

Script/Documentary

Racin' at the Basin: A Retrospective and History of the Snowbasin Ski Team

In the beginning...the early 1940s...there was no team...no coach. Just a bunch of kids who dreamed of being ski racers. Along the banks of the Ogden river they cut willow branches... hauled them to the mountain...and jammed them into the snow on City Hill for gates. A very fast rope tow...pulled them to the start line again and again...until their legs...or gloves...gave out. Boots were leather and laced up. Bindings were bear trap. Much of their clothing was cotton...and soaked most of each day...until freezing stiff. Metal edges appeared as an innovation...and screwed onto skis in sections.

Dick Mitchell was there every day...hitching rides up the rutted, unpaved surface of Old Snowbasin Road, lying under a tarp in the frigid bed of a gravel truck. He went on win the NCAA Downhill and ski for the United States Team in the 1956 Olympics in Cortina, Italy. Bob Chambers also hitched to the mountain, often in the back of a Forest Service truck. He won a full ski scholarship to the University of Wyoming...was selected to the national Classic Combined Team...and still wins national championships on the Masters circuit. Dean Perkins slashed through hundreds of training runs...became a member of the 1950 and 1951 FIS World Cup Team, and won numerous national downhill, slalom and giant slalom championships. He took first place in the Roch Cup in Aspen in 1949...only two days after first laying eyes on the route he had to ski. The course was down North American from the top of Ajax mountain...likely the longest downhill ever set in the U.S. His winning time was over four minutes. There were only two gates...at the start...and the finish.

Harold and Derlin Newey and Marvin Felt were also on the course most days...their skill pushing everyone to ski faster.

The Ogden Ski Club formed and gave the young racers a name to be associated with...but little else. They were still on their own when training...or traveling to mountains in Utah, Idaho and Wyoming for organized races.

1947 saw the opening of the Wildcat single chair, which made Snowbasin viable as a site for major races. Utah's governor was patiently waiting for the signal to step forward and become the lift's ceremonial first rider...when local racer Dick Mitchell streaked ahead of him and onto the first chair. To punish the culprit...the lift was stopped and Mitchell

dangled in full view of the crowd...and the governor...while the ceremony took place. Whether ski racing or flying combat missions, Dick always hated not being in the lead.

The US National Championship Downhill came to Snowbasin in 1947. Dubbed the Centennial Cup to honor the hundred year anniversary of the state's settlement...the race attracted the world's best ski racers... put Snowbasin on the national and international competition map...and launched organized training and racing for local kids. As 8,000 spectators lined the course, athletes burst through the start gate just below where Needles lodge stands today...wound their way to the top of Wildcat...and plunged to the finish at the bottom of that classic race hill. Karl Molitor...the famed Austrian and boot manufacturer...won. Alf Engen was second. Ogden's Corey Engen, who had already qualified for the U.S. Olympic team, sat out the race with a sore back.

An intriguing story took place off the race course. Henri Aurelis was an Olympic Champion...a true French ski stud...and reveled in his status and role. He was one of the favorites. An adoring fan offered him \$100 for his skis after a practice run. Henri agreed...took the money...but insisted that he would only deliver the skis after he won the race on them. Henri apparently became as enamored with the raw essence of American capitalism as he was with upholding his competitive image. He sold his skis eight times that same day...then left Utah...with his skis...and didn't compete in the race.

1948 saw Corey Engen take over the ski school at Snowbasin...and become the first formal coach for the mountain's talented young racers. Engen remained an active member of the U.S. Ski Team during his early years at Snowbasin. 1948 brought the inaugural Eccles Cup to Snowbasin...won by Warren Miller...who would become the most famous ski cinematographer of the next fifty years. In the second Eccles Cup, Dick Mitchell beat Salt Lake Olympian and ski legend Jack Reddish...and fired perhaps the opening shot in the half century...and counting...Ogden vs. Salt Lake City ski war.

