

Norway, a small country of 5.5 million inhabitants, has won more Winter Games medals than any other nation. It became the first country to win 100 Olympic gold medals, and reached the 300-medal milestone in the Winter Games of 2010. Norwegians go cross-country skiing, ski-jumping, or downhill skiing on weekends, on holidays, and after work. When the snow starts melting in spring, they move it up to the mountains. And if there is no access to snow, they skate on ice. 2,500 lit tracks all over the country make it possible for people to ski in winter, although it gets dark early. Norwegians have enjoyed skiing for thousands of years. A rock carving in Nordland County in the north provides evidence that the use of skis dates back to the Stone Age. Until about a century ago, skis were the only means of transport in winter and essential for hunting. Skiing did not become a mass sport until the mid 1880s when the first competitions were arranged. Sondre Norheim, who is considered the father of modern skiing, was the originator of the Telemark skis, which are narrower in the middle than at the front and back and have stiff heel bindings. The shape made turning easier, and the heel binding allowed skiers to jump from rooftops or over rocks without losing their skis. Polar explorers made skis known internationally and demonstrated their unique merits on terrain that could not be crossed any other way. Roald Amundsen was the first man to reach the South Pole in 1911 on skis. Fridtjof Nansen crossed the Greenland interior on skis in 1880. Other explorers have followed the routes used by these two famous explorers and skied to both the North and South Poles. Annual cross-country events are organized throughout Norway, attracting a great number of participants. Such events are not restricted to athletes, but include "keep fit" categories that allow more people to participate. Enjoying the exercise and nature is as important as achieving the fastest time and winning prizes in these events. Biathlon was first included in the Winter Olympic program in 1960. It is a cross-country skiing race interspersed with shooting contests. Norwegians are very strong cross-country skiers and have won most of the cross-country skiing medals in the Winter Olympics over the years. Alpine skiing has also gained a lot of followers, as has freestyle which is a relatively newer sport. Norwegians are among the world's best in freestyle. Speed skating used to be a large spectator and participation sport on a par with cross-country skiing. Cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and Alpine skiing seem to have taken over and overshadowed speed skating, although Norwegian speed skaters are among the best in the world. In winter in Norway, every sheet of ice is covered with children playing hockey or skating. Indoor rinks are also used for skating and ice hockey. While other Scandinavians huddle around fireplaces, Norwegians bundle up and go out skiing. This could explain the reason why they have won such an astounding number of medals in the Winter Olympics.