



The Ancient Skier

Spring 2019

SILVER SKIS: DERRING-DO ON MT. RAINIER

It was April 22, 1934, at the 10,000-foot level of Mt. Rainier's Muir Snowfield. The weather was uncharacteristically clear and windless -- and the 60 or so men entered in the first annual Silver Skis race were about to leave the start line together. That's right: together.

Winner Don Fraser remembered it this way: "We lined up, spread across the Muir Glacier, possibly 10 or 20 feet apart, in all different kinds of what we called 'ski gear' ... Otto Sanford fired his starting pistol and approximately 64 of us started off simultaneously down the Muir Glacier. Some of us started out straight down the fall line toward Paradise ... others choosing to zig zag their way down. The snow was hard and the surface mostly ice on the upper part of the course, with large sun cups. ... About half the time, you were airborne due to the depressions.

"Fortunately, I was soon out in front of the mob headed for Little Africa, so I didn't witness the many terrible collisions that took place just behind me. ... Near McClure Rock and above Panorama, there were large mounds (like small jumping hills) and one was airborne 100 feet or more on each one. The speed, at this point, was far more than any of us had ever gone before -- even on a jumping hill. Tired legs took their toll. ... I had my only fall at this point and minutes went by trying to unravel. It was then that Carleton Wiegel caught up with me.

"From there on down Panorama, across the left side of Alta Vista, through snow that was by now mostly mush, we skied side by side and it was only when we approached the finish line at Paradise that my cross country training made the difference and I was able to finish a few feet ahead of Carleton."

Fraser's winning time was 10 minutes, 49.6 seconds -- covering nearly four miles and almost a mile of vertical.

Despite a single, serious accident, the first Silver Skis was a success and a solid payoff for earlier efforts by such top-flight local skiers as Hans-Otto Giese and Hans Grage who sold Seattle Post-Intelligencer sports editor Royal Brougham on the idea of an annual ski competition.

Brougham saw that a major ski race would connect the P-I with the sport's growing regional popularity, and it provided the Hearst publication with a new vehicle to promote circulation and advertising.

"Hairy, scary"

As for the races themselves, many early news reports returned repeatedly to the words "courage" and "stamina," and, today, course veterans still talk about "hairy," "scary" and "dangerous."

Then, too, there were few control gates, no grooming, and major storm possibilities.

For the six races where inclement weather or other considerations didn't prevail, Camp Muir is where the men's races began. But only the 1934 event had a simultaneous start for all competitors.

This first race ended near Paradise Lodge and was slightly longer than subsequent men's downhills that ran the full distance from Muir. Those logged in at 3.16 miles and a vertical of approximately 4,800 feet, ending in Edith Creek Basin, just northeast of Paradise. (Women and juniors started close to the 7,385-foot elevation level of McClure Rock.)

For everyone involved, the Silver Skis was round-trip

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

We thank the International Skiing History Association (ISHA) for permission to carry an abridged version of the Silver Skis race history written for ISHA's Sept. 2004 Skiing Heritage magazine (now Skiing History) by Mike Dederer. We thank the Museum of History and Industry and Seattle P-I for use of visuals. The original article and magazine are available via Google. Non-ISHA-members are encouraged to visit its website, join, enjoy six yearly copies of Skiing History, and explore other ISHA features.

Contact <http://www.skiinghistory.org/>



Don Fraser, the 1934 men's victor, and his future wife, Gretchen Kunigk, were 1938 winners. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History & Industry)

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work. Initially, parking was a mile below the racers' overnight stay at Paradise. Then, for the men, it was usually at least three hours and nearly 5,000 vertical feet to Camp Muir.

Former racer Walt Page remembers that part of Rainier well. While climbing to the 1938 downhill start, he says, "the snow was blowing – you couldn't see anything below your knees. So they cancelled the race for that day. I still had to get downhill." His teammate, Lonnie Robinson, recalls "We had to lie on our stomachs it was blowing so hard."

