

Excellence on the Esca



Small vertical, big results: A 750-foot-high ridge in Ontario has spawned many of Canada's Olympic and World Cup champions.

BY LORI KNOWLES

Creative Canadian marketers call it the Blue Mountains but locals know it as the escarpment—a rim overlooking Georgian Bay, a geological landmark of Southern Ontario with a vertical drop of 750 feet and a 2.5-mile-long strip of steep ski runs that have produced some of the world's greatest ski racers: 1980 Olympic bronze medalist Steve Podborski; four-time Olympian Brian Stemmler; three-time World Cup downhill winner Todd Brooker; and six-time World Cup ace Laurie Graham. An impressive number

of Canada's top competitors spent their formative winters along this ridge: riding tows, dancing through gates, schussing icy chutes.

It started in the early 20th century, as it always does, with an intrepid group of men and women wearing laced boots and gabardine suits. Recognizing the ski potential of a snowy escarpment 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of Toronto near Collingwood, the Toronto and Blue Mountain ski clubs made their mark. Through the 1920s and '30s they built ski jumps and cut runs. History books say a fox-hunting trumpet called skiers to the slopes; horses hitched to sleighs

carried them to the runs. With names like Wearie, Gib, Nipper and Hans, these pioneers persevered. They transformed farm houses into clubhouses, used old Buick motors to power tows. In 1935 they hired Fritz Loosli, a Swiss immigrant, to head the show. His inventive sleigh/cable contraption carried nine people and their skis up the escarpment at a time. Five years later, Jackrabbit Johannsen was paid the princely sum of \$100 to survey the escarpment's terrain and create a development plan.

Then, in 1940, the Canadian National Railway (CNR) caught the bug. A special train was commis-

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GEORGIAN PEAKS

Above: An alpine racer flies down a course at Georgian Peaks. Established by Toronto lawyer Ian Rogers in 1960, just one year later the resort hosted the world's top racers at an event sponsored by Bee Hive Golden Corn Syrup. Left: View from the slopes of Blue Mountain, with a long view toward the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron.



BLUE MOUNTAIN



LAURENTIAN SKI MUSEUM

Left: Slovakian immigrant Jozo Weider arrived in 1941 to build Blue Mountain into a thriving resort. Above: In 1940, the legendary Jackrabbit Johannsen was paid \$100 to survey the escarpment terrain.

sioned to leave Toronto's Union Station every winter Sunday, reaching Collingwood by 11 a.m.. Maurice Margesson set up a ski shop in a baggage car to show off the latest fashion: lederhosen, snowflake ski sweaters, tapered tweeds. Ski racing flourished, of course. Sticks gathered from the Canadian "bush" served as slalom poles, and downhill snaked perilously through naked hardwoods. Jozo Weider arrived in 1941, a Slovakian skier with determination, ingenuity and charm. His perseverance in building Blue Mountain paid off. Through the next two decades the escarpment was lined with lucrative ski areas, one public: Blue Mountain; three private: Osler Bluff, Craigleith, and Alpine, plus Georgian Peaks, which was established in 1960 by Toronto lawyer Ian "Buck" Rogers, and has operated as both a public

and private facility.

It's little wonder that from this elbow-grease generation, a next generation of impressive ski racers emerged. Weaned on wartime innovation and unafraid of hard work, their parents pushed up their sleeves and got to it: cutting slalom poles, sewing flags, becoming gatekeepers, bootpacking courses so kids could race. To keep things interesting on small hills that lacked powder, extended pitches and glades, through the 1950s club racing grew strong: slalom, GS, even

downhill. The Canadian Junior Ski Championships were held at Osler Bluff Ski Club in 1959. Its winner was Elizabeth Greene from Rossland, BC. Her sister Nancy, 15—who would go on to win the first overall women's World Cup in 1967—placed eighth even though she dislocated her shoulder on the piste.

Perhaps it was inspiration from pro races such as The Bee Hive Giant Slalom (see the March-April 2014 issue of *Skiing History*) that spurred future champions on—a major sports event at Georgian



Stein Eriksen (center) won the first Bee Hive slalom in February 1961 on boilerplate conditions, with Aderl Molterer in second and Christian Pravda in third.



Todd Brooker came up through the Toronto Ski Club ranks at Blue Mountain. A member of the famed “Crazy Canucks” men’s alpine squad, his 1983 downhill victory on Kitzbühel’s fearsome Hahnenkamm is his most memorable win.



Steve Podborski learned to race at tiny Craigleith and in 1980 became the first North American male to win an Olympic medal in downhill (a bronze at the Lake Placid Games).



Osler Bluff racer Laurie Graham won five World Cup downhills during a career that spanned from 1979 to 1988.

