

NORDIC KULTUR

The Magazine of the National Nordic Museum

How Swede It Is

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National Nordic Museum

When the Northwest Was a Center of Ski Jumping in the US

by John W. Lundin



Olav Ulland and Hjalmar Hvam entertain the crowd at the 1938 Silver Skis race on Mount Rainier by doing a side-by-side flip. The race was postponed due to bad weather.

Bottom: This red sweater was worn by Ragnar Ulland during his skiing career. He donated it along with several other important items to the Museum's collection.



By 1930, over one million people living in the United States were born in Norway or had Norwegian parents. "The Norwegians brought to their new country a passion for skiing" said Harold Anson in *Jumping Through Time*. "They organized ski competitions to strengthen their ethnic ties, showcase their abilities, and generate a new sense of belonging to their new country."

From the teens through the 1940s, ski jumping was a very popular form of winter sport in the Northwest, thanks to the region's many Nordic immigrants. Our first jumping event occurred in February 1916, when Norwegian businessmen built a ski jump on Queen Anne Avenue to demonstrate the "popular Scandinavian sport" of ski jumping. Between 1917 and 1924, "genuine Norwegian ski jumping tournaments" were held over the July 4th holiday at Mount Rainier's Paradise Valley.

From 1924 to 1933, the Cle Elum Ski Club held ski jumping tournaments that attracted competitors from all over the Northwest, watched by 3,000 to 5,000 spectators. In 1931, the club built a giant new ski jump, said by *the Seattle Times* to be "one of the most hazardous in the world, six percent steeper than any in Norway." The Seattle Ski Club, organized by Norwegian immigrants in 1929, built a jump on Beaver Lake Hill at Snoqualmie Summit with "one of the steepest landings in the world, a hill three of four degrees steeper than the famous Holmenkollen Hill in Norway." The Leavenworth Winter Sports Club formed in 1928, and built its giant ski jump in 1932 on what was later named Bokke Hill. Not to be outdone, Portland's Cascade Ski Club formed in 1929, and built a ski jump on Mount Hood.

Ski jumpers competed in a circuit of tournaments, traveling between Cle Elum, Snoqualmie Summit, Leavenworth, and Mount Hood—often on successive weekends. Tournaments attracted

The Northwest's Kongsberg Ski Jumping Tradition

Anyone who has been close to a ski jumping hill is likely to know Ragnar Ulland and the Kongsberg jumping tradition. During the golden age of ski jumping, Kongsberg, Norway, was known for its incredible and daring jumpers, who flew through the chilly air in bright red sweaters emblazoned with white

Ks. These men were renowned throughout Europe and the United States in the 1930s and '40s: three of the four Olympic gold and silver medals awarded at ski jumping events during this period were won by Kongsberg skiers.

Ragnar Ulland was born into an extended family of ski jumpers

in Kongsberg. The Ulland family had seven brothers who grew up jumping in Kongsberg. The first to come to America was Sigurd, who in 1928 set hill jumping records at Lake Placid and Mount Shasta. After notable wins in Europe, younger brother Olav came to Seattle in 1938 to coach aspiring

Olav Ulland flies through the Mount Rainier air in this 1938 photo.

thousands of hardy spectators—mostly Scandinavians—who traveled long distances, hiked up steep hills to reach the jumping sites, and stood outdoors for hours, often in snowstorms, to watch Norwegians fly off the jumps, fighting for distance records. In December 1937, Olav Ulland from Kongsberg, Norway, moved to Seattle to coach ski jumping, after his brother Sigurd immigrated in 1928. Olav, the first to jump beyond 100 meters, was a mainstay of ski jumping in the Northwest for decades.

In 1938, the famous Ruud brothers from Kongsberg—Birger and Sigmund—entered the Seattle Ski Club's tournament at Snoqualmie Summit. Sigmund won an Olympic silver medal in 1928, and Birger won gold medals in 1932 and 1936. Seven of the sixteen jumpers at the tournament were from Kongsberg: Birger and Sigmund Ruud, Olav and Sigurd Ulland, Rolf Syvertsen, Tom Mobraaten, and Hjalmar Hvam. Birger Ruud won the tournament with a near perfect score, somersaulting to a stop at the bottom.

Sigurd Ulland won the 1938 US National Championships in Vermont, then won the 1938 Leavenworth tournament, beating Birger Ruud, his brother Olav, and two members of the 1936 US Olympic team. Sigurd won the 1939 Leavenworth tournament, setting a new national distance record that lasted only a few hours, as Alf Engen jumped further at Big Pines, California.

In anticipation of the National Four-Way Championships in spring, 1940, Milwaukee Railroad built a world class ski jump at its Milwaukee Ski Bowl on Snoqualmie Pass. In addition to Alf Engen, the jumping event featured Torger Tokle, a recent Norwegian immigrant and rising star, whom Engen had beaten to win the 1940 National Jumping Championship. Tokle had the longest jump, but Engen won the Ski Bowl's jumping event on form points. Showing he was a master of both Alpine and Nordic



skiing, Alf Engen won the Four-Way Competition, followed by his brother Sverre, Seattle's Sigurd Hall, and Portland's Hjalmar Hvam. Alf Engen won Leavenworth's 1940 tournament, beating Sigurd Hall and nearly setting a new national distance record.

In February 1941, Alf Engen set a new North American distance record at Iron Mountain, Michigan, only to have it broken later in the month by Torger Tokle at Leavenworth. At the National Jumping Championships at the Milwaukee Ski Bowl in March 1941, Tokle set his second distance record in a month, beating Engen. Tokle set another distance record in 1942, but was killed in Italy in May 1945, as a member of the Tenth Mountain Division. During his short career, Tokle had broken twenty-four jumping records and won forty-two of the forty-eight tournaments in which he competed.