Weather cancellations

During the Rainier years, competitors were dealt two bad-weather cancellations (1937 and 1946) and occasional postponements.

Remembrances of tough conditions hold true for all the events on the big volcanic peak. In a 1994 P-I retrospective, part of the scene 60 years before looked like this to Wolf Bauer: "We all funneled for that first gate and hit this wind slab. It was like a washboard and at 50 mph or so, the fastest part of the race, we were out of control. I did a complete somersault, lost both of my poles."

More recently, Bil Dunaway remembered the changing snow and weather conditions in the years he competed: "You're in icy windblown stuff and then you're in piles of drift. A hairy race. Scared me to death."

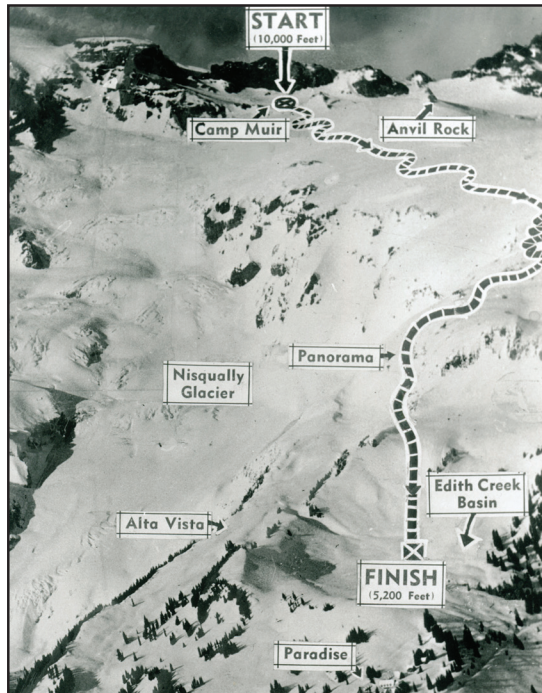
Five gates, four miles

The first year, there were only five blue control gates along the nearly four miles from Muir to Paradise. Yellow danger and red advisory course flags were in place, too, but creative route finding was very much de rigueur that year and beyond.

Nevertheless, the event's prominence accelerated quickly, helped by an arrangement for the Silver Skis trophy to be awarded to the downhill winner of the 1935 National Championships, held in conjunction with the U.S. Winter Olympic Team tryouts, at Mt. Rainier.

One writer modestly termed that competition "The Greatest Event in the History of American Skiing."

Shorter than the courses set solely for the Silver Skis, the national championship downhill covered 2.25 miles and 3,000 vertical feet, dropping from Sugar Loaf to Edith Creek Basin. Veteran competitor Hannes Schroll, called "the yodeling Austrian" by the P-I, took the win, with Dick Durrance in second place, more than a minute back.



Starting in 1936, the men's course followed this route. Women and juniors ran a shorter course starting at McClure Rock, above and to the right of Panorama, the location where they started the first year. The ending of the original 1934 men's race circled west of Alta Vista and finished at Paradise, and 1935's was shortened. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History & Industry)

The 1939 winner, notched a new running-time record by almost a minute. Austrian Peter Radacher, skiing out of Sun Valley, logged in at 4 minutes, 51.4 seconds, throwing in only one speed check.

Next, on April 13, 1940, came the nadir of Silver Skis' experiences -- the death of Sig Hall, a Norwegian-born Seattle electrician regarded as one of the region's leading ski

racers. High speed, a fog bank covering part of the course, and, ultimately, rocks near Anvil Rock, less than a mile below the start, contributed to Hall's fatal crash.

