Two Planks and a Passion: The Dramatic History of Skiing

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When I was asked to review this book, I asked myself: Why would they want a ski book reviewed? Then I remembered that present and former members of INSTAAR have done winter research using skis in the Front Range and overseas. Here are some examples. One professor skis toward the Continental Divide almost weekly to do hydrological research. Another leads others on skis for the annual snow survey on Niwot Ridge, located above the Mountain Research Station. Another used skis to do research on three Alaskan glaciers. A technician and his assistants skied up to the weather stations on Niwot Ridge as part of their climate research; he noted that they were more dependable than some of the tracked vehicles. Students also have used skis to do their research. One skied to Isabelle Glacier to study mass balance, sometimes taking a long route over Niwot Ridge. Two skied to lakes to collect lake cores for dating sedimentation rates, debris flow activity, and paleoclimate work. Another skied to field sites in Svalbard with kayaks tied on of top of sledges, and used either, as conditions required. One alumnus of both INSTAAR and my de-

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partment returned to the Front Range and used skis to collect cores from lakes above treeline for dating moraines and paleoclimate reconstruction. In many of the above coring studies, professors and students skied along to help. Finally, many INSTAAR people ski the local mountains and valleys for recreation, and two once formed a team for the annual faculty-student alpine ski race.

Two Planks and a Passion consists of 36 chapters. It is truly encyclopedic, covering everything about skiing from its inception, with the earliest reference in the 7th century A.D., to the modern-day shaped skis used by downhill skiers, the skating technique used in cross country, the V-shape technique used in jumping, and the role of climate change in the future of skiing. What follows is a summary of all that is covered.

The first part of the book tries to sort out the beginnings of skiing between Scandinavia and Asia, and without a chronological chart, it is hard to follow. Once skiing got started, the Norwegians took over. They made skis that turn with proper boots and bindings, learned to use poles, and started cross country and jumping competitions. The first ski school was formed, and skiers ventured into the mountains. A seminal event was Nansen's group skiing across Greenland in the late 1800s, followed two decades later by Amundsen's team skiing to the South Pole with the aid of dog sledges. In contrast, the British polar explorers went on foot.

In the late 1700s to early 1800s skiing spread to other parts of the European continent, with Norwegians doing much of the teaching. Europeans altered skiing technique to better handle steeper terrain. Davos became a winter destination, followed by St. Moritz, and the British went there to ski. Ski clubs and ski schools flourished. In time, French troops on skis guarded the border with Italy, and alpine races began. Equipment was vastly improved in the 1900s with the development of laminated skis, metal edges, cable bindings, adjustable toe pieces, and sturdy boots. Special bindings were made for cross country skiing, where only the toe of the boot was fixed to the ski. Skiers went far into the mountains, aided in places by huts.

Skiing came to the U.S.A. and Canada in the 1800s, thanks to Norwegian immigrants. Many went to the midcontinent, and some to the 1849 California Gold Rush. The latter needed skis to get around, and one used skis to carry the mail across the Sierra Nevada. The miners also raced down a straight course on long skis and experimented with wax (called dope) to go faster.

Ski racing evolved from cross country and jumping initially, sometimes combined as one event, and later added downhill racing. However, in the first Winter Olympic games, at Chamonix in 1924, only cross country and jumping were contested. Arnold Lunn from England was the main promoter of alpine racing, and it was included in the 1936 games (Garmisch-Partenkirchen) where the Norwegian Birger Ruud won gold in both downhill and jumping. The Austrian Hannes Schneider introduced his skiing technique before WWII, which became very popular; he brought it to the U.S.A. when he immigrated at the start of that war.

People devised various mechanized ways to get up mountains for recreational skiing. Rope tows were popular at first, but it was the chair lift, first used at Sun Valley, Idaho, in 1936, that was the conveyance that got the masses up into the mountains. This led to a surge in the popularity of skiing.

All this was interrupted by WWII. The invasion of Finland by Russia was not the first use of skiing by the military, but the Finns in white clothing moved swiftly on skis to defeat the vastly larger Russian Army. In Norway, the invading Germans were using a heavy water plant to develop their nuclear program; this was halted when Norwegian skiers swept down and blew up the plant.

Following the War, all phases of skiing developed at a rapid pace. New materials were used to make all equipment. Techniques in all four competitive events changed to take advantage of these resources. Competition reached a high level, as speeds and maneuverability increased (my Army buddy, Ralph Miller, was first to attain 100 mph), and jumpers went farther thanks to new innovations. People skied to the North and South poles, some solo. Women were at the forefront of much of this.

The first scientific study of snow was in 135 B.C. in China. This led to ways to wax skis to prevent them from absorbing water, and in the case of cross country skiing, waxes were developed to allow the skis to hold going uphill yet glide on the downhill.

Skiers will find a lot to like in this book. I have been a skier for eight decades and have used much of the changing equipment, tried the changing techniques the author describes, and competed in all events. One funny aspect of all of this is that for downhill racing we were wary of the new release binding because we were afraid they might actually work—racers then did not want to lose their skis!

In summary, I found the book to be informative and accurate. Two things could have been added, however. One is that avalanche research is an important
by-product of the study of snow. Another is that the returning 10th Mountain Division veterans of WWII were very important to ski area development and equipment advances in the United States. Readers interested in pursuing more of this topic are referred to Skiing History magazine (kathleen@skiinghistory.org, http://www.skiinghistory.org).

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