The US jumping team for the 1948 Olympic Games was selected after a tournament at the Milwaukee Ski Bowl. The

by Kirby Gilbert

young ski jumpers—and eventually the 1956 US Olympic ski jumping team. They were joined by their brother Reidar in 1947, who brought his fourteen-year-old son, Ragnar, to Seattle in 1951.

During the 1952–53 season, Ragnar notched five first-place finishes in the Northwest. The following year he began

jumping in Class A events—consistently taking second in tournaments and even beating his legendary Uncle Olav. In 1955 he won the National Junior Ski Jumping Championships at Leavenworth, where he tied the hill record with a standing leap of 284 feet. With a fourth-place win at the tryouts

for the US Olympic ski jumping team, he landed a coveted spot on the team.

His Olympic hopes were not to be, however—Ragnar badly hurt his back during practice in Cortana, Italy. He came home, being unable to compete further. Ragnar rallied, however; back in the US, he took third in

the Northwest Championships in 1958, and set a hill jumping record of 224 feet at Multorpor Hill the following year.

Today, Ragnar is retired and lives in Washington State, although he still skis and makes annual trips to Norway to visit Kongsberg relatives and friends. He has donated several items from his

skiing celebrity days to the National Nordic Museum—including the iconic red sweater—where they are valued parts of the collection.

Ragnar Ulland's existing Multorpor ski hill record of 224 feet still stands.

team was coached by Alf Engen and Walter Prager. Gustav Raaum, who had won Norway's junior Holmenkollen tournament, stayed to attend the University of Washington and lead its jumping team, becoming a mainstay of Northwest ski jumping. Raaum listed fifty-six Norwegian students who competed for Northwest schools, forty-one in Washington alone. "The Milwaukee Ski Bowl hosted the National Jumping Championships in 1948, and a new distance record was set there in 1949, by a Norwegian exchange student."

A major blow to Northwest skiing came in December 1949, when fire destroyed the lodge and train depot at the Milwaukee Ski Bowl, and the Milwaukee Road decided not to rebuild in fall 1950. The loss of the Ski Bowl's Olympic caliber jumps was a major blow to Northwest ski jumping, although the sport continued at Leavenworth, Snoqualmie Pass, and elsewhere. Leavenworth hosted four National Jumping Championships through 1978, and three distance records were set there. In 1972, Leavenworth native Ron Steele became the second Washingtonian to be selected to the US Olympic jumping team, joining Ragnar Ulland (Olav's nephew) in 1956.

In 1954, "a hardy group of Norwegian ski jumpers," led by Olav Ulland, Gustav Raaum, and others, formed the Kongsberger Ski Club. The club built a ski jump at Cabin Creek east of Snoqualmie Pass, held competitions, gave jumping instructions, and assisted with jumping competitions at Olympic Games and international competitions.

Interest in ski jumping in North America diminished in the 1960s, and dropped further in the 1970s. The last Leavenworth tournament took place in 1978, which was a National Championship. In 1982, the *New York Times* published an article, "Ski Jumping Faces a Long Decline," saying the popularity of ski jumping had nosedived and the sport was struggling.

Despite the ebbs and flows in popularity, Nordic ski jumping had a positive impact in the Northwest, serving as a way to continue Nordic traditions and values while sharing them with a broader community. National pride in American athletes of Nordic descent grew. Alf Engen was named skier of the century in 1950, and together with Torger Tokle, was inducted into the US Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in 1959. Northwesterners



"I'll do a somersault if you'll buy me a new pair of skis every time I break one," said Olav Ulland of the Seattle Ski Club, No. 1 jumper in the Northwest Indoor Ski Championships which closed last night at the Ice Arena. So he did, each night—but without breaking his skis.—Photo by R. Schumann.

Olav Ulland does a somersault during the Northwest Indoor Ski Championships. The skiers descended the jumping hill outside before coming through a window into the Ice Arena in front of the audience. Article clipped from *The Seattle Times*, November 12, 1939.

inducted into the US Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame include Seattle's Gustaav Raaum and Olav Ulland; Leavenworth's Hermod Bakke, Magnus Bakke, and Earl Little; and Portland's Hjalmar Hvam and John Elvrum.

The Washington State Ski and Snowboard Museum on Snoqualmie Pass preserves and shares the history of ski jumping in Washington through a multi-media exhibition showcasing film clips, memorabilia, and other collections pieces. Learn more at www.wsssm.org.

Great Courage or Low IQ: Early Attitudes Toward Ski Jumping by John W. Lundin

"(The) breath-taking pastime of risking life and limbs on skis" is how a 1937 *Seattle Times* article described ski jumping.

Filmmaker Warren Miller agreed. "Jumping takes great courage, or a low IQ," he said. "The agony of climbing, the shak-

iness of the scaffolds built out of scrounged lumber, and the lack of safety bindings kept most people from ever becoming ski jumpers. They were smart."

Many Nordic ski jumpers were much more blasé about the risks involved. This casual attitude of jumpers toward their

sport was described by Norwegian Olympian Torbjorn Yggeseeth in an interview in the *Seattle Times* of February 28, 1960. He scoffed at the idea of being afraid while flying the length of a football field over frozen terrain. "It's not really as dangerous as downhill skiing," he said. "You're only going about

60 miles an hour at top speed. As you follow the curve of the hill, you're never more than 20 feet high. And there are no trees to wrap yourself around. You land at 40 miles an hour. Some skiers land so gently they don't even leave a mark in the snow."

When Norway's Petter Hugsted won the

Olympic gold medal in jumping in 1948, he was asked which was harder: winning an Olympic Gold or winning the Holmenkollen? The Holmenkollen, he said. "In the Olympics you jump against four Norwegians, in the Holmenkollen you face fifty."