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Rhona Wurtele Gillis

Born: 1922

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Rhona Wurtele, Canadian-born Alpine skier from Westmount, Quebec, was one of the famed Wurtele twins, who so dominated Alpine skiing the Eastern United States and Canada from 1943 through the late forties.

Rhona and her twin sister Rhoda first came on the international ski scene during the first Canadian-American Downhill and Slalom staged at Lake Placid, New York in 1943. Rhona placed fourth in the Downhill only eight seconds of a second behind the winner, Paula Kann of the American team, and less than one-half second behind her sister Rhoda. Rhona won the slalom competition handily, and took first honors in the combined, followed by Rebecca Fraser and her sister Rhoda, in third place. A most impressive beginning to a brilliant career.

Rhona skied for the Canadian Amateur Ski Association, as a member of the Penguin Ski Club of Montreal, as well as the National Ski Association of the United States. Both Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele won many races on both sides of the United States-Canadian border, helping to forge a link in the goodwill chain binding the women skiers of both countries in unity and friendship.

Not only did these sisters look alike, they skied alike. Rhona was a very aggressive skier, who showed no fear, and fiercely loved good competition. Technically slightly more steady than her sister, Rhona emerged as more of a slalom and combined specialist, whereas Rhoda's aggression and lust for speed gave her an edge in the long run, treacherous downhills. Both were strong skiers, able to win over the other, or anyone else on any given day, and their difference in abilities were nearly immeasurable.

Rhona won the National Ski Association National Slalom and Combined titles in 1946, the National Ski Association combined title again in 1947, and the National Ski Association Giant Slalom title in 1952, along with nearly every Canadian Amateur Ski Association Slalom, Giant Slalom and Combined titles from 1944 through 1956, most of those she did not win were won by Rhoda.

Rhona Wurtele won the Eastern Downhill Championship at Pico Peak, Vermont, placed second in the Slalom, and first in the Combined in 1948. As usual, when one twin won, the other was somewhere close behind. True here, as Rhoda was in third place in the Downhill, won the Slalom, and was second in the Combined.

These Canadian-born twins with their good-natured cooperative attitude, helped mould the women athletes of both nations into strong competitive-minded skiers, some of which is still visible in the women's ski teams of both nations today.

The twins directed skiing for Ski Jay and Ski Chick Clubs for 25 years, the first children's ski club in North America (1956-1979), and started a club for housewives in 1964 – plus gentlemen a few years later.

Still going strong, the twins are active in biking, golfing, etc. They have taken groups to the West in February and Europe (2 weeks) in March, for 30 years. In 2004, the twins took a group of 64 to Panorama, B.C., to Canazei, Italy, and Lech, Austria.

Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele were elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1969.

