

Norwegian Museums for Sports History and the History of Physical Activity

—SCOTT A.G.M. CRAWFORD
Eastern Illinois University

Holmenkollbakken Skimuseum and Jump Tower

Foreningen til Ski-idrettens, Fremme, Kongeveien 5, 0390 Oslo

Telephone (47) 22 92 32 00. Fax (47) 22 92 32 80

Open major portion of the year from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. and in the summer (1 June - 31 August) the times are extended to 9 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Norwegian Skating Museum

Frogner Stadion, Middelthuns gate 26, Oslo

Postal address - Postbox 5129, Majorstua, 0302 Oslo

Telephone (47) 22 43 49 20. Fax (47) 22 44 17 20

Very limited access. Tuesday/Thursday 10 a.m.— 2:30 p.m. and Sunday 11 a.m. –2 p.m.

Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter

(Museum of Modern Art)

N-1311, Hovikdden, Norway

Telephone (47) 67 80 48 80. Fax (47) 67 80 49 00

Open Tuesday to Thursday 10 a.m.– 9 p.m. and Friday to Monday 11 a.m.– 6 p.m. Admission varies according to programs, exhibitions and performances.

Special contact person: Reidar Brjeson, Head of the Sonja Henie Archive

The focal point of the Norwegian Skimuseum is the ski jump tower. The starting platform at the top of the tower is 60 meters from the ground and 417 meters above sea level. I walked to the top of the tower to enjoy the glorious panoramic view of wooded groves, the city of Oslo, and the islands sprinkled around the fjord that gives the capital access to the open sea. At the end of my museum tour I returned to the tower, retraced my steps to the jumping platform and for the first time got some appreciation of the technique, timing (jumpers are known for their almost uncanny ability to wait and wait for the optimum moment to begin their descent and catch the "best air"), and the wonderful sense of cultural continuity that sustains Norwegian jumpers. The original Holmenkollen ski jump was built in 1891, and its first jumping competition took place on January 31, 1892, in front of 10,000 spectators. The winning distance was 21.5 meters.

In 1914 the first take-off tower was constructed. Thirteen years later a new 19-meter-high tower was erected, and a record distance of 48 meters was achieved. Some sense of a nation's passion for ski jumping can be gauged by the fact that in 1946, at a "Peace Meet," there was a record gathering of 100,000 spectators.

In 1952 Norway hosted the Winter Olympic Games, and permanent stands as well as a new judges' box were added. On my museum tour I visited the judges' box and the press boxes, and the views are spectacular. The steepness of the descent that confronts ski jumpers is literally mind-boggling. The various 1952 jumping competitions played to capacity crowds, and the winning leap was 71.5 meters.

Holmenkollen was home to the World Skiing Championships in 1966 and 1982. In 1992 the center enjoyed its centenary. In its nearly one-hundred-ten-year history Holmenkollen has experienced fourteen building renovations. Alterations to the technical design of equipment and training advances have seen competition distances grow from 126.5 meters (1992) to 132.5 meters (1999).

The Ski Museum, located under the shadow of the jumping tower, was opened in 1923 under the supervision of *Foreningen til Ski-Idrettens Fremme* (the Organization for the Promotion of Skiing). The architect Arnstein Friling designed the current museum in 1983. It is blasted out of solid rock and in 1999 attracted more than one million visitors.

The Ski Museum seamlessly exhibits a series of thematic collections that allows the visitor an easy to view/read chronological overview of the history of skiing. There is skiing down through the ages (Karin Berg in her museum guide expressively writes, "Although only three letters long, the word ski is literally a pillar of Norway's cultural history"); rock carvings and the secret of the bogs (archaeological and anthropological surveys of ski fragments); Viking Kings and Birkebeiners (the place of skiing in Norse language and literature); the celebrated and extraordinary voyaging of Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amudsen; the role of modern polar expeditions and the recognition of lesser known but equally courageous and proficient travelers—see, for example, the Norwegian female Liv Arnesen's solo journey to the South Pole in 1994; the evolution of skis, in Norway, sub-titled "From utility to sport"; ski-sticks; military skiing; ski bindings; the Royal Family on skis; Morgedal in Telemark is examined as, not the birthplace of modern skiing, but rather as one place of importance in a region where skiing was, and is, a mass pastime followed with massive community enthusiasm; the evolution of cross-country skiing; the development of ski jumping from Telemark to the flying V; alpine skiing; waxing; trophies; ski philately; and a richly illustrated exhibit—which includes photographs, artifacts and memorabilia—of Norway as host to the 1952 and 1994 Winter Olympics.

