
ALAN BLACKSHAW

Competitions in Mountain Areas

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Introduction and Background

At the UIAA Council meeting on 29 May 1993, there was discussion about the competitions of all kinds that are taking place in the various mountain regions of the world, for instance solo-climbing, hang-gliding, ski-mountaineering and a number of combined competitions. The danger is that they may develop from small single competitions into mass events and championships which add different aspects to the sport: mass media, traffic, investments, risks and many more.

It was recognised, therefore, that the UIAA needed to give very careful consideration to the implications of these developments for the future of mountaineering and the mountain environment; and, in particular, to the issue of whether or not the UIAA should itself organise or endorse ski-alpinism or other competitions in mountain areas as an extension of its existing responsibility for rock-climbing competitions on artificial structures.

The present policy of the UIAA is to promote rock-climbing competitions only on artificial structures and not on mountain terrain; and it could be that, after considering the issues involved, the UIAA might decide, as a matter of principle, to maintain only its present level of involvement. There is little doubt that such a decision would be opposed by some UIAA federations. But whatever was decided, the UIAA would need to develop comprehensive and consistent policies towards mountain competitions. A thorough analysis of the situation and of the policy issues arising was therefore considered essential.

Accordingly, a small Working Group on Mountain Competitions was set up and I was asked to produce a paper to shed some light on all aspects of these problems, to point out the positive and negative aspects, and to propose possible solutions that might be adopted by the General Assembly of the UIAA at its meeting in 1994. It was recognised that this task would present a challenge: to shape policy for the future without disregarding reality. Furthermore, my report would need to reflect the considerable amount of discussion of these issues that has already taken place within the Mountaineering Commission over the past two years (and now in the new Working Group). The UIAA Council asked for a fresh approach to be made, covering the range of opinions involved, and recognising the extent

to which competitions in mountain areas already exist and are seen by some as beneficial to mountaineering. My report therefore proposed that the Working Group on Mountain Competitions, in collaboration with the UIAA Commissions and member federations, should continue to analyse the extent and effects of mountain competitions, make proposals for the UIAA's future policy, and suggest guidelines for member federations.

For the purposes of the paper it was assumed that the UIAA would continue to have responsibility, at international level, for the sport of mountaineering in all its aspects, including competitions on artificial structures; and to represent the worldwide community of mountaineers through its member federations. It would continue to be concerned with the protection of the mountain environment, while at the same time encouraging responsible use of the mountains and access to them. Questions of safety should also be taken into account. The UIAA would need to keep in touch with all current developments in mountaineering, so that it could remain in the main stream and not become a backwater.

It was also assumed that the UIAA would continue to conserve its limited resources for those tasks which were of greatest benefit to the majority of its members; and that any proposals for extending UIAA responsibilities in competitions would need to be justified against other priorities, especially if they involved relatively few member federations.

A useful starting point for considering future policy might be to assess whether the original arguments for restricting UIAA involvement have proved to be correct. For instance, although the current policy has been to promote competition in rock-climbing only on artificial structures and not on mountain terrain, it has to be recognised that competitions are in fact occurring on natural sites also. We need to determine what are the main lessons to be learnt from the successful and widespread popular development of this form of competition.

We also need to recognise that competitions in mountain terrain of one kind or another have existed for a long time: mountain marathons, for example, together with triathlons, downhill ski races, long-distance ski races, ski-alpinism races and high-altitude mountaineering in the former USSR. In many cases these have been organised or sponsored by member federations of the UIAA, usually at Club or regional level, but sometimes also nationally or internationally.

It would seem, therefore, that there is, and has traditionally been, some tolerance of the use of mountain areas for competitions, especially those of limited impact or on lower mountain terrain. So it would not be realistic to suggest that there should be *no* competitions in mountain areas; we must recognise that competitions are in fact likely to increase, in some cases sponsored by member federations, whether or not the UIAA decides to endorse them.

However, the growing number and scale of competitions, especially in higher mountain terrain, raises legitimate questions about their impact on the sport of mountaineering, on the mountain environment, and on mountain safety, which undoubtedly need to be addressed.

Mountaineering-related sports and other sports

In considering whether or not the UIAA itself might take responsibility for competitions in mountain areas, or influence them in other ways, it is helpful to distinguish between mountaineering-related sports, which might in principle come within the ambit of the UIAA, and sports not related to mountaineering, over which UIAA does not have any possibility of control.

In principle the UIAA could regard the international aspects of any branch of mountaineering as being within its responsibility; and therefore become involved, if it so wished, in the provision for competition within it. On that basis, the following branches of mountaineering would be eligible for consideration: mountain walking or running, climbing in any form (including ice-climbing), high-altitude mountaineering, ski-mountaineering, snow-shoeing, canyoning, and possible other forms of the sport that might be developed in the future.

Conversely, the following independent sports, among others, do not fall directly within the UIAA responsibility, although they might be of considerable concern to member federations: mountain-biking, hang-gliding, parapente, cross-country skiing, downhill skiing. In each case these have their own international or national governing bodies; and it would be for the UIAA, or member federations, to discuss with them any issues of concern that impinge on the sport of mountaineering or on the mountain environment.

In dealing with these other sports, we must recognise that we do not have a monopoly of the mountains, nor indeed a greater right to them than other users, though we should do everything possible to maintain the interests of mountaineers, especially as regards aspects of the environment important to mountaineering.

