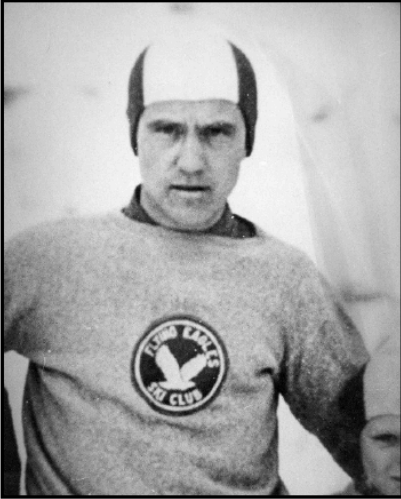


#159

Jimmy Ellingson

Born: 1906 Died: 1971



Jimmy Ellingson was a fine ski jumper in his own right, but sacrificed personal opportunity to serve youth. It was a decision that would prove invaluable to the American Skisport.

Jimmy Ellingson was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in 1906, and was a fine ski jumper as a young man, but he is best known as a skisport builder. Ellingson's greatest contribution came between the years 1933 and 1941, which was the "heyday" of the "Flying Eagles." For forty-one years, the name "Flying Eagles" commanded respect in the nation's ski jumping circles. More than 1,000 boys and girls had flown the colors of the Eau Claire, Wisconsin junior club, seven maturing into national senior champions. The club claimed to be the country's oldest junior organization in terms of consecutive years.

Founded in the basement of the Fourth Ward Grade School on a snowy January night in 1933 by seven boys and their leader, the Flying Eagles, by the end of the decade, were to leave an impact felt throughout the ski jumping world. The blossoming of this unique club is credited with playing a major role in ski jumping's explosion on the sports scene in the 1930s.

The man behind the Flying Eagles was Jimmy Ellingson, janitor at the school where the club was founded. He would go on to become an American Skisport Builder in the truest sense of the world. Ellingson made his great contribution in the years 1933-1941, termed the Flying Eagles' "heyday" but the foundation he built in that brief period still stands strong today as a memorial to his service.

Ellingson, the son of a Norwegian immigrant, was a builder of champions – and not only those who received trophies at the ski hill on a Sunday afternoon. At a testimonial in his honor held at Eau Claire in 1970, in conjunction with National Tournament, his Flying Eagles-nearly 100 strong-returned from all parts of the nation to pay tribute. Included were judges, lawyers, school administrators, doctors and other successful business people – guided onto the right paths in life through his influence. Ellingson was more than an outstanding ski coach. He was a leader, counselor, minister, teacher and disciplinarian all rolled into one, stressing sportsmanship, honesty and politeness. He took personal pride in the fact that none of his skiers ever got into serious trouble with the law.

There were more than 100 "original" Flying Eagles of the Ellingson era. With the help of his guidance, 17 became state champions and several more Midwest champs. In Midwest competitions, the Flying Eagles almost always swept honors. In senior jump exhibitions, of which there were many, they left audiences in awe.

Ellingson would never single out his members for individual praise, but the Flying Eagles most famous product was Billy Olson, who joined the club when he was five years old. For 20 years, as a senior jumper, he soared the heights, skiing in two Olympic Games and winning national championships in four classes-the only American ever to do so.

The secret to Ellingson's success, besides his personable abilities of leadership, was the club's ski hill, located on the grounds of the school he served. Built to accommodate jumps of from 15-60 feet, the hill was erected as a WPA project in 1936 under the influence of Ellingson and, after lights were installed, gained nationwide attention on February 28, 1937, when the nation's first night ski-jumping tournament was held. Most of the kids in the Fourth Ward School were ski-jumpers and rode the hill before and after school, at noon and during recess. Before the hill was torn down in the late 1950's, it was considered a top breeding ground for champion jumpers.

In 1939, Ellingson was named Central Junior Ski Jumping Chairman, and, for his service to youth, was granted the city's Distinguished Service Award that year. Following the war years, he continued to work with youth in other capacities and also served with the Wausau Ski Club. One of the trails on the nearby Rib Mountain Ski Area today bears his name.

At the club reunion in his honor in 1970, he told his products, "The Flying Eagles was the most marvelous thing that ever happened to me in my life. We had something like 17 state champions, but I like to think of every one of you as champions." Ellingson died July 2, 1971, less than a week before he was to undergo surgery for a heart ailment.

Jimmy Ellingson was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1975.