

Book Reviews

Allen, E. John B. *From Skisport to Skiing: One Hundred Years of an American Sport, 1840-1940*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993. Pp. 229. Notes, bibliography, index, photographs, illustrations, tables. \$30.

E. John B. Allen cites two highly symbolic incidents in the evolution of American skiing when he refers to Dartmouth student Jack Durrance's arrival in the Tetons for a bit of summer skiing in 1936 and, secondly, when he refers to an advertisement for skis which appeared in the *American Ski Annual* of that same year. Durrance, one of a pair of brothers at Dartmouth whose daredevil downhill style and success helped transform the sport in America, greets his Wyoming hosts with: "Gott sei Dank!" a German salutation that translates, "I've brought my skis" (p. 122). The advertisement, touting the advantages of skis sold under the brand name "Nordic," captures readers' attention with the bold type: "Ski Heil!" (p. 122). Like Durrance's greeting, "Ski Heil!" was obviously German, a greeting common to skiers who would encounter each other on the Alpine peaks of Europe. The ski shop that ran the advertisement was located in New Jersey.

The incidents, while seemingly inconsequential, actually speak volumes about the cultural transformation and a hybrid Anglo-Germanic Americanization of skiing that took place in the United States between 1920 and 1940. While the greetings, particularly in Durrance's case, smacked of linguistic dilettantism, they contained layers of meaning that strike at the heart of Allen's history, namely, the cultural transformation made manifest in the linguistic switch in America from "skisport" to "skiing." "... (U)nderlying the language shift," Allen argues, "was a denigration of the Norwegian heritage" (p. 122). The very word "ski" did not exist in English, but by 1900 it became accepted in the United States largely because it was the term Norwegian immigrants used to describe their method for getting around on snow. While the term originated with Norwegians, the history of skiing in America, Allen argues, is the story of a gradual but certain dissolution of Scandinavian cultural values and their replacement with values that originate in Germany, or the Alpine countries, in general, are transported to the United States via upper-class Britons, and are then transformed by upper-class, college-educated Easterners.

In the competitive, and especially the recreational, context, skiing in America came to mean not Nordic, or cross-country skiing over varied terrain and ski jumping, but Alpine skiing, sliding downhill on a pair of waxed boards. Illustrative of how deeply ingrained this identity of skiing has

become in American culture is a snippet from CBS-TV's coverage of the Lillehammer Winter Olympics in Norway. When American television aired a piece on the importance of teaching children to ski, it used footage of Norwegian children on cross-country skis sailing off small jumps made of snow. When CBS segued to American children learning to ski, the footage was of a downhill ski school in the Sierra. No comment was offered on the differences in equipment or style. Skiing in the United States, and to a great extent in Canada, also, has become synonymous with locked toe-and-heel bindings and schussing, a Germanic term again, down a mountain trail. Jack Allen's *From Skisport to Skiing* tells in meticulously researched detail how that identity came to be forged.

Allen's social history of American skiing is constructed on an extensive study of primary sources, including films, oral histories, and interviews, that blends elements of ethnic history, business history, regional history, political history, media history, linguistic history, the history of technology, and, of course, sport history. He is a professor of history at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire, ski country, so it would seem that his interest in the topic would spring naturally from his environment. That, however, is not entirely the case. Rather, his interest was sparked by an exhibit of old skiing prints in Innsbruck in 1976 during the winter in which the Olympic Games were held there. Allen was drawn to a ski manual from 1938 which described a game in which skiers skied diagonally towards each other until they collided. The winner was determined by the one who fell the least. Downhill skiers, of course, try to avoid colliding with each other or anything else. Allen writes: "Here was a vastly different skiing world from my own, yet one that was still within reach, and I wondered if I could find anyone who played 'Collision'" (p. xi).

"Collision" sounds like a game meant to be played on cross-country skis: "players ski diagonally towards one another." Moreover, it sounds like a game meant to be played, or certainly one more safely played, on level terrain. If so, this was a part of a "vastly different skiing world" from the one most North Americans would have known in 1976. Note the date. It was virtually on the eve of Bill Koch's silver-medal performance in the 30-kilometer cross-country race in the Innsbruck Games, the only top-three finish of an American cross-country racer ever in the Olympics and a performance that is reputed to have brought about a renaissance, of a limited sort, of Nordic skiing in the United States. In fact, when Allen began to research the history of American skiing, he discovered its roots were Norwegian and that the values inculcated by the Norwegian philosophy of skisport were more akin to those one might learn in a game of "Collision." For nineteenth-century Norwegians in the homeland, outdoor exercise, of whose forms skiing was the highest, fostered nation-building ideals of "strength, manliness, and toughness," as well as "purity of mind and body" (p. 11).

