

Silver Skis Race on Mount Rainier (1934-1942, 1947-1948)

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The Silver Skis Race on Mount Rainier, held from 1934 to 1942 and in 1947 and 1948, was an iconic Northwest event and one of the country's best-known ski races. Skiers hiked from Paradise Lodge at 5,400 feet elevation to the climber's hut at Camp Muir at 10,000 feet, then raced down Muir Glacier to Edith Creek Basin just above Paradise, descending more than 4,400 vertical feet in about three miles at speeds sometimes reaching more than 60 m.p.h. It was a rough virtually uncontrolled downhill course in a dramatic setting. Racers faced conditions ranging from glacier ice to slush in a race that quickly achieved legendary status. Austrian Hannes Schroll, who had the fastest time in 1935 and 1936, described how to run the course: "You stand at the start and you look at the finish and then you try to run a straight line" ("50 Competitors ..."). This People's History is by John W. Lundin, who helped start the Washington State Ski and Snowboard Museum and has written two books on Northwest ski history -- *Early Skiing on Snoqualmie Pass* (2017) and *Skiing Sun Valley: A History from the Union Pacific to the Holdings* (forthcoming, 2020).

Downhill Dash from Camp Muir

In the early 1930s, Alpine skiing was just starting to gain a following in the Northwest, where ski jumping had long dominated ski competitions because of the area's large population of Scandinavian heritage. In the winter of 1933, Ben Thompson, the manager, winter sports director, and chief guide at Mount Rainier's **Paradise Lodge**, introduced slalom skiing with weekly races at Paradise Valley, where many of the area's best skiers learned their skills. Alpine skiing was so new to the region that from December 17, 1933, to January 28, 1934, *The Seattle Times* published a series of seven ski lessons provided by Thompson, explaining "how to learn, how to develop, how to master the fundamental turns on which all skiing success is built" ("Learning to Ski").

Designed to promote the fledgling sport of Alpine skiing, the Silver Skis Race was conceived by well-

known skiers including Hans Otto Giese and Don Fraser, who convinced *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* sportswriter Royal Brougham to have his paper sponsor the race. Brougham compared the race to the Kandahar race at Murren, Switzerland, "the Kentucky Derby of ski racing" ("The Morning After"). Given the high-altitude location, weather would be an issue from the start, causing the cancelation or postponement of several races and contributing to a death in 1940. Winners were to receive a trophy created by silversmith Carl Zapffe, with two vertical skis around a central core.

The first mention of the Silver Skis Race came in the *P-I* on December 24, 1933, reporting an announcement by the National Park Company, the private company that operated concessions in Mount Rainier National Park, of the race schedule for 1934. A new event was included -- the "[f]irst flying mile exhibition ...[a] downhill dash from Camp Muir -- right up there in the clouds brother -- to Paradise, a real test of the ski rider's ability, will be the main event of the programs" (Donahoe, "Rainier Ski Slate ...").

The First Race

Many of the **Northwest's best skiers** entered the 1934 race, including Hans Otto Giese, Ben Thompson, Hans Grage, Paul Gilbreath, Wolf Bauer, Carleton Wiegel, Don Fraser, Alf Moystad, Martin and Ole Tverdal, and more. There were no lifts, so racers hiked for three hours from Paradise Lodge to Camp Muir where the race began, using sealskins, canvas socks, or Klister wax. In an interview quoted in *Ancient Skiers of the Northwest*, Don Fraser said ski gear was rudimentary, homemade, and adopted from other sports:

"from riding breeches and corduroy pants to gabardine knickers and jumping suits. Skis were a motley variety, too, both with and without metal edges but with lead slabs nailed on tips for additional weight ... There were few ski boots ... I used a Wisco hiking boot shaped somewhat like a squared off ski boot" (Fraser).