Hvam's Hvoom

Then there was 1936, when winner Hjalmar Hvam took a creative shortcut. Known later for his invention of the world's first release binding, the Oregon competitor chose a route of his own near the bottom of Panorama's steeps. Instead of making a long, fast turn, Hvam's straight route put him on line for a short downhill pitch laced with rocks and moss. To some observers it appeared that Hvam's ski-jumping ability would have helped him clear a snow-covered slope and pick up several seconds. Instead, the exposed moss generated the opposite effect, slowing Hvam and abruptly prompting a terrific spill and a loss of at least 10 seconds. Even so, Hvam hvoomed to victory by 13.2 seconds.

Two years later, in a whistling gale and snow flurries, Don Fraser took his second trophy – the same year that Gretchen Kunigk, his future wife and the 1948 Olympic special slalom winner-to-be, won on a weather-shortened track.

on a full course and in good weath-



Marguerite Strizek won the first women's Silver Skis in 1934. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History & Industry)

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In that marred 1940 event, Paul Gilbreath won the first of his two Silver Skis downhill, followed that year by Toni Matt and by Hans Grage, who was to become the only competitor to race in every event between 1934 and 1942.

Wing-dingiest of them all

P-I writer Mike Donohoe described the 1941 race as “the wing-dingiest Silver Skis of them all.” This time every racer fell at least once. Bill Taylor, the winner, took no less than four spills. Two solid days of snowfall preceded the 1941 race, but the start still was set quite high.

Topping the finish order in 1942 was Seattle fireman Matt Broze, who, in the same year, also became the 15th man to win the coveted Sun Valley Diamond Sun award. That was the year, too, when Shirley McDonald became the only two-time women’s winner.

Starting up again

After the war, foul weather ended a 1946 attempt to resume the series, but a year later the first postwar title went to Willard A. South, with the tightest victory margin since Don Fraser’s initial win. South edged Karl Stingl by 0.2 seconds in a race shortened slightly because of slow snow at the bottom.

The year 1948 marked Mt. Rainier’s last Silver Skis and Paul Gilbreath’s second trophy. After two postponements, the starting order was the smallest ever. Over the 14 years since the first event, the scene had changed dramatically. Many early racers had moved on to Silver Skis officiating, and strong sentiment to make Mt. Rainier a developed skiing showplace gave way to plans for a quieter winter role for the national park.

The big differences in the 1960s, after a 16-year break, were a new venue, Crystal Mountain; chairlifts; and course-grooming. But difficult weather remained a possibility, and the Muir-to-Paradise dangers and adventure were exchanged for the perils of contemporary downhills.

Crystal’s first

Nearly in the shadow of Mt. Rainier, Crystal Mountain opened in December 1962, and, from the start, offered lift-served racing terrain of up to 1.75 miles and 2,400 vertical feet.

Crystal’s second season marked the revival of the Silver Skis -- run in conjunction with the Pacific Northwest Ski Association’s 1964 downhill championships. On top was University of Washington freshman Joe Jay Jalbert, pictured in the P-I the next day with former two-time men’s victors Fraser and Gilbreath. That turned out to be prophetic news coverage – for Jalbert became the other double male victor when he won again at Crystal in 1966.

Between those wins, though, was one of Crystal’s two biggest events of its first decade: the 1965 Silver Skis International. Scheduled in conjunction with the National

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ANCIENTS ENJOYED BUSY WEEK AT 36TH ANNUAL SUN VALLEY REUNION



Ancient Skiers enjoy their time together on the slope. l to r: Peggy Boyle, Peter Kennedy, Nanette Stocks, Torrie Kohler, Peggy Curtis, Rick Stocks, Chris Raam, Hartley Paul Photo: Leland Rosenlund

Many of our Ancient Skiers found themselves a week of fun and sun at the 36th annual Sun Valley Reunion held January 19-26 of this year. The attendance was about the same as last season, adding up to 274 participants who typically skied mornings on Baldy or Dollar and then participated in the many scheduled afternoon and evening events. The week started with stormy weather on Saturday and the limited visibility continued into Sunday. But, as the week unfolded, Sun Valley provided its signature good weather with great snow and grooming.