Such a philosophy was embodied in the Norwegian term *Idraet*, and that

philosophy was at the center of the establishment by Norwegian immigrants of the National Ski Association in Ishpeming, Michigan, in 1905. In the context of competition, the Norwegian showpiece events were long-distance races over varied terrain and ski jumping, both of which underwent dramatic transformations in America. Long-distance racing faded early from the winter sport scene because it proved too physically demanding and, hence, unpopular. Jumping offered a more interesting example, because the sport was transformed from its *Idraet* ideal of an equal emphasis on distance and style to an American obsession with distance while sacrificing style and, significantly, an American proclivity to offer cash prizes to the winner and to gamble on the outcome. The notion of “purity of mind and body” to be fostered in the winter wilderness yielded to American opportunism.

Ultimately, skiing in America became modernized and mechanized. It became a recreation for the wealthy rather than the keystone of a Scandinavian philosophy of life, and the thrust of Allen’s book is to show that the “developments that made skiing modern were the same as those that changed American society” (p. 5). In tracing the transformation of “skisport” to “skiing,” the author relies on Allen Guttman’s characteristics of modern sport set forth in his *From Ritual to Record*. Allen concludes that on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, all the elements were in place to launch the modern, mechanized, largely recreational form of Alpine skiing that dominated the American winter sports scene following the war. By 1940, the philosophy of *Idraet* had been banished by the more secular thrill of sliding full speed down a well-groomed mountain trail.

Allen’s *From Skisport to Skiing* is an important work in sport history if for no other reason than it fills a huge void. Typically, books that pass as skiing history contain more fluff than a Wasatch Mountain snowfall. Allen’s work is a well-researched, serious history. Moreover, it is a truly seminal work in the field because it yields the possibility of potentially valuable future work. Allen observes on the first page of his “Preface” that his history of skiing is not a story “fully told” (p. xi). Rather, many stories remain to be researched and told; one that he may not delve into thoroughly enough in the present volume is the matter of possible resistance on the part of Norwegian immigrants and even first-generation Norwegians (who would have been located in the upper midwest United States), to the transforming influence Eastern collegians such as Jack Durrance exerted on their way of life. It would be interesting, for example, to do a more in-depth study of the National Ski Association’s journal, *The Skisport*, to see how or if it changed its philosophical underpinnings as skiing became modernized and Americanized. If ethnic or cultural histories teach us anything, it is that the old customs do not die off completely in the face of change, and a study of skiing in the upper midwest in the crucial period from 1920 to 1940 might prove fruitful.

A larger question, and one considerably more difficult to answer, deals with Americans’ cultural fascination with breakneck speed, on skis, in cars.

in life, in general. Allen documents the influence the thrill of speed had on the transformation of skiing. "Wealthy skiers from the eastern seaboard . . . traveled to Europe and became devotees of the Alpine, not Norwegian, skiing in which speed and devil-may-care attitudes replaced the *Idraet* ideal" (p. 98). At the same time, wealthy Americans, virtually all Americans for that matter, were becoming devotees of speed in automobiles and in planes. Is it a technologically determined fascination with speed? After all, a different binding system and different ski manufacturing techniques made the Alpine style more accessible, a point Allen documents. Or is it something ingrained in the quick-shifting mobility of American culture? Whatever the answer, Allen's book offers further evidence that skiing is part of the American fascination with risk-taking and speed.

Of course, still to be studied in the considerable wake of Allen's book is the more-than-half-century from 1940 to the present, a period which, significantly, sees a re-emergence of the popularity of cross-country skiing in the fitness boom of the seventies. Is there even a trace of *Idraet* philosophy in the legacy of Bill Koch? How "tough, manly, and pure" was President Jimmy Carter when he broke his collarbone cross-country skiing at Camp David? Or, how did it come to pass that a Georgia peanut farmer put on a pair of cross-country skis in the first place? The questions, while only tangentially related to Allen's fascinating study, are not entirely facetious.

Springfield College

Dennis Gildea