The ski museum contains myriad sports history topics that have merited past discussion and beg for future analysis. In terms of the historical evolution and development of ski jumping, the museum's treatment of this aspect is masterly. With a series of bold photographs and concise captions museum visitors follow the progress of ski jumping from its origins in the 1860s with a crouched leap facilitating a 20-meter jump. A century later East Germany's 1960 gold medalist Helmut Recknagel, who held his arms stretched out in front of him, and Sweden's Jan Boklov, the inventor of the V-style in the late 1980s, transformed a relatively crude jump, bent knees and retracted legs, into an aerodynamic tour de force in which flying athletes soared as if Concorde-sculpted humans. While the V-style now consistently wins Olympic and world titles, the museum's photographs of the

Finnish style—arms close to the body and skis held rigidly in tight parallel formation—reveals an event that is the epitome of aesthetic excellence carried out in a domain where the most minute error is disastrous.

Another more encyclopedic area for possible sports history research is the matter of exploration, survival, stamina and competition. The most engaging single museum exhibit for this reviewer was the material devoted to Roald Amundsen, who became the first explorer to reach the South Pole. His team of five on December 14, 1911, reached the Pole three weeks before the British team led by Captain Robert Falcon Scott reached the South Pole. Amundsen won "the race," and Scott and his team perished on the return journey. The museum clearly, yet dramatically, shows the reasons for Amundsen's success (hickory skis, four well-constructed sledges and 52 dogs) and Scott's failure (heavier equipment and the tragic embrace of petrol engines and 14 ponies, and two motor sledges both of which malfunctioned and succumbed to the rigors of the Antarctic). In a similar vein, the museum does a superb job of outlining the achievements of Amundsen's hero, the Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen. In the years 1893-1896, Nansen explored the northern wilderness. His attempt to reach the North Pole with Hjalmar Johansen by ski, dogsled and kayak is an epic odyssey of courage and ingenuity. Visitors to Norway eager to pursue this line of inquiry are urged to visit and climb aboard the "Fram" (see the Frammuseet, The Polar Ship Fram Museum, Bygdynes, 0286 Oslo, Norway, telephone 22-43-83-70) that is surrounded on the museum walls by a comprehensive history of arctic exploration. The documentation and the narrative of the Amundsen/Scott "march" to the South Pole is remarkably unbiased, and the tales of perseverance and endurance graphically displayed at the Frammuseet are worth re-telling.

This sub-body of history makes for exciting reading and the focus on socio-cultural contexts surrounding celebrated accounts of extraordinary feats in the extreme cold is the sort of interdisciplinary project that could make for a lively, innovative history of physical activity doctoral dissertation. Although not a scholarly treatise, Frances Ashcroft's *Life at the Extremes: The Science of Survival* (2000) is a physiologist's account of living things adapting at the extremes of existence. Her narrative has a generous amount of generalized trivia, but her storytelling frequently sees her nicely navigating history of science terrains.

The anatomy of courage and the psychology of risk taking has always been part and parcel of the history, myth and legend of Mount Everest. Take mountaineer George Mallory, who died attempting to summit the Everest peak in 1924. While last seen within striking distance of the summit, he and his companion Andrew Irvine vanished. Mallory's body was found and identified high up on Everest in 1999. Six books on Mallory have been published in the last year (see an excellent extended book review of these sources in the *Economist* of July 15, 2000), and it would be fascinating to see similar exhaustive or biographical or contentious revisionist studies being written (in English) on Norwegian folk legends Nansen and Amundsen.

A special bonus of a visit to the ski museum is one of the most unusual items ever associated with a sports museum: a simulator in which visitors can "interactively" experience the excitement and adrenaline rush of ski jumping and downhill racing. Tremendously popular, the simulator is a science fiction-looking apparatus. Visitors are strapped into a contraption that allows one to get a sense of the excitement and adrenaline rush of ski jumping at Holmenkollen and downhill racing at Kvitfjell. Sports museums need to

draw on the Holmenkollen model and explore every opportunity to challenge visitors with visceral, "physical" learning experiences.

The Norwegian Skating Museum is a traditional, old fashioned museum. The exhibition rooms, while full of skating prizes, trophies and medals and photographs, seem as if trapped in a time warp. The sport of speed skating is such a visually exciting activity that it would have been appropriate, indeed expected, for visitors to look at a video screen and see the highlights of contemporary Norwegian champions. Johann Olav Koss (the "Michael Jordan of Norway") who dominated world and Olympic speed skating in the 1990s, but surprisingly he gets little attention. The museum is really a shrine of sorts to four earlier Norwegian folk legends: Axel Paulsen, 1855-1938 (a champion in speed and figure skating, creator of the Axel jump, and the inventor of the basic skate still used today in speed skating); Oscar Mathisen (a five-time World champion in the period 1908-1914 and a special sort of national hero as his successes took place just after Norway enjoyed nationhood and separation from Sweden in 1905); Ivar Ballangrud (four-time World champion and four-time Olympic champion over the period 1926-1938); Hjalmar Andersen (three-time World champion over the years 1950-1952). No wonder the latter acquired the nickname "King Happy." At the 1952 Oslo Olympics he won gold medals at 1500, 5000, and 10,000 meters.