Further development of the UIAA dossier

The Working Group recognised that there may be other sports which are of concern (positive or negative) to UIAA members and member federations were invited to supply information about them.

The kind of information sought was as follows: the status of the sport; its international organisation; its impacts (positive or negative) on the sport of mountaineering, the mountain environment and mountain safety; any proposals for UIAA involvement; and the policies of member federations.

It should be possible for the Working Group to present to the General Assembly in 1994 a more comprehensive analysis of the different mountain competitions of relevance to the UIAA, together with a summary of the issues (positive or negative) identified by member federations.

Proposed UIAA guidelines

It was hoped that, by 1994, sufficient detailed information would have been collected from the member federations to make it possible to compile UIAA guidelines on competitive sports in mountain areas. These might consist of broad guidelines covering the agreed approach towards

competitions in general, and more specific guidelines covering the practical implications of particular forms of competition in mountain terrain. In both cases they should cover the impact of the sport on mountaineering and on the mountain environment, and they should also include safety considerations.

Such guidelines might assist member federations in formulating their own attitudes towards particular forms of competition in mountain areas; and, in the case of the independent sports, might form the basis for discussions between the UIAA or member federations and the international or national governing bodies involved.

The assessment of proposals for UIAA involvement

The UIAA is at present considering proposals relating to two projects. The first is concerned with ski-alpinism; it has been suggested by the Club Alpin Français and others that the UIAA should take responsibility for the present European Cup.

The second proposal relates to the annual competition on Kang Tengri; the Federation of Alpinism and Rock-climbing of the Republic of Kirghizstan has proposed that the UIAA should recognise this as a model for the organisation of high-altitude competitions.

In support of the first proposal it is argued that, although the situation remains fluid at present, the international organisation of ski-alpinism competitions could become divorced from the UIAA in the near future unless some indication is given of our willingness to consider possible integration. It should be noted, however, that a number of delegations have already expressed opposition in principle to the UIAA becoming involved with the organisation of ski-alpinism competitions; while yet other delegations have expressed themselves in favour. It will be important, before the meeting of the General Assembly in 1994, that the main arguments for both of these opposing viewpoints should be identified.

The Kang Tengri proposal is different in kind from that for ski-alpinism, involving as it does a single country, a relatively small number of participants, and the special issues (particularly medical and safety) associated with high altitude; conversely, the area concerned is relatively remote and unfrequented.

It is suggested that in specific cases such as these, the UIAA should, in conjunction with those concerned, carry out an in-depth assessment of the practical functioning of the proposed competitions. But the Mountaineering Commission also wishes to emphasise the importance of avoiding undue delay in reaching decisions on both these proposals.

Basic questions to consider in making assessments

The issues for consideration have been identified as follows:

- Is the branch of competition concerned compatible with the sport of mountaineering? And how important technically is it to the future development of mountaineering?

- How far can the UIAA be involved with such competitions without compromising its stands on mountain protection or mountain safety? Conversely, can any impact on the mountain environment, or the risks involved, be reduced to acceptable levels?
- Would UIAA involvement be welcomed by a significant number of member federations? And conversely, would it be at least acceptable to other members in the UIAA overall interest?
- Would the competitions be potentially world-wide and thus needing world-wide control? Or would they be of more limited coverage and thus perhaps more suited to a regional or Continental body?
- Could UIAA afford the time and resources required, as against other priorities?

It would be the objective of each assessment to provide answers to such basic questions.

The status of the sport

The assessment should also cover in some depth the various aspects of the sport's current status, including, for example, historical development, current organisation at international and national levels, financial issues, acceptance or otherwise of Olympic principles, levels (eg local, regional, national, international), geographical extent (how many countries? how many continents?), popularity (numbers involved at various levels), and its importance for member federations.

The assessment would also need to provide an objective and well-informed analysis (positive and negative) of the sport's impact on mountaineering, the mountain environment, and mountain safety. The guidelines for such assessments would need to be determined in consultation with the Mountaineering Commission, the Mountain Protection Commission and the Safety Commission, with assistance, as necessary, by the Medical Commission.

In general, the more widespread or important the particular branch of the sport, the more urgent it will be for the UIAA to decide how to deal with competitions within it, including the question of UIAA involvement and/or control of one kind or another.

Possible levels of UIAA involvement

There could be scope for several progressive levels of UIAA involvement.

Firstly, the UIAA could accept that a sport is appropriate for competition and recognise a particular body or bodies as being responsible for the sport on an international basis (always provided that the bodies concerned accepted, where relevant, the UIAA guidelines outlined above).

Or secondly, the UIAA could adopt rules for the competitions, incorporating whatever conditions and safeguards the UIAA considered

appropriate; but leaving it to national federations or others to organise the competitions.

Or thirdly, the UIAA could take full responsibility for organising competitions, in the same way as we already do for rock-climbing on artificial structures.

It would always be important to ensure that conflict with other UIAA objectives was avoided or minimised.

Working towards solutions

Following detailed future work by the Working Group on Mountain Competitions, it is hoped that some analysis of the different mountain competitions, together with proposed guidelines, can be presented to the 1994 UIAA General Assembly. Preparatory meetings of this Group have already been held, but in future it would be helpful if additional representatives of the Mountaineering Commission and of the Mountain Protection and Safety Commissions could also attend.

The UIAA should then be in a position to decide its attitude towards competitions in mountain areas and whether or not to agree to the present proposals for involvement in ski-alpinism competitions and the Kang Tengri competition on the basis of the necessary factual analysis.

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