

Howard Peterson

As a persistent advocate for athletes, compensation, sport inclusion and 'legacy' Olympics, visionary U.S. Ski Team leader Peterson worked behind-the-scenes for game-changing reforms.

By Andy Bigford

It is nearly impossible to objectively rank the significant accomplishments in the groundbreaking career of the late Howard Peterson, the U.S. Ski Team leader who was hardly known outside competitive circles but slowly and surely moved mountains within.

For advocates of efficiency and ethics in governing bodies, it would be his coupling in the 1980s of the Colorado Springs-based U.S. Ski Association, then splintered by regional rivalries, with the separate, cash-strapped U.S. Ski Team. Peterson erased almost \$1 million in U.S. Ski Team debt and then went to work on putting the combined entity on strong financial footing. Peterson's prescience in working to stop FIS corruption in the 1990s among its disparate, 100-plus member nations helped put a stop to delegates selling their votes—for cars, furs, all-expense paid trips, and other favors—to resorts lobbying to host the World Championships.

For cash-starved elite skiers, it would be his 1990 campaign that brought cash purses to premier events (the first Olympic sport to do so), and then sensibility to the rules governing commercial markings for athletes, teams, and event host sites, providing more resources for all involved. Sponsorships still drive the bank accounts of international race stars, but Mikaela Shiffrin collected almost \$1 million in prize earnings on the 2018-19 World Cup, when she won 17 races.

For freestylers and then snowboarders, it would be his relentless lobbying to gain them entry into the World Cup and then the Olympic stages, in which Peterson proved once again to be ahead of the times. Donna Weibrecht was the poster girl for the U.S. Ski Team when she won the inaugural Olympic moguls gold in 1992, so it was good business for the team, too, although always an uphill struggle within an alpine-oriented structure. Jeff Chumas ran the U.S. Freestyle program back then, and while his team dominated the world,

it didn't always get much respect or budget. Peterson had the team's back. "I've always been very much in awe of Howard's brain power, and his ability to think through problems," Chumas says now.

Snowboarders were outcasts among skiers and ski organizations when they came on the scene. Not to Peterson, who understood their importance and welcomed them into the USSA fold, eventually lobbying for their inclusion in the Olympics. In this role, Peterson fended off blows from the staid ski world and from an anti-establishment snowboarding culture that believed the Olympics would ruin the sport's independent vibe. Years after Peterson had left the team, Shaun White reveled in winning three Olympic golds and further boosted the sport worldwide. Yet another group of under-represented athletes, adaptive skiers, were also supported by Peterson; they too were welcomed into the USSA/USST, and then the Paralympic fold.

For most everyone else, and Utahns in particular, Peterson's legacy is right at home, with the Soldier Hollow Legacy Foundation, which hosted the 2002 Olympic cross-country and biathlon events. Peterson had retired, somewhat surprisingly, from U.S. Skiing in 1994, but would next build his final legacy. This last one drew on an earlier initiative combined with a new passion. In his earlier lobbying with the USOC, he successfully argued that one of the most critical priorities for Olympic host site bids was to show a long-term plan for the "legacy" use of the facilities to benefit local communities and ensure their continued use. What happens after the much-ballyhooed Olympic fortnight is just as important as when the world's eyes are all on the event. The USOC finally came around in designating Utah, for this very reason, as its Winter Games site, and the IOC then awarded Salt Lake the 2002 Games. So Peterson channeled his Nordic roots and endless energy into his new role as the executive director of the Soldier Hollow Legacy Foundation, developing and hosting world-class events and creating an invaluable local resource backed by long term, sensible cash flow, including fundraisers during the summer off-season. (Unfortunately, the FIS voting reforms Peterson had originated in the 1990s weren't adopted in time by the IOC, and a vote-buying controversy scarred the Utah Olympics organizing committee and the IOC. Those reforms were then enacted for the 2006 Games and beyond.)

Howard Peterson was an outlier in ski competition leadership, both domestically and abroad. The sport tends to draw ex-racers and coaches, and the Euro-centric FIS is

dominated by an old world, good 'ol boys network that moves slowly. The 6-foot, 5-inch Peterson was an accomplished rock climber, but merely a recreational cross-country skier, with an accounting background to boot. Peterson was barely deterred by that and the numerous FIS hurdles; his persistence and close working relationship with longtime FIS president and IOC veteran Marc Hodler paved the way for his successful initiatives. He also deserves an endurance award for chairing the FIS Advertising Committee for 22 years, well past his retirement from the U.S. team.

Throughout his career, he “played his cards close to the vest and didn’t go about patting himself on the back,” observed Gary Black, Jr., the late publisher of *Ski Racing* magazine. Peterson had contracted with Black in the mid-1980s to provide subscriptions to all USSA members, some 30,000 strong, a boon for everyone. Black probably knew, and admired, Peterson as well as anybody from outside Park City, and yet he wrote that Peterson kept his reasons for leaving to himself. The ski world is full of brash talkers, and Peterson was definitely not that, choosing instead to work quietly behind the scenes—yet no less boldly toward his goals.

A Maine native, he’d first entered the sport as director of skiing at Bretton Woods, N.H., and then, through the smaller Nordic portal, when he was among the founders of what is known today as the Cross-Country Ski Areas Association. That led him to a position developing Nordic programs for USSA, then based in Colorado Springs. He rose to the top of that organization, merged it with the USST, and the rest is history.

The actual results of the headline-dominating alpine team during Peterson’s tenure were mixed, and included a distinct low point, when the USST’s best alpine finish in the 1988 Calgary Olympics was a ninth in women’s super G. But there were many highs, including twin golds from Tommy Moe and Diann Roffe in the 1994 Olympics, along with a breakthrough silver from the superstar-in-waiting, Picabo Street. Fittingly, the results of the freestyle, snowboard and adaptive teams that Peterson brought on board would overwhelm alpine finishes in many of the seasons to come.

Peterson died of a long illness on May 11, 2020. His wife Susan, also a major supporter of Soldier Hollow, had passed away in 2014. The two met while ice climbing on New Hampshire’s Mt. Washington in 1976 and were married in 1989, travelling to 80 countries together.

Career accomplishments

Born: March 23, 1951 (Presque Island, Me.)

Died: May 11, 2020 (Heber City, Utah)

1974: Works as director of skiing for Bretton Woods, N.H.

1977: Serves two terms as head of what would become the Cross-Country Ski Areas Association.

1978: Joins USSA, becomes Secretary General in 1983, and merges USSA and USST in 1988 in Park City.

1980s: Leads efforts with both freestyle and adaptive skiing to bring them into USSA and eventually the Olympics and Paralympics.

1989: Works with an Eastern group of snowboard parents, officials, and athletes to begin onboarding process to USSA and eventually the Olympics.

1992: Freestyle debuts at Albertville Olympics.

1994: Retires from U.S. Skiing.

1998: Snowboarding debuts at Nagano Olympics.

1999: Leads formation of Soldier Hollow Foundation, building program for successful, permanent operations long after the Games.

2002: Salt Lake hosts successful Olympics.

2018: Presented Founders Award by Cross-Country Ski Areas Association.

2018: Honored with S.J. Quinney Awards by U.S. Ski Archives.