Peaks in February 1961 with a cash prize of \$1,500 for first place. Sponsored by Bee Hive Golden Corn Syrup, the race attracted all the stars: Ernie McCulloch, Stein Eriksen, Austrians Aderl Molterer, Christian Pravda, and Othmar Schneider. They say Toni Sailer, winner of three Olympic golds, showed up but didn’t race. On boilerplate conditions it was Eriksen who won, with Molterer in second and Pravda in third. The following year Pepi Gramshammer entered the Bee Hive, along with Tony Spiess, Ernst Hinterseer and Jim McConkey, who came from nearby Barrie, Ontario, and went on to Whistler fame (for more on the Bee Hive Giant Slalom, see the March-April 2014 issue of *Skiing History*).

With 10,000 spectators and coverage in *The New York Times*, gigs like the Bee Hive made ski racing glam. A slew of Canadian success stories followed: scrappy escarpment kids in tall toques and puffy jackets and skinny racing pants. Among the first was Graham Hess, a Craigleith kid who was named to Canada’s national ski team at age 14 in 1964. Dan Hadley, also from Craigleith, followed Hess to the team in 1965. Georgian Peaks’ Diana Gibson finished third (combined) in the U.S.

National Alpine Championships in 1969. Perhaps the greatest achievement of that era on the escarpment was by a woman: Georgian Peaks’ skier Judy Crawford placed fourth in women’s slalom at the Olympic Winter Games in Sapporo in 1972. She competed in World Cup events from 1969-1973, garnering 23 top 10 finishes, including a third in Grindelwald in 1973.

Indeed, 1973 was a memorable year for escarpment racers. In mid-winter Bob Beattie’s 100s Grand Prix steamed into Southern Ontario, a pro tour promoted by Benson & Hedges that boasted \$400,000 in prize money and big names such as Jean-Claude Killy and Vladimir “Spider” Sabich, who had movie star Claudine Longet in tow.

In those days, local Craigleith racer Steve Podborski was gathering steam as well. As a Crazy Canucks, “Pod” joined Ken Read, Dave Irwin, and Dave Murray as they blazed across Europe in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. Podborski was the first North American male to win an Olympic medal in downhill, a bronze in 1980 at Lake Placid; in 1982 he was the first North American crowned World Cup downhill champion.

“Skiing as a kid on the escarpment,” says Podborski, “and then



Candace Crawford of Georgian Peaks ruled the Nor-Am circuit in 2014–2015, claiming four of the five titles (overall, slalom, giant slalom and alpine combined), along with second place overall in super G. In the 2018 Winter Olympics, she placed 25th in GS.

making it to the Olympics is the equivalent of playing soccer with a ball made of rags in a barrio and getting to soccer's World Cup. It's unlikely, but it's also an affirmation that the foundation of sport is play, and you can play with the best along the escarpment."

Pod was joined on the Crazy Canuck squad by Todd Brooker, a neighbor from Blue Mountain's Toronto Ski Club (TSC). Brooker's list of wins is long, perhaps none quite so spectacular as his World Cup victory on Kitzbühel's Hahnenkamm in 1983. Brooker attributes a large part of his success to the coaching at escarpment ski clubs.

"At the TSC where I started racing," Brooker explains, "my coach, Rudi Hiegelsberger, was from Austria. The clubs hired Europeans because they felt they had more experience. Rudi always talked about famous World Cup racers from Europe, the World Cup sites, the various courses; he was filled with fascinating stories. He impressed me

with the importance of the sport in Europe, the crowds that would show up to races. I was inspired. I wanted to be like Karl Schranz and Toni Sailer and Jean Claude Killy. I wanted to race in the Olympics and be a champion!" (For more on the Crazy Canucks, see July-August 2011 issue of *Skiing History*.)

Next, from Osler Bluff came Laurie Graham, one of the most consistent downhillers Canada has ever produced. She won five World Cup downhill races during a career that spanned from 1979-1988, and scored the first ever World Cup Super-G win when it was added to the circuit. Karen Stemmle of Georgian Peaks rocketed to several top-five finishes in World Cup downhill in the 1980s. Her brother, Brian Stemmle, raced for Canada on the national team for 14 years through the '80s and '90s, including 93 World Cups and four Olympics: Calgary, Albertville, Lillehammer, and Nagano.

The list of escarpment achievers through the 2000s doesn't stop



Veronica "Roni" Remme was named the Canadian ski team's Female Athlete of the Year in May 2019.



Brian Stemmle competed on Canada's national team for 14 years in the 1980s and 1990s, including 93 World Cup races and four Olympics.

there. It includes Larisa Yurkiw, Erin Mielzynski, Candace Crawford, Jack Crawford and Ali Nullmeyer of Georgian Peaks, Declan McCormack from Osler Bluff, Meg and Kate Ryley from Craigleith. Dozens of escarpment racers have gone on to ski for Dartmouth, Middlebury, Utah, Colorado, and beyond. In May 2019, with a swell of support and a slew of World Cup finishes in her stats, Roni (Veronica) Remme of Alpine Ski Club was named the Canadian team's Female Athlete of the Year.

How long the list will grow nobody knows, but one thing's for sure: Success on the escarpment proves racers don't need sky-high peaks and an Austrian pedigree to win. What athletes need is snow, some icons, and a grassroots community—oh, and a piste, even one as brief as 750 feet. ❄️

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