The museum is literally packed with photographs and has glass cases full of memorabilia associated with these fabled Norwegian skaters. The English language museum guide claims that the museum is home to "a wide variety of pictures and written documentation of the history of speed skating and figure skating." While no one would quibble about the quality and quantity of the skating photographs, it is more of a challenge for the visitor to distinguish a clear historical picture of the emergence of skating within Norwegian culture. That being said, the museum has nooks and crannies full of fascinating cues on sporting activities that are the common property of a nation.

There are two small photographs (one signed) of America's great speed skater Eric Heiden. It is intriguing to think of his Nordic status had he been a Norwegian! The 1981 exhibit "Champions of American Sport," held at the National Portrait Gallery and organized by the Smithsonian Institute, noted that Heiden was "declared a folk hero in Norway" following his five gold medals at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics. In the entrance room to the museum is a six-tier case which shows the evolution of skates from primitive bone structures to modern designs more akin to space age toys.

In room two of the museum there is a significant focus on female champions such as Lisbeth Berg, Randi Thorvaldsen and Sigrid Sundby. Nearly hidden in one corner of this room is a glorious celebration of Sonja Henie's fabulous life as Norwegian champion figure skater, Olympic champion and Hollywood celebrity. There are nine Henie photographs—several more than one meter square—that chronicle the metamorphoses of little girl (1923) to glamorized starlet (1936) replete with white skates, ballistic grace and a remarkable degree of innocent sensuality.

In the museum's third and final room are photographs of people skating in Oslo, circa 1870, and scenes of a world skating championship held at the Frogner Stadium in 1922. Oscar Mathisen's spirit suffuses this area and to look at the faded strip of colored cloth—the Norwegian flag worn by Mathisen on every occasion that he competed—was strangely poignant for this observer. There is an eye-catching full-body length photograph of Mathisen

liberally bedecked and festooned with his career medals. Beside it is an imposing charcoal and paper sketch of Mathisen, dated 1924, and signed by artist Harald Brun.

The Henie-Onstad Art Center is neither a sports museum nor an archive with significant holdings of a variety of sports-related materials. Nevertheless, simply because of its connection with the famous Norwegian figure skater and three-time Olympic gold medalist—1928, 1932, and 1936—the Art Center is a wonderful place to visit. The Art Center opened in 1968 and was founded by Henie and her husband, shipowner Niels Onstad. The collection originally counted 300 works but now is home to more than 3,000 pieces. The Center presents exhibitions of Norwegian and international modern art as well as programs of film, video, concerts, ballet and theater. The Art Center's setting—only fifteen minutes from downtown Oslo yet spectacularly situated alongside the Oslo fjord and its frequent setting of art (sculpture, dance, theater) in the outdoors—makes for an artistic complex imbued with a strong sense of physicality. In the sculpture garden is an avant garde piece by the British artist Henry Moore entitled "Standing figure."

While the Henie-Onstad Art Center is not a sports museum in a traditional sense, the fact that it is home to the Sonja Henie Archive means that it offers unique opportunities for the scholar eager to focus on the career of Norwegian icon Sonja Henie. In communications with this writer, Art Center curator Reidar Borjeson pointed out that there have been Sonja Henie exhibitions in connection with the Atlantic Olympics and the World Figure Skating Championships in Manchester, England (hosted by the National Film Theater in London). In 2002 (the 90th anniversary of Henie's birth) the Art Center hosted a series of celebrations including a "new and much larger exhibitions of photographs from her three stages in life, as an amateur skater, film and ices how star in USA, and as an art collector." Furthermore, two new books on Henie were recently published and the archives exhibited her first car, a 1929/30 Cord convertible, her mink jacket, and some of her skates. The archive/library has considerable holdings on Henie (programs, letters, manuscript, films, press cuttings and photographs) as well as Henie's amazing trophy collection of more than 600 single objects received by her from 1925 up to 1967. In 1994 a Sonja Henie Film Festival took place in New York, and the American-Scandinavian Foundation published a brochure entitled "Sonja." This illustrated source is a fine example of a concise biography/filmography that would serve as an excellent teaching resource for a sports history lecture on Henie, popular culture, and Norwegian sport. As the "Sonja" catalogue states, Henie saw herself as both missionary and pioneer: "I want to do for figure skating what Fred Astaire has done for dancing."

After visiting Norway, I was struck by the fact that so little about Scandinavian sports history—with the exception of the monumental contributions to gymnastics by Swedish and Danish educators—finds its way into mainstream sport history. Polish sport historian Wojciech Liponski has argued forcefully that in Western histories and encyclopedias of sport the Slavic tradition is "either totally ignored or at best heavily under appreciated." The same is true for Scandinavia and, in particular, Norway, which is an intriguing country with a rich history. And as the museums reviewed here demonstrate, Norway has produced a series of noteworthy, courageous, and indefatigable citizens/athletes/explorers. The arena of Norwegian sport history and the history of physical activity is clearly an area of exciting potential.