For that race, held on April 22, 1934, there was a mass start where racers lined up across the hill and started at the same time, resulting in mayhem and collisions. Sixty-six skiers started, 44 finished, four were hurt. *The Seattle Times* said skiers' speed was so great they couldn't control it, and quoted the race's assistant starter: "Within a mile they began falling ... There were explosions of snow as they churned into it" ("Fraser Wins 5-Mile ..."). According to notes from a 1992 interview, Wolf Bauer recalled that "[w]ith the mass start, it was just like a horse race. After a fast schuss at the start, the racers hit washboards and all but a few leaders fell" ("Wolf Bauer Taped ..."). Bauer had the lead but did a high-speed somersault, broke a ski, and lost both poles and his goggles, but still managed to finish fifth, though he was disqualified for missing a control gate.

The race was won by Seattle's Don Fraser, later a 1936 U.S. Olympic ski team member, on skis with lead slabs nailed on for extra weight, who barely edged out Carleton Wiegel. Martin Tverdal raced on jumping skis with no poles, fell and went "whirling end over end like a top" ("Fraser Wins Ski Race ..."). Marguerite Strizek won the women's race, "riding in the old telemark position -- weight on one foot, the other advanced -- from top to bottom" ("Fraser Wins 5-Mile ..."). (Women and juniors competed on a shorter

course.) Several press services covered the race and Universal Newsreel filmed it, bringing national attention to Northwest skiing.

National Championships and Olympic Trials

The 1934 Silver Skis Race helped publicize Alpine skiing and increase its popularity. In October 1934, the Pacific Northwestern Ski Association amended its bylaws to recognize Alpine skiing -- its activities had previously been limited to ski jumping and cross-country racing. The move recognized the "tremendous growth in the popularity of slalom and downhill racing ... Slalom and downhill racing are entitled to equal recognition with jumping and cross-country" ("N.W. Bids ..."). Alpine events were added to the Pacific Northwest championships, and a four-way combination championship started the following year, with equal weight given to each branch of competition.

No separate Silver Skis Race was held in 1935. Instead, the National Downhill and Slalom Championships and Olympic Trials were held on Mount Rainier that April, a major event that received extensive nationwide publicity. Austrian Hannes Schroll won the downhill, slalom, and combined titles, beating all the U.S. racers. Dartmouth's famous racer Dick Durrance finished second and his teammate A. L. Washburn was third. *The Seattle Times* called Schroll "a tornado on skis; a whooping, yodeling, hat-throwing, rip-snorting fool who doesn't respect fog, ice, precipices, avalanches or tradition" ("Schroll Wins ..."). However, Schroll was not an American citizen so could not join the U.S. Olympic team. Tacoma's Ethelynne "Skit" Smith won the women's National Slalom title, and her sister, Ellis-Ayr Smith, won the women's National Downhill and the Combined National Championship titles. Schroll was given the Silver Skis trophy and Ellis-Ayr Smith the women's trophy. Five Washington skiers were selected for the 1936 U.S. Olympic team for the games in Garmisch, Germany -- Don Fraser, Darroch Crookes, Grace Carter, Ethelynne Smith, and Ellis-Ayr Smith.

Ski equipment and techniques had improved, problems of the first Silver Skis race were addressed, and the event soon became one of the country's major tournaments. The mass start was eliminated so skiers started at one-minute intervals, and the finish line was moved uphill from Paradise Lodge to Edith Creek Basin, eliminating the slush and flat slopes that plagued skiers at the end of the 1934 race.

