of the Alpine Club' as I have specifically excluded experts from this comparison.

By an average mountaineer, I mean a man who has climbed for two or three seasons between guides. Such a man will discover that snow is usually hard in the morning and soft in the afternoon. He may once or twice observe that his guides are muttering doubts as to the stability of a particular snow slope. But the chances are that at the end of his third season he will know little more about snow than when he began, though his skill on rocks and his balance on ice will probably have improved out of all recognition. The expert, of course, who aspires to lead or at least to influence the decisions of his party must study avalanche conditions in summer, which are fortunately far less complex than avalanche conditions in winter or spring.

Now consider the ski-runner. He spends his first few days on the practice slopes, then starts forth for his first small run. Before he has been ski-ing for many minutes he will discover that the snow, which to his untrained eye appears a uniform monotonous surface, is full of treacherous surprises. He runs from powder snow into breakable crust and pitches violently on to his head, from powder snow into unbreakable crust and sits down heavily on his tail. If he wishes to maintain an approximately vertical, rather than an intermittently horizontal position, he is forced to study the ever-changing humours of the snow. He is impressed from the first not only by the importance of avoiding falls but also by the danger of avalanches. The ski-runner is indeed haunted by the avalanche menace, and it is this constant pre-occupation which is responsible for the comparatively small number of fatal accidents.

Few people bother their heads with useless knowledge. Why should the mountaineer concern himself with all those subtle changes in speed and texture which are meaningless to the man on foot, but full of significance to the man on ski. Is it surprising that the ski-runner, alone, should have mastered the gamut of snow values due to the intricate interplay of sun, wind and storm? 'The ski-runner,' writes Dr. Jenny, 'must know more about snow than the summer mountaineer.' Dr. Jenny, the Editor of the Swiss Alpine Club *Journal*, is certainly no bigoted partisan of the ski-runner, but he realizes that snow-craft is the especial domain of the ski mountaineer. The reader who doubts the complexity of snow-craft as studied by the ski-runner could do worse than glance through the examination paper on snow-craft which is printed in the current issue of the *British Ski Year Book*. We ski-runners are proud of our contribution to the great science of mountain-craft. Since

ski-ing was introduced into Central Europe, very little has been written about avalanches excepting by ski-runners. Our present knowledge about avalanches is due in the main to ski-runners such as Paulcke, Hoek, Bilgeri, Rickmers and Marcel Kurz. Among our own people, the study of winter and spring snow conditions has been the work of ski-runners.

Surely the Alpine Club should be the first to give credit where credit is due, and to recognize in no ungenerous spirit the contribution which the ski-runner has made to the sum-total of our mountaineering knowledge.

I have tried to justify the remarks quoted by your contributor not because I am unduly sensitive to criticism, but because a larger issue is involved. I should not have replied to a purely personal criticism lest I might appear ungrateful to the ALPINE JOURNAL which has always reviewed my books with great kindness, and which paid a signal compliment to that last issue of the *British Ski Year Book*, and indeed, to the very article which is now the subject of censure.

I do not think I am mistaken in assuming that the reference to sports known as 'Slaloms' in your last issue indicates a certain contempt for the ski race in general and the Slalom in particular. Let me quote the relevant passage:

'British expert ski-runners mostly spend their time in sports known as "slaloms" while the non-experts slide about on slopes, trodden to adamantine hardness, at the back of hotels. Yet both kinds often start for an expedition immediately after or during a fall of fresh snow. . . . Many more accidents may occur before these young skiers learn the rudiments of winter mountaineering. The pioneers waited for days, even weeks, before the conditions appeared safe; these later-day "experts" wait hours, sometimes not even that.'

First as to Slaloms. Your contributor is misinformed. It is only a minority of British experts who race, and even this minority does not concentrate on the Slalom. The downhill race still holds its pride of place; for there are three downhill races to every Slalom race.

