

Hotham in July?

By Noel Feltscheer

UNTIL last July I'd never been to Hotham. There are many such in Melbourne—members of that great fraternity who've done their ski-ing only on such nearer mountains as Buller, Baw Baws or even Lake Mountain and Donna Buang. I went in July because "you always get powder snow at Hotham in July and there are so many runs there's always a sheltered slope to ski no matter what the weather." The axiom of the Hotham skier.

We walked in from St. Bernard in what was to be the only powder snow we saw. It was the Friday of THE WEEK-END, now famous in song and story, when feet of snow covered nearly every part of Victoria over 1,000 feet. The powder snow turned to ice somewhere beyond the Diamantina Hut, where the wind first approached the mean July velocity (M.J.V.), which is somewhere in the supersonic range. We were later to learn that this ice is a permanent feature of Hotham during the period of the M.J.V. winds. It covers all that area from Blowhard to the Railway's Chalet—talk about the Ice Cap.

The following day was spent unfreezing the U.S.C. Lodge, devising mouse traps and recuperating whilst listening to the wind, so it was evening before we sallied forth to see who we knew on the mountain, and find what was doing at Alpine, Lindsay's and the Chalet. We then learned just how foreign to Hotham in July this weather really was. Nearly all the Chalet guests were regulars who came every year at that time and had previously always enjoyed perfect snow and weather.

But this season was different. The wind had blown continuously for the past fortnight, an unheard of occurrence, old man. This, of course, did have the saving grace that the weather from then onwards was certain to be good. It can't possibly last like this, old boy.

We retired home to bed nappy in the knowledge that our timing was perfect and a fortnight of dream ski-ing lay ahead of us. The sound of the wind howling down the chimney was our lullaby—we knew it was a dying effort. The world, and Hotham in particular, was a wonderful place. We sank

into dreamland through the caresses of overproof rum. We were smiling as we fell asleep.

At the end of our fortnight, carrying our skis because the ice was so hard, there were those of us who muttered "always powder snow in July—always a sheltered slope." The wind doing its steady M.J.V. momentarily doubled in velocity as a fitting retort.

During the whole fortnight no one dared attempt any the runs north of the Chalet and on many occasions even the Davenport was deserted by the few hardy souls who were determined to ski, come what may. So we spent two weeks on Hotham and were no closer to Mary's Slide or the Loch Ridge than gazing in admiration at them framed by the large end window of the U.S.C. Lodge, no closer to Avalanche Gully than the snow pole line and did no more than peer down the awful ice-covered, wind-swept surfaces of Slalom Gully and Australia Drift. But we did have two really good days of spring snow on the Drag as far as the Hogs' Back, and even went on down to the creek to see how far it was. More than one authority has stated the length of the Drag as exceeding one mile. Allowing the vertical descent to be 1200 feet, this would give an average slope of only 13 degrees! Can you see the expressions of horror on hardened Hothamites at this suggestion? Our sacred Drag? My goodness! Such liberal estimates of the length of this famous run were almost certainly made immediately after climbing out, in which case, of course, they are entirely justified.

But back to the July weather; let's peep into the Alpine Club's log book. The Alpiners present at the time were also confirmed, "Hotham in July, never gets this weather," advocates. They always came in July. The July pages in the book over the past few years were thick with entries such as "gale force winds," "iced up" and "thick cloud!" I think there was one mention of three days of glorious powder snow.

However, I saw enough of these fabulous Hotham runs to make me want to ski them more than ever and I'm going back to try again this year—in the spring.