



When Norwegians immigrated to the United States, they introduced their new communities to ski jumping, an activity that had been part of their culture for thousands of years.

BY CHRISTINE JOHNSON

FEARLESS

FLIERS

IN NORWAY, there are carvings of humans skiing that date from 3,000 to 4,000 BC.

When the Vikings were active from 793 to 1066 AD, they were known to strap on skis to travel, descend the mountainous terrain and jump over obstacles while hunting.

The word “ski” comes from *skið*, an Old Norse word that translates to “cleft wood.”

In other words, skiing has been part of the country’s history for a very long time.

From the primitive days through the early 1900s, any kind of travel with skis was simply considered “skiing.” There was no distinction between cross-country, Telemark or alpine, for example.

That included ski jumping as well, which may be hard to imagine knowing the exhilarating sport it has become. According to John W. Lundin, lawyer, historian and the author of “Ski Jumping in Washington State: A Nordic Tradition,” ski jumping was just a part of the “normal” skiing that Norwegian kids learned. “Skiing on their way to school, down hills, they would build jumps over fences, so they didn’t have to stop,” he says.

Over time, different styles were defined, and people all over the world were introduced to them. Then the separate methods went from leisure activities to competitive sports when athletes saw they could put their skills to the test against others.

Ski jumping took off rapidly. The first recorded effort happened in 1808 when Danish-Norwegian lieutenant Olaf “Ole” Rye lofted himself 31 feet through the air as a way of demonstrating courage to his fellow soldiers.

In the mid 1800s, ski jumping was a regular addition to Norwegian ski carnivals. The first officially measured vault, made by legendary Nordic athlete Sondre Norheim, is believed to have occurred in 1860. Two years later, Trysil, Norway, played host to the world’s first public ski jumping contest. Four years after that, either Rye or Norheim—there are conflicting reports—took home top honors in Høydalsmo, Norway, at what’s considered to be the first event with prizes.

The successful competitions made ski jumpers household names, and participation surged. The demand led ski clubs to start all over Norway. In 1877, the Christiania Skiklub was founded in what is now known as Oslo. Then in 1881, the Norwegian Nordic skiing club, which still exists, established the Association for the Promotion of Skiing, a group that would later produce the Holmenkollen Ski Festival. At its first event in 1892, both the festival and the

sport got a status boost when the Norwegian royal family began donating the King's Cup trophy. To this day, the award is bestowed upon the annual winner.

COMING TO AMERICA

In the late 19th century, ski jumping gained traction in Europe and North America. Like in Norway, its exponential growth in the midwestern and northwestern United States prompted the formation of countless ski clubs.

Lundin says the popularity in these regions can be linked to the influx of Scandinavian immigrants, who were drawn to the areas by the climate, geography and employment opportunities and others who had emigrated before them. They brought with them the ski jumping skills they had learned in the Old Country, and their enthusiasm for the activity.

Many people credit ski jumping's rapid acceleration in the U.S. to the owner of the Boxrud & Hjermstad department store in Red Wing, Minnesota. A Norwegian-American, Christian H. Boxrud unexpectedly found himself managing the Aurora Ski Club, a collection of fellow immigrants who were looking to introduce Norway's trendy sport to their new homeland.

The ski club organized fledgling tournaments and exhibitions in cities with strong Norwegian-American populations, like its first major contest in 1887 in Red Wing. Competing in the event was 24-year-old Mikkel Hemmestvedt who, the year prior, had won the King's Cup in his home country of Norway. Now a resident of

Minnesota, he wowed the crowd by soaring 37 feet to notch America's first ski jumping record.

Boxrud, an organizational and



promotional wizard, saw what Hemmestvedt could do and flexed his business-savvy muscles. He vigorously recruited the skier and his older brother Torjus, believing the duo could turn Aurora into a premier ski club and establish Red Wing as the ski jumping capital of the U.S. After two years of coaxing—including guaranteeing them jobs at Red Wing Furniture Company—the siblings signed on.

Ski jumping to this period had been seen as a recreational pastime. There wasn't a governing body keeping order, so competitions went on without set rules, and hills had no standards. Boxrud looked to change that. He and Aurora's members crafted a six-point scoring system that accounted for jump distance and style, which echoed the sport's Norwegian

roots. (Later, the U.S.'s initial governing body, the National Ski Association, adopted the system with minor tweaks.)

In 1890, at a meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Central Ski Association (CSA) was formed. America's first ski sport organization, it managed all clubs in the Midwest. The CSA's inaugural tournament, deemed America's first national ski jumping event, took place a year later in Ishpeming, Michigan. The Hemmestvedt brothers treated the sizable audience to a show, one-upping each other with each jump. Mikkel finished the day with a 78-foot leap, and at the end of the event, all three athletes on the podium hailed from Red Wing. The tournament put the Aurora skiers in an even bigger spotlight, and fans christened their unique straight-body technique as "Red Wing style."

During this time, Lundin says it was principally Norwegians who both competed and watched their favorite sport. But it didn't take long for others to get on board. "If you've seen ski jumping, it's an exciting event. So, it pretty quickly gained a following among non-Scandinavians," he notes.

Tournaments expanded and



flourished. According to Lundin, in the Midwest, between 50,000 and 100,000 spectators swarmed to the competitions, and 5,000 to 10,000 regularly watched in the Northwest. These supporters traveled far and wide to follow the tournament circuit, and trekked steep hills to reach the jump sites and endured often frigid and snowy conditions.

