

# Social and Performance Elites in North American Skiing, 1935 vs. 1975

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From its beginnings as a major enterprise in North America during the 1930s through its achievement of prominence in the last 1960s and 1970s, two principal forms of elitism have shaped the inner reality and the outward image of skiing: social elitism and performance elitism. In social elitism, the sport has tended to borrow glamor and respectability through its association with famous and prominent people who may have only the most tangential interest in skiing. Performance elitism is essentially an “aristocracy of merit” in which those who perform at a level of excellence themselves acquire a kind of prominence in the society more broadly and may influence that larger community’s habits. Underpinning the relationship of these two trends has been a decline in the influence of social elites over the nature of the sport and a corresponding ascendancy of those who respect only the elitism that is founded on superior performance.

Instrumental in this development was a change in the processes of socialization within skiing, brought on in large part by the U.S. Army and the National Ski Patrol. At the suggestion of avid skiers in the Patrol such as Minot Dok, the Army during World War II committed itself to fielding the Tenth Mountain Division, a decision which hastened a revolution in training methods and in the production of advanced equipment. Skiing, moreover, was opened to a wide group of average citizens lacking in social distinction. Many of these emerged to lead the expansion of skiing in the post-war period.

In completing the breakthrough of the performance elites, two developments proved critical: the institution of the so-called “pro tour” under Bob Beattie, who enjoyed excellent financial and promotional connections; and the emergence of the “Hot Doggers,” free-style skiers who set the tone both in ski technique and in equipment and accessories. The coupling of the commercial marketability of the professionals and the “Hot Doggers” with the expansion of the skier population thus effected a substantial shift in patterns of control over the development and direction of skiing.

