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Walter Prager

Born: 1910 Died: 1984

Information Submitted by J.H. Carruthers, Chairman, Historical Committee

Perhaps no man ever arrived on the American ski scene to coach and teach alpine skiing with better credentials than Walter Prager. Consider this: winner of three Alberg-Kandahars between 1930-35 and holder of the famous Kandahar Diamond pin, twice world F.I.S. downhill champion in 1931 and 1933, and Swiss cross-country and jumping champion. He was the winner of the famed Parsenn Derby, Hahnenkamm, Lauberhorn and a string of other premier alpine ski races.

Walter Prager was a licensed Swiss mountain guide proficient in climbing sheer rock and faces and ice climbing, educated in both Switzerland and England. Prager brought this background with him to coach at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, at the age of 26.

More importantly, he brought with him a colorful personality and a wry wit which he needed from his opening day. "I arrived at Dartmouth at four in the morning and immediately went to bed. When I woke up and looked out the window, all I could see was flat land. When they showed me Oak Hill where they practiced and it had a drop of maybe only 300 feet, I thought my God, I could find bigger hills in the suburbs of Zurich!"

No matter, Prager set about his task and consistently turned out ski teams from 1936 to 1957 which became the scourge of intercollegiate competition. Any pre-season estimate of collegiate standing had to include Dartmouth simply because of Prager's ability to teach, coach, and bring forth the maximum effort from his skiers.

Over a dozen of Prager's Dartmouth skiers went on to earn Olympic team spots. A few of those touched by this man's talent are Warren Chivers '38, Dick Durrance '39, Howard Chivers '39, Brooks Dodge '51, Dave Lawrence '51, Bill Beck '53, Tom Corcoran '54, Ralph Miller '55 and Chiharu Lgaya '57. At this point, a second generation has been spawned. Richard S. Durrance '65 captioned Dartmouth's ski team.

As one would suspect, Prager found himself in the 10th Mountain Division during those years from 1941 to 1945. Due to his special skills and talent for teaching, his main duty was to instruct troops in mountaineering and skiing. He authored the book *Skiing* which was used as the basis for military ski training by the U.S. Army. There were dark nights too, like the time perhaps 150 men dug in and only five or six came out the following morning, Sgt. Prager being one of them. John Rand, connected to Dartmouth College, attested to Prager's quick reflexes. During those dark days in the Italian campaign, Prager very possibly saved his life.

Prager was singled out to coach the 1948 Olympic Team which represented the United States in the first Olympiad to be held after WWII in St. Moritz, Switzerland. In a day of specialization, it is a tribute to his ability that the United States Ski Association saw fit to have him coach all four events – downhill, slalom, cross country and jumping.

Regardless of the direction in which you view Prager's life, skiing is the dominant thread in it. In 1940, he participated in the planning of many of the trails on Cannon Mountain, New Hampshire. He was a director of the Eastern Ski Association in 1952.

In 1955, he designed and supervised the building of the Dartmouth Skiway and in 1957, the State of New York saw fit to engage him to do a special feasibility study of the Catskill Mountain region of that state.

Ever with the ski scene, he was manager of the Mt. Snow, Vermont, under the aegis of the flamboyant owner Walt Schoenknecht from 1957 to 1960.

He designed a new ski area in Millville, Pennsylvania, in 1965. He also designed and supervised another ski area in Yorkville, New York, in the same year.

Beginning in 1960, Prager was the owner and operator of the ski shop at the Whiteface Mountain complex in Wilmington, New York. Beginner or expert, anyone seeking Prager's advice got it, although it is doubtful if most realized the true stature of the man giving it.

In an age where superlatives are cheap, this gentleman exemplified the true meaning of the word "outstanding."

Walter Prager was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1977.