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**Gene Kotlarek**

**Born: 1940**

*Gene Kotlarek's career began in 1945 in Duluth, Minnesota, at the age of five. His career would span the next 22 years, 10 of which would be at the national or international level of competition.*



Gene began as any other youngster would, on the small IS-meter hill called "Rabbit Ears," excelling rapidly. When he was seven, he graduated to the larger 30-meter hill, where he competed, winning many competitions over the next several years. After winning the state high school title at age 17, he had a mishap in training for the Boys' National Competition, sustaining a broken collar bone. When the team left Duluth for Reno, Gene was still in a shoulder harness. Fortunately, within the next week, his recovery was such that he was able to compete and win the Boys' Title.

From that point on, Gene really began working hard. In 1958, he won almost every major competition in which he entered, including the National Junior "A" title and the North American Championship. Gene was named as an alternate on the 1958 F.I.S. Team. In 1959, in preparation for the Squaw Valley Olympics, he won 11 of 14 competitions. He was 2<sup>nd</sup> at Squaw Valley in the pre-game, 2<sup>nd</sup> in the National Championships with a fall, and finished 10<sup>th</sup> in the Holmenkollen at Oslo, Norway (winning the Junior Class for boys 20 and under). In these two years, Gene had established 10 new hill records and would go on to set six more, including the North American Distance Record. The Olympic Year of 1960 began very well for Gene. He won the tryout competitions, far outclassing more-seasoned veterans. Although he led his team through training at Squaw Valley, he became a victim of his youth and overwhelming desire. A mistake and a fall kept him out of the results. Disappointed, yes, but with this experience behind him, it was off to Canada, Norway, Finland, and then to Ski Flying in Yugoslavia, all top-level competitions for Gene and a collection of impressive results.

The next three years, 1961 through 1963, were not to be as eventful. Gene chose to return to college to complete his education. He did, however, remain very active in his physical training and did compete whenever possible. In 1961 and 1962, he was second in the National Championships. Gene qualified for selection to the 1962 F.I.S. World Championship Team but again remained at home for the purpose of schooling.

In 1963, Gene won the National "A" title, set a new North American record at Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and participated at the International Holmenkollen Ski Festival in Oslo, Norway. Competing against the best in the world, he recorded an impressive 4<sup>th</sup> place result.

With his education in 1964 now complete, full concentration and effort could be put into preparation for the Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria. A 12<sup>th</sup> place over-all result in the four competitions of the Austria-Germany Springer Toumee Was followed by good training in Europe and at home. All seemed ready! Prior to the games, however, during training in Europe, Gene sustained a minor ankle injury, a problem that would not heal and gave him trouble throughout the games. This, combined with an untimely bout with the flu, certainly reduced what seemed a possible medal for the United States. The best that was to happen was a 14<sup>th</sup> place on the 70 meter and a 24<sup>th</sup> place on the 90 meter. But the year was not over, and Gene again placed 2<sup>nd</sup> in the National Championships and then established a mark that would stand for some time. In Obersatdorf, Germany, at the Ski Flying competition three-day-event, on his way to placing 11<sup>th</sup> over-all, he sailed 454 feet, farther than any American ever to that time and a record which stood nine years.

His employer allowed him the time off in 1966 to try out for the F.I.S. World Team. He made the team and again participated at the Holmenkollen in Oslo, Norway. Gene completed that year by again winning the Nationals. He followed with a back-to-back win again in 1967 in Leavenworth, Washington.

Gene's career in ski jumping did not end in February 1967 at Westby, Wisconsin, when he suffered a near-crippling dislocation of the ankle. In 1968, he was called upon to be the National Coach of the Ski Jumping Team, a position he held through 1970.

Gene Kotlarek was elected to the U.S. National Skill Hall of Fame in 1982.