"Don't Make Turns"

For the Silver Skis Race of 1936, which the *Times* called "America's longest (and probably toughest) downhill ski race," Hannes Schroll returned, but he was a ski instructor at Yosemite, making him a professional under the rules of the day, so he competed "'outside' the competition" ("Skiers Face Test"). Those in the official competition included Portland's Hjalmar Hvam, the Northwest's best four-way competitor; several of Canada's best racers; most of the University of Washington ski team, led by John Woodward; Hans Grage, a contender for the 1936 U.S. Olympic ski team; and Don Amick, later a member of the 1948 U.S. Olympic ski team. Missing were the five Washington members of the 1936 U.S. Olympic Team, most of whom stayed in Europe after the games to compete in other tournaments. Schroll had the fastest time of the day, and Hjalmar Hvam took home the competition trophy by following Schroll's

philosophy of "Don't Make Turns" -- he won the race in five minutes and 38 seconds, about half of Don Fraser's time in 1934, despite taking a terrific fall where he hit some rocks and "hurtled into the air fully twenty feet," losing at least 10 seconds ("Muir Race Time Cut ..."). Alf Moystad said he learned you "[r]un a race straight, and your legs don't tire. Try making turns, like some did to check speed, and your legs turn to rubber. The moral -- take it straight" ("Muir Race Time Cut ..."). Margie French of Portland's Cascade Ski Club won the women's race.

The 1937 Silver Skis Race was scheduled to take place not long after Sun Valley Resort in Idaho, the first destination ski resort in the U.S., opened in December 1936. Sun Valley's inaugural Harriman Cup Tournament attracted 44 of the best European and American skiers, a number of whom came to Washington afterward to ski on Rainier, helping turn a regional event into an international one. Sun Valley Ski School sent its director Hans Hauser, twice downhill and slalom champion of Austria, and his assistant, Austrian Josef Schwaighofer, to the Silver Skis race. Top Norwegian skiers in attendance included Sverre Kolterud, a ski jumper and one of the best downhillers in Europe, who finished third in the Harriman Cup downhill, and Sigmund Ruud, 1928 Olympic silver medalist in jumping, 1937 U.S. National Jumping Champion, and one of the greatest all-around skiers. Also entered were Sigfried Engl, assistant to Schroll at Yosemite and later longtime director of the Sun Valley Ski School, and two members of the 1936 U.S. Olympic Team, Don Fraser from Seattle and Alfred D. Lindley from Minneapolis, President of the Sun Valley Ski Club who later married Seattle Olympian Grace Carter. Northwest favorites included 1936 Silver Skis trophy winner Hjalmar Hvam, Northwest Slalom Champion Don Amick, and Canadian racers headed by Tom Mobraaten.

Bad weather caused the 1937 race down from Camp Muir to be postponed then canceled. The crowd of 6,000 was disappointed, but spectators did get to see a hastily organized slalom race, a short 25-gate run from the shoulder of Alta Vista (a short distance above Paradise Lodge) that was won by Sigfried Engl, followed by Hans Hauser and Don Fraser. After the race, Norway's Sverre Kolterud and Sigmund Ruud, along with Knut Frolich of the Seattle Ski Club, did somersaults off improvised takeoffs.

More International Ski Stars

In 1938 the Silver Skis Race drew more international contestants. Hannes Schroll was back, along with "two Sun Valley ... hot shots" who were favorites to win -- instructors Max Hauser (Hans Hauser's brother) and Paul Deschman, "powerful downhill men, with legs like pistons" ("Hauser, Deschman ..."). Sun Valley had chairlifts, allowing skiers to get in 25,000 vertical feet of skiing a day, giving them an advantage as the Silver Skis was a "schuss" race, where the skier who can run the straightest line from top to bottom has the advantage over skiers who do check turns. The race included Don Fraser, along with much of the U.W. ski team and the best of the local racers. For the second year in a row, bad weather and 60-m.p.h. winds caused the race to be postponed, disappointing a crowd of 8,000. An exhibition slalom race was held, which was won by Portland's Hjalmar Hvam. After the race, Hvam and Olav Ulland entertained the crowd by doing a side-by-side flip on their skis.