What is a Slalom race? It is a race down a course defined by flags which are placed so as to test the ski-runner's mastery of the turns. The Slalom is a fine test of control, and, as such, might be expected to appeal to the mountaineer. The man who has been through the Slalom school is a safer companion when ski-ing on a rope than the man who has concentrated exclusively on high speed. The modern Slalom has been developed by the British. The Swiss Universities Ski Club honoured us by adopting our Slalom rules and by awarding their Championship, as we do, on the combined result of a downhill race and a Slalom race. Our view is that the downhill race is the best test of dash, balance and courage, but that the Slalom is the supreme test of control and technique. We regard

these two races as complementary, and consider that a champion should excel in both. Our view is finding support on the Continent, especially among Swiss, German and Austrian students. Our instructions for setting a Slalom course have been reprinted in Canadian and American ski-ing journals, with the result that Slalom races have been successfully held on the American continent. This appears to me to be a legitimate matter for congratulation.

British ski-runners hope to be represented in future at the Winter Olympic Games. If we compete, we may as well not disgrace ourselves, and if we hope for success some of our young men must specialize in racing. Handicapped as we are by small numbers and lack of opportunity, we may well be proud of the modest successes that we have so far secured in international ski-ing competitions. At a time when other countries are beating us in games which we taught them to play, it is a matter for legitimate satisfaction that in ski-ing, to us an alien sport, we are beginning to hold our own. The British Universities Team beat the Swiss Universities Team in 1926, and our representatives also did extremely well in the International Universities Meeting at St. Moritz and Wengen. Mountaineers who never ski will, I am sure, feel a certain satisfaction in the successes of those who are their own countrymen.

I do not write as a racer, for I have neither the courage nor the skill to excel in racing. My own primary interest is in ski mountaineering; but I do not feel it essential to belittle one form of sport because I happen to prefer another form, and I confess my unstinted admiration for those who have proved their mastery in a virile and exacting branch of ski-ing.

According to your contributor, British experts mostly confine themselves to Slaloms, and the non-experts to playing about on the practice slopes.

I refer your contributor to the back numbers of the *British Ski Year Book*; for I do not propose to waste space in dealing with this wild travesty of the facts as far as Slaloms and practice slopes are concerned. Indeed, your contributor tacitly admits his inconsistency when he condemns ski-runners for leaving the practice slopes too soon, and for invading too rashly the preserves of the mountaineer. The gravamen of his charge is, indeed, that ski-runners enter the danger zone without due experience, due preparation, and without expert leadership. This charge is worth meeting. The other charge is not.

I admit, of course, that the danger zone is far lower in winter than in summer. The Faulhorn is often as dangerous in January as Mont Blanc in July. Mountain-craft indeed begins in winter when one puts on ski. British ski-runners seldom employ guides except on the glaciers, and might therefore be described as guideless mountaineers, if we admit, as we must, the contention that small mountains in winter call for mountain-craft. If your contributor is correct, and if British ski-runners are as ignorant and as reckless

as he suggests, we should expect a heavy death roll. Conversely, if accidents are rare, the British ski-runner must be credited with more knowledge and more judgment and more prudence than your contributor is willing to allow him.

I confine myself to British ski-runners because I possess our own accident statistics up to date, and also because the ALPINE JOURNAL in the main confines its attack to British ski-runners.

Of course, if a ski-runner employs a professional guide, the responsibility of an accident rests with the guide. Cases in which guided ski-runners have been killed cannot be cited to sustain the charge that the ski-runner is an amiable idiot who rushes into danger unaccompanied by experienced leaders. This thesis can only be maintained by the evidence of accidents in which ski-runners are unaccompanied by guides; for by hypothesis the guide is an experienced mountaineer.

