Frederick Wallace

President's Report

International Journalists' Ski Club

General Assembly, Barruera, Spain

SCIJ 71st Winter Meeting

March 5th, 2026

The Mountain is Yours to Climb

Distinguished members, dear friends, fellow travellers of snow and story:

Welcome. All of you. Every single one of you who found your way to this magnificent corner of the Spanish Pyrenees. Look around this room. Take a moment. Because if I know this organization, and I do, half of you nearly didn't make it, the other half are already thinking about the après-ski, and at least three of you have no idea how you ended up here but are enormously glad you did.

That, my friends, is the eternal magic of SCIJ.

The Meaning of Spain

Being here in Spain does something particular to me. It closes a circle.

It was in Catalunya, at Baqueira Beret, where I first stood before you as president. Nervous, full of ideas, and if I'm being completely honest, a little terrified.

And it was in Spain, in the beautiful enclave of Llívia not far from where we sit tonight, where I had first returned to Europe after many years away. A younger man, considerably less grey, and almost certainly holding a glass of sangria.

I remember the 1996 General Assembly in Llívia as if it were yesterday. The room was in a basement filled with cigarette smoke of a density I have never encountered before or since. It was as though delegates from 36 nations had collectively decided that the best way to represent their country was through the volume of tobacco they could personally contribute to the atmosphere.

The smoke didn’t just hang in the air. It lived there. It had its own passport.

The secretary general, Peter Daalder, asked me, in his wonderfully calm way, if I might help with translation. I said yes. Of course I said yes. Because when you are young and enthusiastic and have had enough sangria, you say yes to everything. It was only a few seconds later, standing at the front

of that smoke-filled basement packed with journalists from 36 nations, that I had a quiet, urgent conversation with myself. Do I actually speak all of these languages? The answer, it turned out, was a negotiation between confidence and reality. We managed. Mostly.

But underneath the smoke, underneath the noise, underneath the chaos that has always been part of SCIJ's magnificent personality, there was something else. Warmth. Real warmth. Conversations that stretched into the early morning hours. Friendships forged over wine and Catalan snow. A feeling that you were part of something that mattered. Something larger than yourself.

That feeling never left me.

This Past Year

This past year has been very eventful. We left the beautiful snow of Bardonecchia, our 70th meeting no less, with full hearts and questionable knees. And at the centre of it all was one person who made it not just possible but unforgettable.

Roberta Serdoz and the GIS team made it possible. One hundred and 19 people. Twenty-three nations. One unforgettable week. Roberta cannot be with us today, but her colleagues from GIS are in this room. Would the Italian team please stand.

[Pause for applause]

And now here we are. Boi Taull. A gem hidden in the Spanish Pyrenees, proof that when SCIJ goes looking for beauty, it never settles for second best.

The story of this meeting begins not on a mountain, but over lunch in Barcelona last year. Goyo Prados, Ramon Vilaro and I sat down together, good food, good conversation, and began, almost casually, talking about the idea of a meeting in Spain. It was one of those enjoyable, exploratory conversations where nothing happens and everything feels possible. A lunch between friends.

I had no idea that just a few weeks later, I would be calling Goyo in a very different spirit. Not to dream, but to ask for a

lifeline. And without a moment's hesitation, he answered. Goyo, you and SCIJ Spain did not simply organize a meeting. **You rescued one.** You had every reason to say it was too complicated, too uncertain, too late. You said none of those things. You rolled up your sleeves and you delivered. On behalf of this entire organization: gràcies, my friend. From the bottom of my heart. Goyo, would you please stand.

[Pause for applause]

My Election

When you elected me president in 2014, I made you a promise. A rejuvenated SCIJ. An organization recentred on its core values, modernized and professionalized, ready for a world that was already changing faster than any of us were comfortable admitting. Stepping into the legacy of our founders, Gilles de La Rocque and Marcel Pasche, and all those who carried the flame after them, was both an incredible honour and genuinely daunting. The SCIJ spirit they created is not a small thing. It is rare and real, earned over decades. How do you protect that?

How do you carry it forward without diminishing it? These were the questions that kept me awake in those early months.

Thank you. Not just for that first vote of confidence in Champéry, but for re-electing me, and continuing to do so, mandate after mandate. You didn't have to. I never took it for granted. Not once.

Twelve years. I am told that makes me the longest-serving president in this organization's history. I don't say that with pride so much as with astonishment. And with gratitude I am not sure I have the words for.

What We Built

The journey was not always easy. Change in an organization built on tradition and camaraderie feels, at times, almost like a betrayal of the very thing you love. I understand that. But I believed then, and I believe now, that the greatest act of love for something you cherish is not to preserve it in amber. It is to give it what it needs to survive.

We formalized our statutes and regulations. We incorporated as an AISBL, giving this organization the legal foundation it had never had. We digitized our tools and processes so that the work of running SCIJ no longer lived in individual inboxes and fading institutional memory. We built a governance framework that can outlast any single president, including me. And we grew. Not just in numbers, though 33 member nations is not nothing. We grew in the infrastructure that makes those numbers mean something.

None of that is glamorous work. Most of it is invisible if it's done right. And I want to acknowledge, simply and sincerely, the members of the International Committee who showed up year after year to do that quiet work alongside me. It is not always easy to serve an organization you love. They know that. I know that.

It was done right.

And through all of it, I tried, every day, to give back to this organization far more than it had ever given to me. Not out of obligation. Out of genuine love.

Pandemic

I need to speak for a moment about the pandemic.

There was a quiet, genuinely frightening moment where I sat and wondered whether we would ever come back. Whether SCIJ, in any meaningful form, would survive. Kazakhstan had challenges. Canada was ready, until the main sponsor disappeared, as sponsors sometimes do, in the night, without so much as a farewell note. And then came Newfoundland. Beautiful, charming, slightly bewildering Newfoundland, with its warmth and its personality and its utter refusal to be anything other than exactly what it is.