When the 1938 race from Camp Muir to Edith Creek Basin was eventually held a few weeks later on May 1, Hannes Schroll, who was starting first, said to be an unlucky position, had a phenomenal run. Right afterward he said "I would give ... ten bottles of champagne ... GOOD champagne ... to the man who comes down faster than me" ("Fraser Speeds ..."). As it turned out, *The Seattle Times* reported the next day, Schroll "owes Don Fraser of Seattle the ten bottles," since the local skier, metaphorically described as "riding a Buck Rogers rocket ship," won his second Silver Skis Race, leaving Schroll in second place ("Fraser Speeds ..."). Carl Neu was third (he would later lead the U.W. ski team), Hans Grage of the Washington Ski Club was fourth, and Olav Ulland from Kongsberg, Norway, was fifth. Ulland, a famous ski jumper, the first man to jump more than 100 meters, had recently arrived to coach ski jumping in the Northwest.

A promising young ski racer, Gretchen Kunigk of Tacoma, won the women's race. Kunigk later married Don Fraser, and in the 1948 Olympic Games in St. Moritz she won the first skiing medals by any U.S. competitor, a gold and a silver. Both Don and Gretchen Fraser are honored in the Washington Ski and Snowboard Museum's Olympic display.

In 1939, Austrian Peter Radacher from the Sun Valley Ski School was the favorite to win the Silver Skis race. A successful racer in Europe and one of the world's greatest skiers, he had placed second in that year's Harriman Cup. Others in the 29-skier field included prior Silver Skis winners Hannes Schroll and Don Fraser; ski instructor Sigfried Engl from California; Arthur Schlatter, a Sun Valley instructor; Reidar Andersen of Oslo, Norway, winner of three Holmenkollen jumping tournaments, making him champion of Norway; up-and-coming ski star Sigurd Hall of the Seattle Ski Club; members of the U.W. ski team; and other top Northwest racers. Radacher topped the fast field to win in record time of 4 minutes, 51.8 seconds, as he "went boiling down it in an unbelievably straight line" according to *The Seattle Times* ("Radacher Wins ..."). For once, the conditions were good, with a spotless sky and excellent snow conditions from start to finish. Schlatter finished second and Andersen third. Don Fraser finished sixth and Sigurd Hall 10th. Dorothy Hoyt of the Washington Ski Club won the women's competition, beating Sun Valley's Margaret Jennings (who later married Dick Durrance).

Tragedy Strikes

The 1940 Silver Skis Race attracted a field of 40 racers that included some of the country's best skiers, led by Toni Matt of North Conway, New Hampshire, an outstanding German racer who won Sun Valley's 1939 Harriman Cup. Matt would later teach at Sun Valley. Local favorite Sigurd Hall, a Norwegian immigrant, had proved himself to be one of the country's top competitors in the National Four-Way Championships held the prior month in Washington. Hall won the downhill race and finished third overall in the tournament, behind Alf and Sverre Engen, largely because he lacked the jumping skills of those famous Norwegian brothers. Also entered were Sigfried Engl, then teaching at Sun Valley; 1936 winner Hjalmar Hvam; and Bill Redlin, leader of the U.W. ski team and 1940 National Downhill and Slalom Champion. Showing the prestige of the race, equipment-maker Anderson & Thompson produced an "A & T Silver Skis Model" ski, which sold for \$13.95 at Warshal's in 1940. Its competition was an "Otto

Lang Model" ski selling for \$12.95, and "The famous Sun Valley" ski for \$14.95.

The 1940 race ended on a tragic note, as Sigurd Hall was killed when he veered off course in a dense fog half a mile from the start and hit a rock, becoming the first death in sanctioned ski competition in the United States. Paul Gilbreath of the Washington Ski Club won the race, "but there was no elation over the win" ("Gilbreath Wins ..."). Sun Valley's Nancy Reynolds won the women's competition. In the future, the trophy for the fastest amateur would be known as "[t]he Sig Hall Memorial Trophy in honor of the clean-cut young fellow who was the personification of the amateur ideal" ("John Blatt Wins ...").

