

Alison Owen-Bradley

In a transformational career, Owen-Bradley went from 'the girl' to a pioneer of 'firsts' for U.S. women's cross country, a World Cup winner, and inspirational coach.

By Andy Bigford

Thirteen-year-old Alison Owen from Wenatchee, Wash., was making endless laps at Winter Park under the brilliant Colorado sky without a care in the world, while down below at the Nordic center a group of male officials was determining her fate for the 1966 U.S. Men's Junior National Cross-Country Ski Championships. "*What're we gonna do with the girl?*" is how Owen imagined the debate. There was no women's division back then, and in fact female athletes were sometimes ridiculed, warned that competition was dangerous, and taught to dismiss it as "unattractive." But Owen had easily qualified in the middle of the pack for the 18-and-under Pacific Northwest male squad. In the team photo, her teammates loom a head or more above, and she had only started in cross country two seasons' prior.

The men finally decided they would let her compete in the spot she had earned, but with this caveat: An ambulance must be on site in case something horrendous happened. That proved to be unnecessary, a girl's division was established the very next year, and by 1969 there were 40 competitors in the event.

It's probably a stretch to call Alison Owen-Bradley the "RBG of XC," particularly since she was, in her own words, "clueless" about what she was doing at the time ("*I was 13!*"). But her barrier-breaking participation some 45 years ago was the first pioneering stride toward lifting U.S. women's cross country, which was decades behind the rest of the world, to the spotlight. The effort culminated in a 2018 U.S. Olympic women's relay team gold from Kikkan Randall and Jesse Diggs. The timing of Owen-Bradley's induction is both prescient and long overdue; in fact, the members of that 2018 U.S. Olympic women's team lauded her for "shattering the glass ceiling" in their overwhelming endorsement of her for the HOF.

Growing up in the cross-country hotbed of Wenatchee, Owen-Bradley trained instead of hanging out at the mall, always with the idea of being the fastest from Point A to

Point B, not necessarily the strongest but with a focus on technique. In her subsequent career, Owen-Bradley was a member of the “first” women’s U.S. Nordic team to compete in a World Championships (1970) and Olympics (1972), even though men had been racing cross country in the Games since 1924 and international women since 1952. She became the “first” U.S. skier to win a World Cup cross-country event (held in 1978 at Tony Wise’s Telemark, Wis., resort, and somewhat controversial at the time, it actually was the first-ever Nordic World Cup); and finished an “unofficial” second in that season’s overall World Cup standings (more on that later). She next went on to be a highly praised international-level coach, taking six of her Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation (SVSEF) star performers to the World Juniors (where she fought, and usually lost, with the old guard male coaches over how to handle athletes); and creating the “first” women’s post-graduate elite team (Women In Nordic Development, or WIND).

Owen-Bradley, now 67 and splitting time between Boise and Bozeman, was too good nationally in her early years but too young and unseasoned to succeed internationally in what would become the first installment of her elite career in the early 1970s. But after she’d “retired” and gone to school at Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage (then known as Alaska Methodist), which had the “first” women’s cross-country ski team in the country, she caught a second wind. There are pros and cons to being the first, and at school in Alaska she had an experienced coach and trained relentlessly (she always did), but there were no other women’s college teams to compete against. She did enter occasional national events, and saw the Nordic norm come true: You get better with age.

She then returned to the U.S. team and international success, which perhaps reached its zenith with a runner-up finish in the 1980 Norwegian Holmenkollen, the Super Bowl of cross-country skiing, preceded by a seventh place in the 1978-79 World Cup overall standings, behind five Russians who are now strongly suspected of PED use. Thus the “unofficial” second place, but even her actual seventh place was the best effort by a U.S. woman until Randall finished fifth in 2012. In Owen-Bradley’s final season, she even earned a robust \$35,000 from sponsorships.

After her second retirement as an athlete, she settled in McCall, Idaho, with her first husband, Rob Kiesel. Despite those early warnings that competing in endurance sports could damage her child-rearing abilities, she very successfully raised a family. After the

family moved to Sun Valley, SVSEF Nordic leader Rick Kapala sought Owen-Bradley out to coach. The program was good but not great, until Owen-Bradley arrived. “Excellence became the norm because Alison showed all of us, myself included, how champions think and act,” says Kapala, noting the program quickly attained new benchmarks by sending six skiers to the U.S. Juniors and Worlds and that he still channels Owen-Bradley in his program today.

Meanwhile, it was a family affair: She coached while her son Fredrick Jess Kiesel and daughter Kaelin Kiesel developed from toddlers into strong national-level skiers. Frederick raced for the University of Utah for four years, and Kaelin was a two-time All-American at Montana State. (Owen-Bradley and Kiesel divorced in 1998, but both continued to live in Ketchum; she has been married to Phil Bradley for the past 20 years.)

Coaching at the World Juniors, she once again confronted dominating males who weren’t good listeners. She knew more than most about training, ski prep, technique, and unlike her peers, had an impressive World Cup record under her belt. But she liked to concentrate on the mental approach to competition, and all the complex factors that lead to speed, which the men didn’t readily grasp. “My style was very much about the person,” she says, though she also wasn’t shy about using old-school tactics either. When she regularly outdistanced her charges on training runs, she’d quickly bark at them: “*C’mon! I’ve had two kids!*” (Owen-Bradley ultimately realized a basic difference between herself and most all others: “I wanted it more.”)

Looking for more challenge, she founded the first women’s elite squad of post-college athletes (Women In Nordic Development, or WIND), even elevating her fundraising talents to balance the books. WIND organized a Steve Miller concert that became all the rave in the greater Ketchum area, bringing in much-needed funds for the team.

Owen-Bradley now finds inspiration from her involvement in a group called 53 NOW (Nordic Olympic Women), which brings together all the U.S. cross-country skiers who have competed in the Olympics. Their first reunion was a couple years ago at the World Cup sprint events in Quebec City, and the experience was remarkable. The hurdles she and her colleagues faced in a male-dominated sport and world are in sharper focus now, but she’s pragmatic about the quest: Don’t blame the men, who deserve credit for organizing all the sports in the first place, she says, and instead step up yourself. “It’s been a slow change,

but it is changing,” she says. Meanwhile, Owen-Bradley is looking to preserve the story for future generations, working with 53 NOW colleagues on a book to chronicle their paths.

Owen-Bradley’s tale will stand out in any such history. As the current U.S. Nordic women’s team members put it, “The gold medal (in 2018) has not only been an achievement for our team, but for the larger ‘team’ that Alison truly championed...she gave us all something to dream about as young women.”

Career Accomplishments

Born: Jan. 5, 1953 (Kalispell, Mont.)

1966: Competes in the U.S. Men’s Junior National Cross-Country Ski Championships

1970: Races on the first U.S. women’s team in the World Championships as a wide-eyed 17-year-old in Czechoslovakia (and again in 1974).

1972: Competes in the women’s first Nordic Olympics in Sapporo.

1973-77: Attended and skied for Atlantic Pacific University in Anchorage.

1976: Wins the women’s U.S. Birkie to earn entry into the Norwegian Birkie, the first to allow women.

1978: Wins first World Cup ever held, in Telemark, Wis.

1977-79: Named *Ski Racing’s* U.S. Nordic Competitor of the Year for three straight seasons.

1981: Wins ninth and 10th U.S. national titles at Lake Placid.

1987-1997: Coaches Nordic racers as part of the SVSEF, taking six to the U.S. and World Juniors.

1999: Creates WIND, elite-level team for post-college graduates.

2018: Helps create and participates in 53 NOW.