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Hjalmar Hvam

Born: 1902 Died: 1996

Hjalmar Hvam was an excellent four-way skier. His greatest contribution to skiing however was not as a competitor. Like most skiers, Hvam fell and had the misfortune of breaking his leg. While recovering in the hospital from a broken leg sustained while skiing, he realized that the ski binding was the “weak link” in ski safety. Hvam set about to invent and market a “ski-free binding.”

Hjalmar Hvam was born in Kongsberg, Norway, in 1902. He was skiing about the time he was able to walk. After completing his primary and secondary schooling in Norway, he immigrated to Canada at age nineteen.

A fine athlete, Hvam entered the Nordic National Championships in 1932 at Lake Tahoe, and won three gold medals and national titles: the Class “A” Cross-country, Class “B” Special Jumping and the Nordic Combined. He was forced to jump in Class “B” because he had not previously competed in a national jumping meet. From that day forward, Hvam won over 150 ski trophies, and he can be listed as one of the most outstanding four-way competitors in United States ski history. His versatility may never again be equaled in this age of specialization. During the 1937 season, Hvam won 400 points in a four-way international

meet at Mount Baker, which included first place in downhill, cross-country, slalom, and jumping. He won eight Pacific Northwest Division Championships, from 1932 through 1937, including the cross-country in 1932 and 1933, the downhill in 1935, 1936, and 1937, the alpine combined in 1935, and 1936, as well as the 1936 slalom.

Although Hvam was a top competitor in his time, his most important achievement was not on the race course. Like many skiers, Hvam had the misfortune to break a leg on the ski slope. As he lay in the hospital recuperating, he analyzed the forces that had contributed to his injury. He realized that the problem did not lie in the fall – everyone falls occasionally – but in the ski binding, which locked the ski onto the foot. As Hvam considered ways of avoiding this mishap, he concluded that injuries might be avoided if the ski came off during a fall. Thereupon, he set out to design a “release” binding. The resulting “ski-free” binding had a pivoting toe iron which allowed the foot to release right or left with any forceful movement that might cause potential injury. His invention worked well and was immediately hailed as a major safety breakthrough. Ankle, lower leg, and knee injuries were cut substantially.

Continuing to improve the concept, Hvam eventually designed a cable-less binding, which was used for many years.

Hvam qualified for the United States Olympic Team in 1936, but he was unable to compete because he was not yet a U.S. citizen.

Hjalmar Hvam was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1971.

