

The Debate Over Ski Jumping in NCAA Competition

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In April 1980, less than two months after the Winter Olympics were held in Lake Placid, New York, the Ski Rules Committee of the NCAA met and voted 5 - 0 to eliminate ski jumping from future intercollegiate competitions. Ironically, the United States' best showing in a jumping event at the Lake Placid Games came when Walter Malmquist, a Dartmouth student, finished second in the 70-meter jumping segment of the nordic combined competition. Nordic combined, however, is scored by combining the results of jumping and a 15-kilometer cross-country ski race held the day after the jumps. Malmquist did not fare nearly as well in the race and missed winning a medal. Nevertheless, for American jumpers, his was a noteworthy effort.

Why did the NCAA committee vote to eliminate ski jumping immediately following a promising Olympic showing? What resistance was raised, and what were the issues discussed in coming to the unanimous decision? This essay studies the debate surrounding the decision to eliminate ski jumping from future competitions,

focusing on the rationales offered for dropping the event and the arguments offered by some members of the skiing community to keep the event. I have interviewed coaches who were on the Rules Committee, including Chip LaCasse of Vermont, who was the president of the committee and who led the movement to drop ski jumping, and Pat Miller of Utah, as well as coaches who favored keeping the event, including John Morton, then the Dartmouth coach, and Bud Fisher of Williams College. I intend to interview athletes who were affected, particularly Jeff Hastings, then a Williams undergraduate and now the expert commentator for CBS-TV for ski jumping; Ron Steele of Utah, who fought to retain the event; and Malmquist. In addition, I study the reports and editorials concerning the decision printed in *Ski Racing*, the journal that covers ski racing most extensively in North America.

In an editorial headlined “Stand Up for Jumping,” *Ski Racing* noted: “The first ski competitions in the United States took place on ski jumping hills in places like Ishpeming, Michigan, and Berlin, New Hampshire.” That statement ignores downhill races held by Scandinavian miners in the Sierra in the middle of the nineteenth century, but it is substantially correct nonetheless. In many ways, the 1980 NCAA decision to eliminate ski jumping can be read as another erosion of the Norwegian philosophy of skiing that was transplanted by Norwegian immigrants to North America, as historian John B. Allen argues in his book. I argue that it is that and more, because the debate revolved around economic concerns relevant to the period, concerns that Norwegians were dominating an American intercollegiate competition, and concerns that the number of talented American jumpers was decreasing, as was the number of suitable jumping hills on which a competition could be held. Most interesting, though, is that the debate over ski jumping became a struggle for power within a skiing subculture between the larger state universities (Vermont, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado, in particular) and the smaller New England liberal arts colleges (Dartmouth, Williams and Middlebury). Moreover, the debate was framed in terms of practicality and the salvation of intercollegiate skiing as opposed to an idealistic, traditional approach. A slice of irony exists in the fact that it was Dartmouth, most notably, that argued for maintaining the tradition of ski jumping competition, while, as Allen demonstrates in his history of American skiing, it was Dartmouth downhill skiers who in the 1930s struck a major blow to erode the Norwegian tradition and practice that had dominated ski competition in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century.