The *American Ski Annual* for 1940-1941 discussed Hall's death, and the incident caused a national re-evaluation about the place of downhill competition. At least one commentator said that prior Silver Skis Races had been run in even worse weather. At no time did the officials consider postponing the 1940 race because of weather conditions. The race course was clear for a considerable distance from the top before racers entered fog. Because Europe was then engulfed in World War II, Hall's family in Norway did not learn of his death until years later, and did not learn the details until relatives contacted Northwest mountaineering historian Lowell Skoog in the early 2000s.

Ironically, just a year before the fatality, Hall's friend Reidar Andersen had predicted that such an accident might occur. In an interview before the 1939 race, Andersen said:

"This downhill racing business is getting crazy ... Look at Mount Hood. Look at Sun Valley. High speed courses, both of them. You might break your neck. I'll tell you the right competitions -- jumping and slalom racing. Slalom gives you balance. Jumping gives you the true thrill of skiing" ("Ski Star Visits ...").

Sun Valley Hot Shots and Army Mountain Troops

In April 1941 two Sun Valley ski instructors, Sepp Benedikter and John Litchfield, along with five members of the University of Washington ski team, were among the 39 racers who challenged the prior year's winner, Paul Gilbreath. Bill Redlin, top U.W. skier and National Downhill and Slalom champion, missed the race because of an injury. The Junior Division had 56 racers, showing the potential of the Northwest's future ski stars. After adverse weather and poor visibility delayed the race for two days the course was shortened by a half-mile, starting at Little Africa instead of Camp Muir. Bill Taylor of the Washington Ski Club won in spite of falling four times -- "four snowy cartwheels" -- due to poor visibility caused by "flat lighting effects" before he got to the schuss down Panorama ("Taylor Tumbles ..."). Hugh Bauer of the Washington Ski Club was second.

The two "hot shots" from Sun Valley, Sepp Benedikter and John Litchfield, failed to finish: Sepp fell and damaged his binding and Litchfield fell and "was a 'cold potato' for several seconds" ("Taylor Tumbles ..."). Paul Gilbreath, who finished third, had the most controlled run but suffered a bad fall within sight of the finish. Ex-U.W. ski star Lt. John Woodward of the U.S. Army finished fourth. Shirley McDonald of the Washington Ski Club won the women's race. The conditions were the trickiest in the history of the race

due to snow and the flat light. None of the racers finished without falling at least once.

By 1942, with the U.S. having entered World War II, the U.S. Army was training "mountain troops" on Mount Rainier, where novices were taught by "many crack racers whom the unit numbers as ski instructors" ("Army Skiers ..."). The mountain troops trained on Rainier until 1943, when Camp Hale opened in Colorado, where they became the 10th Mountain Division. The army permitted mountain troops to enter local ski races to maintain their skills. *Seattle Times* headlines before the 1942 race read "Army Favored in Silver Skis" and "Army Entries in Silver Skis Are Dangerous," with those entries led by Charles McLane from Dartmouth, Paul Townsend of the University of New Hampshire, and Walter Prager, former Dartmouth ski coach. Five top Canadian racers entered the race at the last minute to make things interesting, bringing the total to 54 competitors.

After being postponed a day to April 12 because of the icy, rutted condition of the course, the race was won by a Seattle fireman, Matt Broze of the Seattle Ski Club, in 4 minutes and 57 seconds, near record time, despite his falling twice (he later said he only fell once). The army's Walter Prager finished two seconds behind, followed by Martin Popp, national champion from Timberline, and the army's Ray Zoberski and Charles McLane. Zoberski fell near the finish line, but his momentum carried him across in fourth place, and he became the only skier to finish the race on his back. Thirteen of the top 20 finishers were army mountain troops. Shirley McDonald, skiing for the Sun Valley Ski Club, won her second women's Silver Skis trophy with a record time.