British ski-ing dates back to the nineties. The aggregate membership of the British ski clubs at the present moment is not far short of 4000. A complete list of all British ski-ing accidents is published in the current issue of the *British Ski Year Book*. I know of only eight fatal accidents in which British ski-runners have been the victims, eight accidents involving a total of 13 deaths. Of these, one occurred in a race, one was due to a fall on a hidden rock while practising for a race, and one was due to suffocation following heart failure on the practice slopes. Only five of these accidents have any real bearing on the point at issue. Of these five accidents, three were due to mistakes by professional guides. Again, in the case of the Valluga accident, British runners were following a professional instructor and a local man, who could reasonably have been expected to understand local conditions. The Valluga accident can therefore hardly be quoted in support of the theory that British ski-runners run into danger without expert advice. I know of one case, and of *one* case only, of a fatal accident to a party composed entirely of amateur British ski-runners.

This is a record of which we have every reason to be proud, a record which compares very favourably with that of summer mountaineers, and which is quite inconsistent with the thesis advanced by your contributor.

I attribute our low death roll to various causes. From the nature of his sport the ski-runner is compelled to devote far more attention to snow-craft than the average mountaineer. Again, few ski-runners employ guides for small expeditions; but even small expeditions can be dangerous, and the man who is thrown on his own resources is forced to study snow more accurately than the man who climbs with guides. Finally, ski-runners are far more interested in the theory of snow-craft than your contributor assumes. The sale of a small book devoted entirely to problems of snow-craft has been surprisingly large. In these days people will spend money on anything rather than a book, and this fact therefore speaks for

itself as evidence of a wide-spread interest in snow, its perils and problems.

The sentences which your contributor quoted with so much disapproval from my own article are calculated to convey a false impression when divorced from their context. I was writing as a historian, and a historian is less concerned to awaken a conviction of sin than to record the facts. The ' baneful influence ' of the remarks which your contributor quoted—baneful, I suppose, because flattering—are more than counteracted by the attempts which the present writer and many others have made for many years to impress on British ski-runners the need for long, patient and consistent study of a difficult science—snow-craft in winter and in spring.

If you contrast what the Alpine Club and the British Ski Clubs have done to promote a better knowledge of the mountains in winter and in spring, you would, I think, admit that the British Ski Clubs at least have not been idle. The Alpine Ski Club published the first Ski Guide to any part of the Swiss Alps, and two volumes of that Ski Guide to the Bernese Oberland have been issued. The first ski map to the Bernese Oberland was the joint production of an English and a Swiss member of the Alpine Ski Club. This map was distributed by the Swiss Alpine Club to all their members. The first book dealing systematically with snow-craft in spring and in winter was the work of an English member of the Alpine Ski Club. This book in its earlier form has been translated into German and its later form into French. The author was elected an honorary member of the G.H.M., a great compliment to British ski-ing.

Every issue of the *British Ski Year Book* contains articles on snow-craft or avalanches. A recent issue of *Ski Notes and Queries* contains an examination on snow-craft, and prizes have been offered by the Ski Club of Great Britain for the best answers.

The Club sent a special Commission to investigate the accident on the Valluga and the Report appears in the present issue of the Year Book.

The Club issues frequent warnings about avalanches and other dangers of the winter Alps.

There are, of course, foolish ski-runners, just as there are foolish mountaineers. Expert ski-runners sometimes make mistakes, and it would not be difficult to prove from the pages of the ALPINE JOURNAL that expert mountaineers are not always infallible. But surely ski-runners should be left to censure ski-runners. ἔρδοι τις ἥν ἕκαστος εἰδείη τέχνην.

The British Ski Clubs are not unmindful of their responsibilities and are determined to do all in their power to build up a sane tradition of caution in the winter Alps. Surely the courteous relations which are customary between the adherents of all other sports should also characterize the exchange of views between mountaineers and ski-runners, linked together as they are by their common love for the hills.

Ski-runners are ever ready to admire those who have made Alpine history, and I was grateful for the generous tribute in the ALPINE JOURNAL to 'the qualities of quick decision, determination and courage demanded of the ski-runners over unknown ground.'