It was the perfect place to find out whether we still worked. Not just emotionally, whether the warmth and the spirit had survived, but operationally. Whether the statutes, the frameworks, the digital infrastructure, all the unglamorous

architecture we had spent years building, could actually do what it was designed to do. Hold the organization together under pressure and bring it back to life. It could. It did. Newfoundland was not just a reunion. **It was proof of concept.** And that matters more than I can say.

The Alarm Bell

After the cancellation of the Andorra meeting, I held my promise and found another location. I sent a letter to the membership on March 5. I wrote about resilience. About SCIJ's ability to endure. What I did not write about was what happened in the hours after I sent it.

When Andorra fell through, SCIJ turned to WhatsApp. And what unfolded there was not our finest hour. The greatest weakness of this organization, and I say this plainly because after 12 years I have more than earned the right, is its inability to sit back, be patient and allow those who are working on your behalf to come back with clear, considered information. We are a volunteer association. Pressing on people before the facts

are even clear is not worthy of what SCIJ stands for. Please carry that forward.

Because here is what I know now that I didn't know then. When you press on people, you do not always know what you are pressing on.

I sent that letter at almost exactly this time of day. And then I walked to my doctor's office for my annual physical. A simple two-kilometer walk. Halfway through, something didn't feel right. My watch sent me an AFib alert. I notified the staff. My doctor came out immediately. And within a short time, I was being wheeled into a medical facility, surrounded by a team of specialists.

The cardiologist sat down beside me, calm and precise, and told me I was having a heart attack. Surgery the following morning. Four to six hours on the table.

I have young daughters.

That is all I will say about what passed through my mind in that moment.

And then, by some grace I still don't fully comprehend, and that the medical team described as genuinely remarkable, my heart began to recover on its own. Other arteries had latched on to the blocked ones, rerouting themselves, compensating, fighting. One hundred per cent blood flow was restored. No surgery. No bypasses. No graphs. No stents.

I walked out on my own two feet the next day.

Three weeks ago, in the darkness before dawn, with my father's star shining above me, I stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon. I didn't go there to prove something. I went to finish a climb. To know that my body, the same one that had nearly stopped, could still carry me somewhere hard and beautiful.

I hiked down 1,350 metres, all the way to the Colorado River. I put my feet in that cold water. And then I climbed back out 1,350 metres. Twenty-five and a half kilometres. Nine and a half hours.

I am still here.

I am telling you this because you deserve to know. And because the people who serve this organization are doing their very best. Please, before you reach for your phone, think about that.

The Future of SCIJ

Think about the world when I became president, our meeting was focused around Swiss Innovation. We had the iPhone 6. Today, we are at 17, and artificial intelligence is woven into nearly everything we do.

But it is not just the device in our pockets that has changed. The very craft that defines every person in this room has been reinvented three or four times over in these 12 years alone. Print has contracted. Newsrooms have been hollowed out or transformed beyond recognition. And yet from that disruption, new forms have emerged with extraordinary energy. Substack. Podcasts. The video journalist with a broadcast studio in a coat pocket. The journalist of 2026 looks nothing like the journalist of

2014. And that evolution is not a loss. **It is proof that storytelling, at its core, finds a way.**

Which means the journalist-skiers are still out there. They look different. They work differently. But the instinct that brings someone to a press room and then to a mountain, that combination of curiosity, adventure and the need to bear witness, has not changed at all. We have to find them where they are.

Perhaps one day SCIJ will have its first AI president. It will never sleep, respond instantly and negotiate in 17 languages without ever once losing its temper. And it will, absolutely and without question, never forget to contribute to the press book.

Though I suspect it will struggle, just a little, with the 2 a.m. conversations over wine that make this organization what it truly is.

Look around this room. Really look. There are fewer than 90 people here. When I started, we were gathering 230, 240. I don’t believe there aren’t enough journalist-skiers in the world

to fill this room. They exist. They are out there. And we have to go find them.

That responsibility does not belong to the International Committee alone. It belongs to every nation in this room. No single president with the very best of intentions can carry this alone. **You carry this.**

Later today, I will ask you to adopt two motions. A designated calendar for meeting organizations and a fund dedicated to bringing the next generation of journalist-skiers into our family. These are not administrative formalities. They are the foundation of what comes next.

Closing

In 33 years of SCIJ, I have participated in 29 winter meetings, 3 summer meetings, and earned three combined gold medals. My wife, who I met here 21 years ago, told me that if on the way home I stepped off that plane still wearing a presidential lanyard, she would have already changed the locks of the house. I love her for everything, including that.

Twelve years of leading this organization has taught me one thing above all. The things worth saving rarely save themselves. Someone always has to decide they are worth the effort, and then do the work. The work is often invisible. It is often thankless. And it is always, always worth it.

What I know now, sitting in this room with you, is the same thing my own heart showed me in that hospital bed. When the path is blocked, other routes open. Other arteries find a way. The organization finds a way, because the people in it decide that it will.

For twelve years, that was my privilege.

Today, it becomes yours. Protect it. Grow it. Hand it to the next generation in better shape than you received it.

Vote yes on both motions. Go find them.

Gracias. Gràcies. Grazie. Dank u wel.

Danke. Köszönöm. Mulțumesc. Tashakor. Merci. Thank you.

And long live SCIJ.

Note for organizers

This speech should be distributed to all attendees as a printed insert in the daily meeting newsletter or programme, and posted in full on the SCIJ website. Members may wish to return to it. Others who were distracted or absent deserve the chance to read it in full.