



DON HENDERSON



As an inspirational coach—and the embodiment of “how to live life well”—Henderson led Holderness skiers to compete in eight straight Winter Olympics.

Before the rise of ski academies like Burke and Stratton, there was New Hampshire’s Holderness School, and more specifically Don Henderson, a legendary teacher and coach who would lead his student-athletes to compete in every Winter Olympics from 1956 to 1984. While Henderson is hardly a household name with the general skiing public, his legacy and story are remarkable.

Growing up in blue-collar Berlin, N.H., Henderson was a strong four-event skier but a struggling student who seemed destined to follow his father into a job at the local paper mill. When World War II intervened, Henderson found himself training with the 10th Mountain Division troops among like-minded adventurers at Camp Hale, and then fighting in the Appenine Mountains, where he suffered shrapnel wounds that would end his deployment in Italy and leave him limping for the remainder of his life.

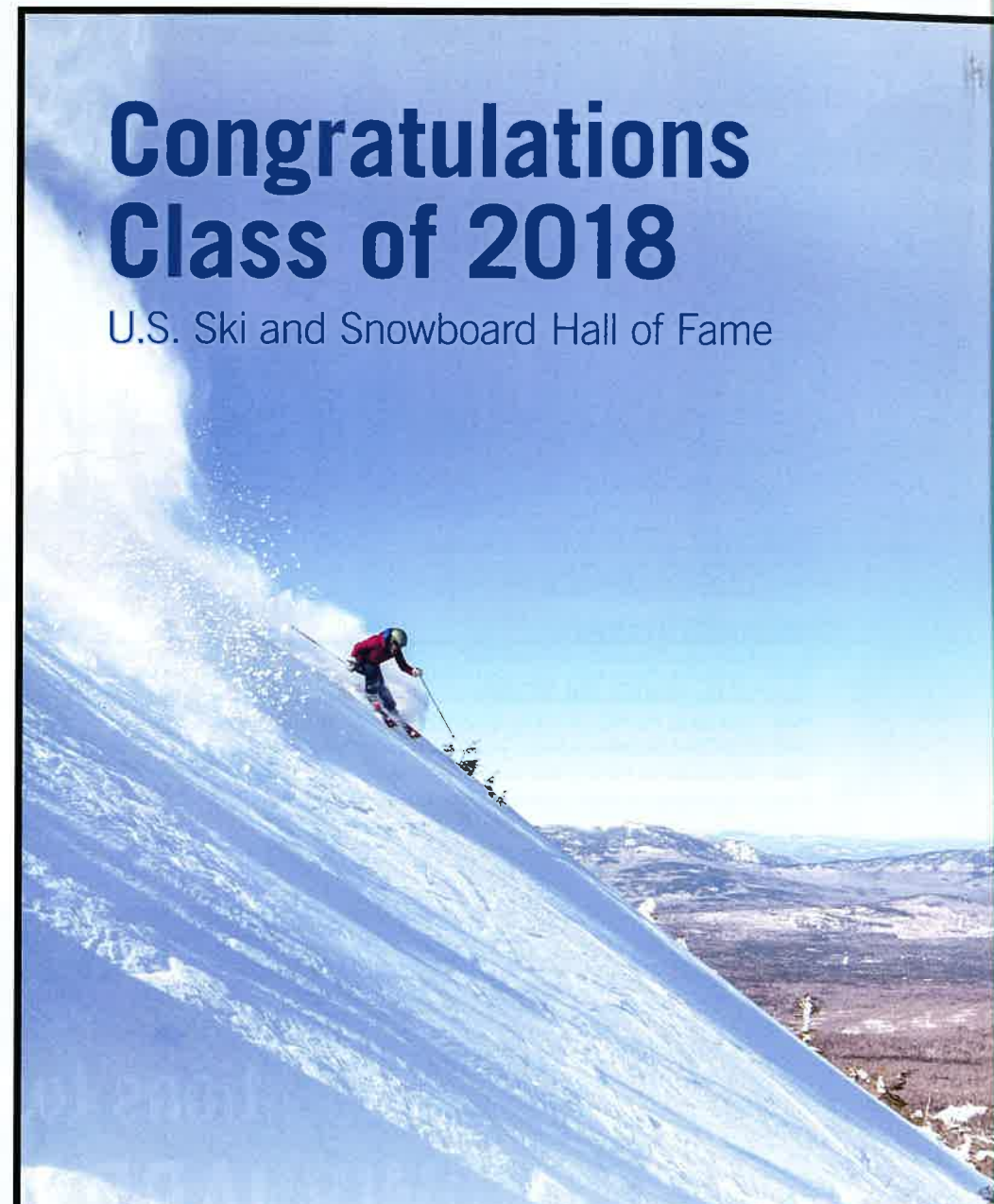
Army friends recommended he apply his GI Bill status to enroll at Middlebury College, and despite those dismal high school transcripts he was miraculously accepted. After a difficult freshman year left him on the verge of flunking out, Henderson dedicated himself to learning, and discovered a world-class talent for academics that would rival his skills on skis.

Meanwhile, nobody could match him on snow, even though his war wounds had left him with a deadened feeling in his lower right leg. As the team captain, Henderson was a premier Skimeister of his generation, leading Middlebury to an NCAA title in 1948. His academic renaissance gained steam: After graduating cum laude, he would earn a Master’s from Harvard, become a two-time Fulbright Scholar, and even pursue a doctorate from the University of London. But Henderson missed the outdoors, realizing that what he really wanted was a life that merged his love of skiing and the outdoors with academics.