The Monday banquet was hosted by John and Glenda Polwarth and Sharon Wellsandt, who helped bring the Western theme alive with music provided by the Doublewide band. Jim Salestrom, lead singer, had known Warren Miller for many years and played a fabulous musical video tribute to Warren and singer John Denver.

Typically, the NASTAR races are held on Thursdays, but this year we had one of our best turnouts ever with the spirited races run Tuesday on Lower Greyhawk.

On Tuesday evening, we had a special tour of the Ketchum/Sun Valley Heritage and Ski Museum where Ancients were provided drinks and snacks. After the museum gathering, many continued on to Sturtevant’s of Sun Valley, where Ancients received a 20 percent discount on merchandise.

The Friday banquet was hosted by Judy Sweeney, Sandy and Jerry Mailman, Glenda and Ross McLaughlin, and Anne and Peter Wick. Marlys Gerber led the group and presided over the awards segment. The Sun Valley Sun Award was bestowed upon John Hansen, with his son Tom providing a spirited acceptance speech on his father’s behalf.

~ Kirby Gilbert.

**SAVE THE DATE: Our next
Sun Valley Reunion will be
Saturday, Jan. 18, 2020,
through Friday, Jan. 24, 2020.**

SILVER SKIS DOWNHILLS*

Date	Men	Women	Juniors
Mt. Rainier			
1934	Don Fraser	Marguerite Strizek	Paul Sceva, Jr.
1935	Hannes Schroll	Ellis-Ayr Smith	**
1936	Hjalmar Hvam	Peggy Harlin	Reidar Gjolme, Jr
1937	(Weather cancellation)		
1938	Don Fraser	Gretchen Kunigk	Richard Lewis
1939	Peter Radacher	Dorothy Hoyt	Dick Lewis
1940	Paul R. Gilbreath	Nancy Reynolds	John Blatt
1941	Bill Taylor	Shirley McDonald	Bill Bowes
1942	Matt Broze	Shirley McDonald	Rees Stevenson
1943-45	(War cancellation)		
1946	(Weather cancellation)		
1947	Willard A. South	***	Bob Dings
1948	Paul R. Gilbreath	***	Gary Kime
1949-63	(No races scheduled)		
Crystal Mountain			
1964	Joe Jay Jalbert	Cathy Nagel****	M-Walt Falk W-Cathy Nagel
1965	Leo Lacroix	Christl Haas	**
1966	Joe Jay Jalbert	Sue Chaffee	M-Jerry Blann W-Ann Black
1967	(Weather cancellation)		
1968	Scott Henderson	Ann Black	**
1969	(Format changed to GS)		

Notes:

*Data assembled from several sources.

**No junior race

***No women's race

****No Class A women raced.

Cathy Nagel, a junior expert, earned the Silver Skis' win.

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Alpine Championships, the event was a late-season stop for the U.S., Canadian, French, Austrian and Swiss teams, following races at Vail and Sun Valley. Karl Schranz, Jean-Claude Killy and their contemporaries were on hand, with the Silver Skis trophy awaiting the men's downhill winner.

After his first day on the mountain, Schranz said, "This is the best downhill course I've seen all season." But, come race day, with fog on top, it was France's Leo Lacroix over the St. Anton veteran by 0.21 seconds.

In 1968, again in conjunction with the Nationals, Canadian Scott Henderson raced under clear skies to win the last-ever Silver Skis downhill.

Crystal's 1967 event was cancelled by bad weather, and 1969's didn't quite happen as planned: The Silver Skis downhill was on the slate for early March, but with a chance to attract more U.S. and Canadian Ski Team members, officials decided in mid-winter to schedule later race dates and change to giant slalom.

By then, however, the World Cup had been launched and ski racing had a shiny new appearance.

~Mike Dederer



Posters, programs and flyers all were used for Silver Skis promotion. (Kirby Gilbert Collection)

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