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Walter Schoenknecht

Born: 1919 Died: 1987

Information submitted in a nomination letter to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame by I. William Berry

Does Walter Schoenknecht need an introduction? Does Mount Snow need a description? They shouldn't. If there's any man and any mountain to whom a generation of intermediate skiers owe a massive debt of thanks, it's these two.

Some years ago, the idea of a "great ski mountain" was a maze of tight, steep, twisty trails facing due north – a complex to chill even the experts and to petrify the intermediates. Before Walter, skiing was hardship and survival: Mansfield, Cannon, Mad River Glen, and rough-hewn base-lodges heated by pot-bellied stoves. A great wave of nostalgia sweeps over us as we think of these days – but for too many, it was too much. Then, Walter drifted into West Dover, Vermont, and saw Reuben Snow's farm and the big rolling lump that towered above it. That day the new era was born.

All Walter did, when you come down to it, was to make skiing fun for all levels of skiers. Take two lessons and you could sweep down the mountain from the top – not on some second-class citizen narrow work road or logging trail but on a big, wide, undulating slope that forgave a few mistakes. No oppression of trees and moguls, no terror of missing THE ONLY WAY TO TURN and crashing into oblivion; rather, a comforting knowledge that you would not only survive but gain confidence in time to ramble beneath the lifelines even before you were a super-expert! You would do it warm and loose and happy, basking in the sun on those east-facing runs. Oh, perhaps the purity of an earlier time took a beating – but the sport of skiing grew mightily in the fifties and sixties, and nowhere more joyously than at Mt. Snow.

Shaken by financial problems that would have shuttered most other enterprises, Mt. Snow stands in southern Vermont, an unfinished masterpiece, a 1,800 foot-east-facing, sunny, intermediate mountain with long, sweeping, wide trails, tons of open slopes and trail names like Ego Alley and Exhibition. Big, colorful two-people gondolas pop like hatching Easter Eggs from clock-tower terminals; base and hotel lodges blare like choruses of "Stars and Stripes Forever" and the wild impact as you drive in makes your pulse beat quicker and forces you to grin despite yourself. And the people—you go back six, seven years and you couldn't find a weirder mélange. Mount Snow was Coney Island, the zoo, the family picnic, the East Side bars and a sophomore mixer. Everyone skied and was welcome here, the affluent and the aspiring, the know-it-all and the novice. Everyone laughed at the excesses, the goldfish and the Oriental pools and the archaeology of lifts, and they came back again in an avalanche because it was fun. A non-stop carnival whirling ever outward and onward, more and bigger . . .

And it was all Walter's . . . it was all Walter. As tall and thin as Snowshoe Thompson ski and as intense as a Utah Blizzard, he not only innovated but evangelized this new faith. In the fall, for years he hit every pulpit he could find and lured innocents and doubters to his mountain; they came away converted, that core of intermediate skiers on which other areas built their followings . . . provided, of course, they followed Walter's code.

Greatness? He owned no gold medals won on Lauberhorn – but he owned a record anyone would like to have. Fighting serious physical illness and corporate fiscal woes and suspecting he had little chance to regain control of his mountain, he never looked back as many might have to those "good old days." Knowing that the Scherburne's takeover was imminent (although never letting on) and that his four-million-dollar personal fortune had vanished, his only thoughts were for the future of the mountain. Perhaps his vision, as always, would turn an environmentalist pale – but it would make a skier sing.

Walter Schoenknecht was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1979.