'We cannot,' writes another great mountaineer, 'be wholly devoted to one enthusiasm without learning something about the nature of all enthusiasm, and without in the end grounding at least a respect for all objects and pursuits, however originally unsympathetic to us, which arouse a like devotion in others.' This is well said, and I am confident that the enthusiasm of the ski-runner will in time earn the respect of the mountaineer in this country, and that the cleavage between mountaineers and ski-runners, which is unknown abroad, will disappear. Even in England there appear to be some who recognize that the aloof attitude of the Alpine Club in the past is a matter for regret.

I quote from 'A.J.' **37,** 409 :—

'Lastly there is an indirect lesson for a small but not negligible group of members of the Alpine Club. Some seem to hold that the Club is not concerned with ski-ing. If they will only read Marcel Kurz's book, they can scarcely fail to see that winter mountaineering is so irretrievably mixed up with ski-ing, that to persist in their present attitude must ultimately lead them to the logical conclusion that the former is also outside the scope of the Club's activities. Kurz mentions the fact that the Swiss Alpine Club fell into the same trap, but has since realized and corrected their errors. May the Alpine Club do likewise.'

It is because I share the hope expressed in this last paragraph that I have wearied the reader with the defence of a sport which I love, but which was not my first love, for I suffered from mountain fever long before I began to ski.

In this country, ski-ing is still a young sport. We have had to contend against great difficulties. We are trying to build up traditions which you have inherited, and we look to the Alpine Club for a sympathetic understanding of our own peculiar problems. I hope that we shall not continue to look in vain.

I am, etc.,

ARNOLD LUNN.

CHALET BERNA, GRINDELWALD,
July 4, 1927.

SIR,—The part of Mr. Lunn's letter which deals with the question of Christian Almer seems to have been written under the apprehension that snowcraft is a subject limited to snow of the particular class which happens to be found in the Alps in winter. As so many skiers look to Mr. Lunn for advice, it is unfortunate that a statement made by him, which might lead them to think they know all that is to be known of a difficult subject, especially difficult in the case of winter snow, should ever have appeared in print. Even if

the ice conditions in 1874 were such that the present alternative route to the Bäregg was feasible at that date, the question as to whether Almer took one route or the other on some particular occasion seems quite irrelevant. In fact it seems unwise to try to substantiate a statement so obviously open to dispute, when its acceptance might give others an undue sense of security.

Mr. Lunn's letter deals with matters quite apart from Almer's skill in snowcraft; and as he seems to indicate the existence of a grievance on the part of British skiers that there is a cleavage between them and British mountaineers, it may be well to try and get an insight into the true relationship between ski-ing and mountaineering. Safe ski-ing necessitates a certain amount of mountaineering knowledge, just as sailing on the Broads necessitates a certain amount of seamanship; but the mountain skill attainable by the skier pure and simple, however skilful he be at ski-ing, is as limited as the seamanship which can be acquired in Norfolk. Ask the expert skier to lead a party over some simple untracked snow walk, Zermatt to Chanrion or across the Pigne d'Arolla, for example, and see how he will shape. Untracked snow would be desirable but not essential. There may be sufficient pitfalls even with tracks ahead. In winter tracks are less easily obliterated. The indelibility of ski tracks tends to prevent a long qualification list of ski-ing expeditions from proving any mountaineering qualification whatsoever. Occasionally it may lead the ignorant into danger; but in the long run it probably accounts for the paucity of ski-ing accidents to which Mr. Lunn refers.