Spence Eccles and Rich Brewer led the next generation of successful Snowbasin ski racers. With a broad smile, one of Spence's contemporaries noted that he arrived at the hill each day in a slightly more elegant vehicle than a gravel truck. But his skill and fierce competitive spirit were widely recognized and admired. In 1958 he finished third in the U.S. National Championships, captained the University of Utah Ski Team, and was named to the FIS team for the World Championships in Austria.

Rich Brewer won the 1950 Intermountain Jr. Ski Championships held at Snowbasin and led the University of Utah Ski Team to a top five national finish in 1952, 1953, and 1954.

In the late 1940's a local boy spent his \$5.00 birthday gift on a ski lesson from the legendary Corey Engen...a lesson that would forever alter ski instruction and racing at Snowbasin.

Earl Miller was a gifted athlete who mastered a number of different sports with remarkable ease...then realized he also had a unique knack for teaching others. A few

years after that \$5.00 lesson, he was working for Engen as a ski instructor... and in 1950 he took over the ski school and race program when Engen left.

Earl Miller and his family's dynamic impact on ski racing at Snowbasin would continue... essentially unbroken...through today. That's 57 years and counting.

Earl possessed an unusually keen eye for technique...detecting and correcting a student's deficiencies...and a wonderful ability to motivate athletes to reach their potential. It wasn't long before racers from heated rival Salt Lake City were showing up at the Basin to train under Earl. According to 1964 U.S. Olympic skier Margot Walters, "I consider Earl the biggest influence as an instructor and coach that I ever had." Dean Roberts, then director of Solitude's Ski School, remarked, "Earl Miller has probably forgotten more about what makes a ski turn than most of us will ever know."

A noted expert on race courses for major competitions, Earl set the courses for the 1957 NCAA Championships...held at Snowbasin.

Earl didn't have to look beyond the family breakfast table to find his first star ski racer. Alan...Earl and Gladys' oldest son...won the Jr. Western States Downhill in 1958...and went on to a spectacular career that included captaining the 1962 University of Denver NCAA Championship team and racing on the European FIS Circuit for the Armed Forces ski team. Establishing a family pattern...Alan would return to Snowbasin to coach young racers...after he retired from competition.

Next in the Miller family ski racing lineage was Dale, who became a top competitor at the intermountain and national level. Dale won both the National Jr. Downhill and Giant Slalom in 1963...and in 1964 won the NCAA Western Regional Downhill. He placed 5th in the NCAA National Slalom. Dale would also return to the Snowbasin ski racing program as a highly respected coach.

Alan and Dale Miller were teammates on the 1958 Jr. National Team, along with another local, John Rasmussen. Alan would take second place in the Downhill. Another teammate, Margot Walters, as already noted, would ski in the 1964 Olympics.

In the mid-1960s Alan Miller returned from military service and skiing on the European FIS Circuit to coach at Snowbasin. Earl was still active...but Alan became the director of the race program, which was renamed the Utah Racing School.

Duane Manful and Butch Hoffman were highly effective coaches working with Alan...and sons Rich Manful and Scott Hoffman developed into top racers for the program. Scott Hoffman eventually became Rookie-of-the-Year on the pro racing circuit. Anne Manful, another top Jr. racer...now Anne Miller, Alan's wife...also coached, as did Jack Lawrence.

Alan's young racers were known throughout the Intermountain race circuit as the toughest and fiercest of competitors. Perhaps adding to that legacy...the day the team

roared into the parking lot for a race at Jackson Hole... helmets, goggles, full race gear on and ready for the start gate...in a car without a front windshield. An unlucky moose had come in contact with the team vehicle on the trip from Utah...but didn't slow them down.

In the mid-1960s, Jack Lawrence formed a second, competing ski team at Snowbasin. Larry Ross and Dave Langford helped with the coaching...and the team came up with an interesting innovation. With an old rope tow they purchased, they would head up to the early autumn snows of Monte Cristo...to run gates and get a head start on the competition. Within a couple of years the two teams had merged back into the Utah Racing School, under Alan Miller.

