

#170

Penelope “Penny” Pitou Zimmerman

Born: 1938

Like many New England youngsters, Penny first put on skis at age four. She took to skiing “like a duck to water,” and in no time was skiing circles around the other girls. By the time she was eight, she was racing the boys and defeating them.

Penelope “Penny” Pitou was born in Bayside, New York, in 1938, and moved to Laconia, New Hampshire, with her parents when she was three. In 1955, at age sixteen, Penny astonished the ski world by winning the slalom, downhill and alpine combined championships at the Junior Alpine Championships at Whitefish, Montana. The next year Penny was named to the U.S. Ski Team for the Winter Olympics at Cortina d’ Ampezzo, Italy. She was inexperienced in world class skiing and did not place well, but few knew that she made the ski team using skis that were factory seconds.

Penny went to Europe as a U.S. Ski Team member for the F.I.S. World Championships at Badgastein, Austria, in 1958. After the F.I.S. Championships, Penny made the big decision not to return to Middlebury College and stayed in Europe to gain experience by skiing with Europe’s best and prepare herself for the big events that lay ahead. Penny’s parents were of modest means and were unable to underwrite all of her expenses in Europe, so Penny had to find a job. She polished her skills in French and German and soon was fluent enough to work as a translator.

Penny remained in Europe until all but the two of the final qualifying races were held for a place on the U.S. Ski Team for the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics. This was cutting it fairly close. A poor showing in either race could have eliminated her chances of making the U.S. Team, but she easily qualified. These two final qualifying races were eastern events. The pressure of not having to raise finances for travel and skiing “on her own turf” made a difference. The experience of skiing with some of the “greats” of Europe was a reason she remained in Europe, but her financial situation also played a part. Most skiers had to pay their own travel and expenses to and from the events at this time, and Penny did not have the finances to travel across the country for the big qualifying races. Once qualified, the U.S. Ski Team paid the expenses, but until you made the team, you were on your own.

There was a great deal of pressure put on Penny by the ski scribes and the ski world in general for her to win a medal at the Squaw Valley Games. Penny took the pressure like she had “ice water in her veins,” but admitted privately that her “knees shook” and she had “butterflies in her stomach” before every race, but no one, especially her fellow competitors would ever know it by looking at her. Here was a youngster that exuded confidence in her ability and never even considered not winning a medal at Squaw Valley. Although the gold medal eluded her, she won a pair of silver medals, one in the downhill and one in the giant slalom. With these wins in “her pocket,” Penny closed out her international competitive skiing career.

Following her Squaw Valley triumphs, Penny married Egon Zimmerman, an Austrian alpine racer, settled in Guilford, New Hampshire, and founded two ski schools, one at nearby Mt. Gunstock and another in Massachusetts. Penny became a certified professional ski instructor in 1965. She and Egon co-managed the ski schools until 1968 when they divorced. The Zimmermans had two sons, Christian and Kim. The divorce forced the Zimmermans out of the ski school business. Penny then traveled the country for two seasons with the International Ski and Sport Show as one of its stars. She accepted a position as fashion designer and consultant for White Stag ski wear, was a sports commentator, a New England tennis champion, a radio and television personality in the New England area, an actress and even coached the Laconia High School Girls Ski Team to several successful seasons.

In 1974, Penny purchased a travel agency in Laconia, New Hampshire, naming it Penny Pitou Travel, Inc. Her agency is unique in that Penny personally conducts ski and hiking tours to Europe on a regular basis, as well as booking cruises and handling routine travel agency duties. Penny’s guided tours are booked over a year in advance. Penny Pitou Travel, Inc. has developed into one of the most popular and top travel agencies in New England and now has branch agencies in Concord and North Conway, New Hampshire.

Penny Pitou was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, Michigan, as a member of the “Class of 1976.” Penny Pitou ranks as one of the greatest female skiers this country has ever produced.