Two entities did a lot to build the public hype. The first was the press. "Newspapers throughout the country were real supporters of this crazy new sport of skiing [and] gave extensive coverage," Lundin says. In the 1930s, he recounts that the Seattle papers included six or eight articles about skiing or ski jumping in each edition, and writers covered tournaments not only locally, but in the Midwest, California and



Competitors Gene Kotlarek, Oyvind Floystad and Jon St. Andre hike up the steep hill to reach the takeoff point at the 1959 National Ski Jumping Championships and Olympic trials at Leavenworth, Washington.

FIGHT FOR FLIGHT



Norwegian world champion ski jumper Johanne Kolstad (right) and her sister Kitty at Earls Court, London, 1938.

fun since the beginning. In 1862—at the world's first public ski jumping event in Trysil, Norway—Ingrid Olsdatter Vestby flew nearly 20 feet. In 1917, Norwegian skier Olga Balstad-Eggen came to the U.S. and competed against men in some early tournaments at Mount Rainier. She even took top honors in one, Lundin says.

At the first Winter Olympic Games in 1924 in Chamonix, France, men's ski jumping was among the program's six sports. Female jumpers, on the other hand, had to wait 90 long years to compete in the Olympics, thanks to the "inherent sexism that dominates our country and our sport," says John W. Lundin, a lawyer and historian, and the author of "Ski Jumping in Washington State: A Nordic Tradition" and other books on the sport's history.

But that doesn't mean women hadn't been in on the

Several ski clubs in the northwestern U.S. included female members who participated in events. Then in 1934, champion jumper Johanne Kolstad, a.k.a. "The Queen of Skis," came to America when her home country of Norway banned her from events because she'd beaten her male counterparts several times. For years she toured the States, promoting ski jumping, battling in a couple of tournaments and demonstrating at exhibitions that women could indeed jump.

By the early 2000s, North American female ski jumpers had had enough, pushing for acceptance from the international community. A group filed a lawsuit in an attempt to enter the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, but after a months-long battle, they lost. "The Olympic Committee from the beginning was always one of the most conservative and resistant to change," Lundin says.

Since at least the 1930s, athletes have fought with the Olympic Committee over who could compete in the Olympics; most notably who was a professional athlete and who wasn't. "It kept the people who made their living from skiing from competing as amateurs," Lundin adds. "That very rigid concept of who was able to be 'an Olympic athlete' permeated the Games for many years."

Between litigation and lobbying, the international community finally altered its tune. In 2014, female ski jumpers competed at the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

PHOTOS COURTESY INGRID WICKEN, INGRID P. WICKEN / CALIFORNIA SKI LIBRARY

TOP PHOTO COURTESY LEAVENWORTH SKI HERITAGE FOUNDATION; BOTTOM PHOTO BY H. F. DAVIS / GETTY IMAGES

Europe, too.

The second group to advance the sport was the train operators. They produced advertisements, supported local ski clubs and transported athletes to and from events.

“Most of the regions where ski jumping took place were accessible by railroad—sometimes by railroad only,” Lundin says. “They saw it as a way to promote passenger travel to the tournaments.”

READY FOR TAKE-OFF

Ski jumping’s popularity in the U.S. declined a bit after World War II. As far as newspapers covering the tournaments, “at best you’d get a report of who won,” Lundin says. “I think that’s the result of the Scandinavians not picking up the sport of their elders, the original immigrants.”

The influence of downhill skiing also played a big role, especially with kids. “The young people who a decade before might have gone into ski jumping were instead choosing alpine skiing,” Lundin says. “They saw alpine skiing as being more interesting and sexier than ski jumping.”

North Americans’ fascination dwindled even more in the 1960s and ‘70s. But Lundin is aiming to reawaken the nation’s love of the sport by looking to the past.

“I was never a ski jumper myself, but doing all of this research I became fascinated with it,” he says. “It was such a big part of our skiing history that no one [these days seems to know] about. I’m on a crusade to bring those memories back, and let people know how rich a tradition we had.” ▼



LEARN MORE

Check out John W. Lundin’s book, “Ski Jumping in Washington State: A Nordic Tradition.” It can be purchased from local and national bookstores, and from [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). The author is donating his portion of profits from the book to the National Nordic Museum and the Washington State Ski and Snowboard Museum. Visit johnwlundin.com or email the author at john@johnwlundin.com.

HOLMENKOLLEN BY THE NUMBERS

For more than a century, Nordic ski jumping competitions have been held almost every year at Oslo’s Holmenkollen. Here’s a look at the impressive numbers behind the world newest and most modern ski jump.



1892

THE YEAR THE ARENA’S FIRST SKI FESTIVAL WAS HELD. ATHLETES TOOK OFF FROM A RAMP MADE FROM STICKS AND SNOW.



1966 & 1982

THE YEARS THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS WERE HELD AT HOLMENKOLLEN



1,000 TONS

THE AMOUNT OF STEEL IT TOOK TO CONSTRUCT THE SKI JUMP



200

THE NUMBER OF FEET IN THE AIR THE JUMP TOWER PERCHES OVER OSLO



250

THE NUMBER OF STEPS IT TAKES TO GET TO THE TOP OF THE JUMP



18

THE NUMBER OF TIMES THE JUMP HAS BEEN REDEVELOPED SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 1892



2010

THE YEAR THE SKI JUMP OPENED AFTER A REDESIGN BY JDS ARCHITECTS



35.7

THE SLOPE’S STEEPEST POINT IN DEGREES

PHOTO BY LINN SARVUD JOHANSEN / VISIT OSLO

OSLO