The third of Earl Miller's sons, Ray, was on skis before he was two. Under Earl, Alan and Dale's tutelage, he raced in the Jr. Nationals when he was thirteen. Twice he was selected Intermountain Junior and Senior Racer of the Year...he was NCAA Big Sky Racer of the Year in 1968/1969...and a NCAA All American. Ray was selected to the U.S. Ski Team in 1966. Again following in his brother's footsteps... he would later return to the race program as a coach.

The Miller's weren't the only family contributing more than one outstanding athlete to the Basin's race program. Peggy, Rick and Paul Goddard were accomplished competitors during the 1960s. Peggy's sons, Casey and Chris Puckett, were on several U.S. Olympic Ski Teams.

The 1970s saw Dale Miller and Rob Wall take over much of the direction of Snowbasin's race program from Alan Miller and his staff, and the team name was changed to the Snowbasin Ski Team. Ray Jones also coached, and his son Corey eventually medaled in the Jr. Olympics. Ray Miller completed the family circle in the late 70s when he returned as a coach for his brother Dale.

The Sneddens were another local family that left a significant mark on the Team. Malisa and her brothers Curtis and Greg were each accomplished competitors...and Malisa went on to ski for the BYU Ski Team, with a number of excellent results in national competition. Dad Bill often contributed his coaching skills to the Snowbasin program.

Butch Hoffman formed still another competing team at Nordic Valley in the late 1970s. He attracted a number of talented skiers, who were drawn to the steep, icy race course at Nordic. Among them were Kirk Langford and Danny Lawrence...nicknamed "Dangerous Dan." According to Kirk, "He could fly, but he fell a lot. He was skiing down a cat track about 70 m.p.h. at Jackson and suddenly veered off into the woods. Amazing...he didn't get hurt. We asked him what happened. He said his neck hurt...so he put his head between his legs to rest it and lost his focus. Head between his legs...at 70 m.p.h....on an 6 foot wide cat track." Danny is currently the Varsity Team head coach.

Kirk went on to ski for Weber State and the University of Utah, and made a number of podiums in the early days of the pro circuits. The Nordic team merged back into the Snowbasin program, newly named the Snowbasin Ski Education Foundation, in the 1980s.

Snowbasin hosted the Western Spring Series National Finals Giant Slalom in 1980, and many of the marquee names on the World Cup showed up. Phil and Steve Mahre...Cindy Nelson...Tamara Mckinney...Olympic Gold Medalists...World Cup Champions...all competed.

The third generation of racing Millers...Brady...Dale and Beth's son...developed into a top junior skier for his Dad. But Brady's greatest accomplishment on a race course would come many years later in a national competition...against a legendary name.

After a stint as mountain manager at Nordic Valley, Ray Miller returned to Snowbasin to coach the ski team in the late 1980s. Brother Dale once again contributed his considerable coaching skills, as did Dan Lawrence and Corey Jones. Dan's son Johnny, a ski team grad, skied in the North American Cup. Ray's terrific coaching and leadership is still on display daily as the Head Coach of the Alpine Team.

The F.I.S. NOR/AM Downhill held at Snowbasin in 1989. Tommy Moe, who would win a gold medal in the Olympic Downhill, finished first.

From the mid-1990s through the Olympics...Snowbasin hosted a number of major ski competitions.

All four disciplines of the the U.S. Nationals were held at Snowbasin in 1994. The National Alpine Championships came in 1999, and 2000 saw the first of the run-up events to the 2002 Olympics...the Women's World Cup Downhill and Super G.

1996 brought a stunning announcement!!...Snowbasin would host six of the alpine events during the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. Earl Holding, the resort's owner...marshaled his considerable financial resources, staff, contractors and volunteers...and issued marching orders to transform the runs off the John Paul lift into the world's best race courses...and Snowbasin into one of the world's great ski mountains. The universal consensus? He succeeded...in spades.

In 2001 the men's World Cup visited Snowbasin's Grizzly downhill course, designed by famed Swiss Olympic Champion and course architect Bernard Russi. The Grizzly, as well as the women's Wildcat course, quickly gained fame as among the most technically challenging downhills in the world.

The Gold Cup, the final U.S. Olympic Team slalom selection event, was the last major race held at the mountain prior to the big event. With a last shot at making the Team and competing at an Olympics in their home country...the competition was fierce.