Ascent on ski requires the minimum of skill in ski-ing. Descent requires no more mountaineering knowledge than the ascent. A quite indifferent performer on ski can descend as safely as the most skilful, provided that his mountain sense suffices; except in the quite rare cases in which roped ski-ing has to be resorted to. In spite of this the mountaineer is interested in ski-ing because his ski enable him to approach the mountains in winter and in spring, whether his object be hill wandering or true mountaineering; but he realizes that the latter only starts when he has to leave his ski behind. He understands the utility of ski, but dislikes the undue importance attached to third-class tests, competitions and downhill running. Even the Alpine Ski Club, which was formed 'to promote mountaineering on ski,' is not blameless in this respect. 'The Proposer should submit his own impressions, based on personal observation, of the candidate's ski-ing, his speed, his control, his mastery of the turns, and his powers of endurance.' What about his mountaineering?

Those British skiers who do not regard the hills as 'glorified toboggan runs,' to quote, as Mr. Lunn does, from 'A.J.' **37,** need not look in vain to the Alpine Club for the sympathetic understanding which he desires. Apart from other considerations, too many members of the Club are skiers for this to be otherwise. Difficulty,

if any, in this direction must be put down to those who use the hills in a manner which is contrary to the traditions of the Alpine Club, or who claim for ski-ing false values from the mountaineering point of view. My only excuse for writing this letter is the fact that you, Sir, have kindly shown me the one written by Mr. Lunn, in which he has quoted from a note of mine which appeared in 'A.J.' **37.** I still adhere to that note, which, taken as a whole, is quite consistent with what I write now.

The skier's attitude towards the mountains controls the mountaineer's attitude towards the skier. If more skiers would only find time to do a little summer climbing their outlook would extend beyond the narrow groove they trace with their ski. Ski-ing would give them greater joy; for they would recognize in every irregularity of the winter snow, which they now regard merely as an impediment to their downhill race, an indication of what really lives beneath. Their regard for the hills would be increased; and, for them at all events, Parsenn—Fideris—up by train would be a thing of the past.

Lastly, Mr. Lunn's reference to the Valluga accident should not be misunderstood. Unless the unguided British party had a distinct understanding with the professional in charge of the party ahead, no responsibility whatever for what happened to them can be placed on his shoulders.

I am, etc.,
P. J. H. UNNA.

[The real point is, as Mr. Unna shows, that the mountaineer only begins 'mountaineering' at the place where ski have to be abandoned. How many great 'Summits' have actually been reached *on* ski?

The three greatest winter expeditions of recent years are unquestionably La Meije, Les Écrins and Monte di Scerscen. In the case of La Meije, ski were worn as far as the foot of the Promontoire; on Les Écrins, as far as the Col des Écrins, reached from the Glacier Blanc; on Monte di Scerscen, as far as the Tschierva hut. In other words, in only one instance were ski worn to within 3000 ft. of the summit. Yet the first two have been described as 'ski ascents'!

It even comes to this: are ski the most suitable aids to serious winter mountaineering? We are told that the vast majority of these instruments now manufactured in Norway and Sweden are exported to America and Canada; yet, on the longest and most terrible 'mountaineering' journey ever made, the ascent of Mount Logan, ski were not employed, not even on the approaches. A full account is given ('A.J.' **38,** 260, 262) of the three different 'aids' (ordinary Canadians, Alaskans, and bearpaws). On the authority of Messrs. Hall and MacCarthy it is stated that while all were satisfactory, 'they do not think that the "bearpaw" shoe can be equalled for climbing.'

There has never been any question of unfriendliness, such as Mr. Lunn rather appears to imply, existing between the Alpine Club and British skiers. But, until we perceive these latter, as in Tyrol, setting forth on their ski equipped for mountaineering, nailed boots and ice-axes, we shall fail to take much interest in speed races, third-class tests, slaloms and all the paraphernalia of modern winter pot-hunting. We realize that there are many British skiers to whom these remarks do not apply—men and women who love the mountains for themselves and who find sufficient reward in so doing —just as there are many parts of Switzerland still said to be free from cups or prizes for jazzing. But, because we recognize that, for good or for evil, ski have come to stay, we feel bound to point out the reasons for our lack of enthusiasm in the performances of the majority of skiers.—E. L. S.]