He found his calling at Holderness School, a premier prep school founded in 1879 in Plymouth, N.H. When he arrived there with

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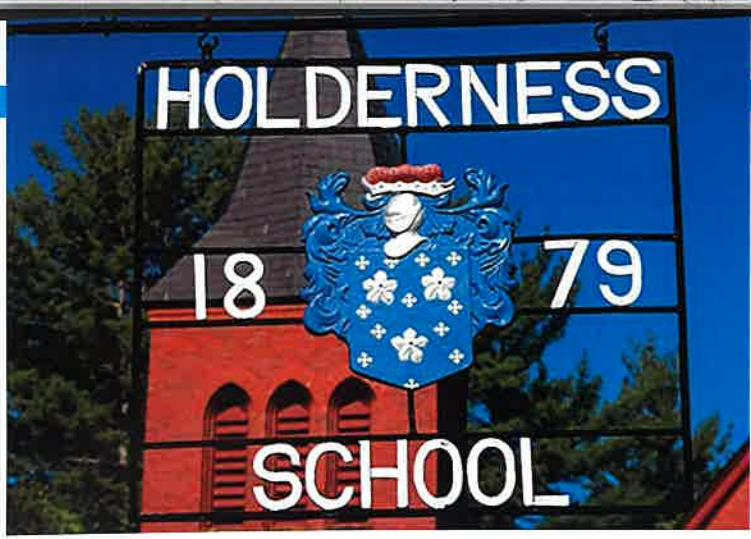
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Career Accomplishments

- 1942:** Joined the Army, sent to Camp Hale for 10th Mountain Division training.
- 1945:** Awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star awards after being hit by shrapnel in the Italian Alps.
- 1948:** Captained the NCAA champion Middlebury ski team, winning events in all four disciplines.
- 1948-51:** Earned Master's in History from Harvard, attended University of London, named twice as Fulbright Scholar.
- 1951:** Hired to teach history and coach the ski team at Holderness School in Plymouth, N.H.
- 1964:** Head alpine coach for U.S. Ski Team at 1964 Olympics.
- 1970:** Head men's alpine coach for 1970 World Championships.
- 1990:** Retires from Holderness School.

Born: May 6, 1924, Berlin, N.H. | **Died:** May 24, 2018, Fairlee, Vt.



his new wife, Pat, in 1951, there wasn't much of a ski program. While Pat would work in administration, as an archivist, teacher and unofficial Mother Superior (she and Don ran one of the dorms), and Don rewrote the history curriculum, the two would leave an unrivaled legacy. The Holderness headmaster, Rev. B.W. (Pete) Woodward, explained it like this in an interview with Holderness School Today: "For my part, I never really had to raise funds as headmaster. I simply went out and collected financial gifts made to the school because of the gratitude created in the hearts of all by Don and Pat Henderson."

Charged with jumpstarting the ski team and teaching history (he would later chair the department), Don led the effort to carve out ski slopes and nordic trails on the 600-acre campus. The rope tow on Cartwright Hill was powered off the wheel of a pickup truck; anti-freeze was prohibitively expensive, so the team hauled water from a nearby stream, and emptied the radiator every night. Henderson could be seen not only extolling his troops, but fully participating himself. Popping off the 30-meter ski jump, pushing his charges on the cross-country trails, and carving up the 20-second slalom course on Cartwright Hill. As the program evolved, Henderson would partner with the nearby resorts of Tenney Mountain, Waterville Valley, and Cannon Mountain for expanded alpine training.

From Cortina in 1956 to Sarajevo in 1984, Holderness sent athletes to every single Winter Olympics. The roster ranged from nordic standouts like Dick Taylor and Ned Gillette to alpine athletes such as Gordie Eaton, Geoff Bruce, and Terry and Tyler Palmer. Not surprisingly, many of Henderson's students went on to coach at the national level themselves. Henderson also teamed with Bob Beattie to lead the U.S. Ski Team alpine efforts at in 1964 Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria, where Billy Kidd and Jimmie Heuga won silver and bronze, and to serve as head alpine coach at the 1970 World Championships in Val Gardena, Italy, where the U.S. would win four medals.

Bill McCollom, who skied four events at Holderness in the early 1960s, was an alpine All-American for Middlebury in 1967, and co-founded the Killington Mountain School, says Henderson was ahead of his time. Defying the "rah-rah" football coach-style of the times, Henderson stressed the Greek ideal of mind and body, getting to know his students as individuals, and personally demonstrating the values of commitment and hard work. While the rise of ski-specific academies in the 1970s would reduce Holderness's ability to attract skiers on a world-class path, he resisted any and all temptations to go that route, insisting that Holderness stress academics first, and continuing to require that his student athletes compete in three sports.

After retirement in 1990, Don and Pat retired to a rambling cape in Fairlee, Vt. Don took up another academic challenge, studying foreign languages, and skied nearly every day in the winter, regardless of the conditions, entertaining himself on the lift by describing the scenery and conditions in French and German. He died peacefully at his home on May 29, 2018, as a man who taught everyone he encountered "how to live life well."

Thanks to Don Henderson for all he taught us in the classroom and on the ski hill. **Sam Stout, Bill McCollom and all the Holderness skiers**