Last Silver Skis Races on Rainier

No Silver Skis races were held between 1943 and 1945 because of the war. The competition was scheduled to begin again in 1946, but without a women's race. The planned 1946 race attracted 23 skiers, mostly local, but it was twice "weathered out" by blizzards and finally canceled. ("Silver Skis Put Over ...").

The 1947 race attracted a 20-man field, led by Sun Valley skiers, local favorite Don Amick, and Willi Hemming from the Multnomah Athletic Club. "A pair of Sun Valley experts flashed across the finish line only a fraction of a second apart," with the cup going to Willard A. South; Karl Stingl, from Seattle but skiing for Sun Valley, was second by just two-tenths of a second and Don Amick ("Seattle's ace downhill racer") finished third. ("South, Stingl ...").

The 1948 race was postponed three times because of adverse weather conditions, which cut the field from 35 to 10. Phil Puchner and several other Sun Valley skiers came to Rainier to race, but had to leave when the event was postponed. Mike Donahoe of the *Post-Intelligencer* described the situation as "Ceiling -- zero; visibility -- zero; Silver Skis -- zero" ("Silver Skis Event ..."). When the race was finally run on April 9, the course was shortened by 1,000 yards because of foggy conditions and started at Little Africa rather than Camp Muir. Paul Gilbreath of the Washington Ski Club won the race, becoming the second man to win the race twice, after Don Fraser, who had set the course used in 1948.

That was the last Silver Skis Race on Mount Rainier. Adverse weather was a continuing impediment,

newer ski areas became more popular than Rainier, and the National Park Service took a more rigid approach to Alpine skiing and sanctioned ski competition. In the 1960s, the Crystal Mountain resort just east of the park began the Crystal Mountain Silver Skis Race, a two-run giant slalom, but it was a different event. It never recaptured the allure and romance of the Silver Skis Race on Mount Rainier that, in the years it was run, made Washington skiing the talk of the nation.

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Map, Silver Skis Open Championship program, 1940



Hans Otto Giese, Don Fraser, and Alf Moystad, Paradise, Mount Rainier, April 22, 1934

Courtesy MOHAI (PI26897)



Silver Skis Race champion Marguerite Strizek, Mount Rainier, April 22, 1934

Courtesy MOHAI (PI26906)



Mass start, Women's Silver Skis race, and Don Fraser with trophy, *The Seattle Times*, April 23, 1934, p. 14



Finish line, Silver Skis Race, Mount Rainier, 1936

Courtesy MOHAI (PI26916)

THE SKIS TO HVAM



To Hjalmar Hvam of the Cascade Ski Club, Portland, Pacific Northwest downhill racing champion, went the Silver Skis trophy as he won the Camp Muir to Paradise Valley ski race yesterday, as he finished first among fifty-one competitors. His average speed was 88 1/2 miles an hour for the precipitous, bumpy, 3.18-mile course.

MUIR RACE TIME CUT ALMOST HALF

Silver Skis Race winner Hjalmar Hvam, *The Seattle Times*, April 10, 1936, p. 15



Exhibition slalom race to replace postponed Silver Skis Race, Paradise, Mount Rainier, March 27, 1938

Courtesy Tacoma Public Library (5550)



Silver Skis Race winners Don Fraser and Gretchen Kunigk (later Fraser) with trophies, Mount Rainier, May 1938

Courtesy MOHAI (1986.5.25547.1)



Peter Radacher, Silver Skis Race winner, Mount Rainier, 1939

Courtesy Tacoma Public Library (7306)

SILVER SKIS WINNER



Peter Radacher of Sun Valley, Idaho, who won the annual Silver Skis race yesterday afternoon at Mount Rainier. He broke all records in a month-long race from Crown Point to Paradise Valley. His time for the 2.14-mile race was 4 minutes 51.8 seconds.

Silver Skis Race winner Peter Radacher, Mount Rainier, *The Seattle Times*, April 16, 1939, p. 51

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