Snowbasin became ground zero...the undisputed epicenter of the ski racing world...for two weeks in February of 2002...as the three Olympic Alpine speed events...downhill, super g, and combined...were held at the mountain. Each race day...twenty-five thousand spectators crammed and wedged themselves into the grandstands and any other vantage point they could find...joining hundreds of millions more in front of TVs...to watch the world's elite ski racers perform on the world's grandest stage.

The drama was riveting...as Bode Miller wrenched his body from imminent disaster...to win silver medals for the U.S. The accolades for the race courses...the event management...the volunteers...and the stunning beauty of the terrain, the resort and the lodges...was effusive and universal.

Racin' at the Basin had come full circle...and traveled light years from those willow branches and courses on City Hill.

Troy Price joined the Snowbasin Alpine Team as a coach in 1997, while a student at Weber State. He had been a highly successful junior racer under Ray Miller...winning the overall J3 Championship for the Intermountain Division in 1991.

Troy eventually quit a promising accounting career to pursue his passion...skiing and teaching young ski racers...and was appointed Program Director for the Alpine Team in 2003. He was selected Head Coach of the J3 Jr. Olympic team and Coach of the Year for the Intermountain division in 2006.

Under the leadership of Troy and Head Coach Ray Miller, the Snowbasin Alpine Team...the racing organization of the Snowbasin Ski Education Foundation...has been highly successful over the past decade.

The Team Slogan is "Turning Impossible ...into...I'm Possible." The coaches and staff work long and hard to carry out their mission...to "provide a fun, yet challenging way for young men and women to improve their skiing and develop skills and discipline that will provide lifelong enjoyment of an active, outdoor life."

The Snowbasin Alpine Team is comprised of the J1&2 and J3 Jr. Olympic Teams, the Varsity and Jr. Varsity Teams, and the Devo Elite and Devo Teams. Current coaches working under Ray Miller and Troy Price include Brady Miller, Tyler Callentine, Dan Lawrence, Jay Sawyer, Cody Brice, Angie Galloway, Brittany Cudmore, Ryan Bexell, Richard Douglas, Tate Callentine, Brad Davidson, Megan Hanrahan, Aaron Larsen, Patrick McCall, Laura Sawyer and Ben Vandenberg.

In addition to the numerous races hosted by Snowbasin, teams and individual athletes in the program compete in events at the regional and national level, traveling often to Intermountain races in Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado.

Over the past decade nineteen athletes representing the program have been selected to the Jr. Olympic Team. They are John and Daniel Lawrence in 1998, Cortney Sutherland in 1999, Patricia Clapham in 2000, 2001 and 2002, Jayme Bergseng, Michelle Hammond and Cara Jones in 2001, Riley Bergsend and Patrick Hepburn in 2002, Melissa Frogh in 2004, 2005 and 2006, Loudon Fruth in 2004, 2005, and 2006, Alex Smith in 2005, Allison Leininger and Mac Wymore in 2006, Josh Elston in 2006 and 2007, Zane Elders and Brittini Thomason in 2007, and Timber-Ky Jones in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006.

A history of Racin' at the Basin would not be complete without recognizing the latest national titles, won on a high profile stage, by a few of our local *older* ski racers.

Every year Masters competitors, led by Keith Rounkles, Bob Chambers and Rollie Karjalainen (Car.ja..lay..nen), compete and consistently reach the podium in regional and national races. But 2007 saw a group of local athletes representing Snowbasin qualify and head to the Nastar National Championships in Steamboat Springs – with extraordinary results. Oliver Zeh placed 4th after leading in the first run... Dawn Goode won a silver medal... Dave Goode won bronze. Kristy Miller and Shiloh Farnsworth both won gold. Snowbasin Jr. Olympic Team Head Coach Brady Miller...yep, that family name again...also won a gold medal, beating four-time Olympian and World Cup winner A.J. Kitt.

What a fascinating journey...from those willow branch training gates. And the Alpine Team, competitors, and competition at our mountain have never been as dynamically successful...or held more promise....than they do today.