

Chisholm Ski Club Junior Program, 1950 - 1962

Scott: This sketch concerning the origin and evolution of the CSC junior development program is largely the product of lengthy interviews with the following former participants whose experiences coincided with the course of the program in its first one and a half decades or so: Wilson Gagnon, junior team member 1950 -1953, also Stephens High School team member and CSC junior competitor 1953-57; Peter Swallow, junior team member 1952 (as a fourth grader), also Stephens High School ski team member and CSC junior competitor, 1956-57 ; Sandy Miller, junior team Ski Club member 1956-59, Mexico High School Team and older CSC junior competitor 1959-63; Jim Miller, junior team member 1959-1962, Mexico High School ski team and CSC junior competitor 1962-66.

Also: Leslie (Miller) Morrill, junior program competitor 1965- 68, member of the first Mexico High School girls ski team and CSC junior competitor, 1968-72.

Finally, added to their memories and smatterings of printed matter are my own recollections as a CSC junior team member 1951-53 and Mexico High School team member (1955-57) on that school's first ski team since before WWII. Before the high school team formed, my competition opportunities during my first two high school years were at the Junior II level USEASA sanctioned competitions. I did manage to enter team meets wherever I was allowed as an individual competitor, mainly the Andover High school and Gould Academy winter carnivals as well as the Maine Principal Assoc. State Class B Championships, 1955.

I have not combed club records for details, but have found that some of the former members have scrapbook collections of their exploits as CSC junior competitors, including team and individual results sheets from the period 1956-68, or whenever the Miller siblings were involved.

Packing the course.

Prior to 1949. unless records of the Mechanics Institute show otherwise, it appears there were no regularly organized ski programs for grade school-age children in either Rumford or Mexico. Both Stephens and Mexico High Schools offered winter sports teams in the years prior to the Second World War, which meant younger kids did what they did in most sports: they played at it in the back yard, in the vacant lot, the local side hill pasture or nearby woods. And boys being boys (and it was very much a boys world) they mimicked what their heroes did in the CSC club carnivals they attended. On jumps in nearly every neighborhood, it seemed, as well on their trails in the woods, they did what they did in every other season - boys (and it was a boys world, no doubt about it) measured their progress by competing. It wasn't until entering high school that the world of competitive opportunity opened, for it was at that point when organized tournaments beckoned. And in Rumford and Mexico, despite the presence of downhill skiing facilities, those opportunities were invariably to be found on jumping hills and cross country courses, for that's where attention to one's prowess was most likely to occur. It was at those sites, particularly the jumps, where encouragement and recognition were guaranteed to materialize. So, again, for the kids attending the various public and parochial grade schools in Rumford and Mexico, developing one's skiing talent was almost exclusively a backyard proposition.

Early runs.

For Rumford and Mexico grade school skiers thirsting for skiing adventure beyond the neighborhood, it appeared in the winter of 1949-50. Club records that year show a budget item of \$150 for expanding junior skiing. Exactly what that entailed isn't included in the report, but in January of 1950 all area public and parochial grade schools, including what now are junior high schools, were given notice of a Chisholm Ski Club Junior Carnival to be held at the club's new post war facilities at Scotty's Mountain.

That it happened in 1949-50 isn't surprising. In 1939, little league baseball began in Williamsport Pennsylvania, and after the war it was widespread enough by 1947 to allow for the first Little League World Series. By adopting that model, it was not long before proponents of every major (and minor) sport in the country was similarly organized at the local, state and national level. The baby boom, coupled with growing post-war prosperity and increased leisure time allowed parents, who had grown up during the Great Depression, the time and resources to provide their kids with opportunities that were rare in their own youth. They were determined to make the most of it.

Additionally, in Rumford and Mexico there was a further model, this one common to industrial communities across the state and country: a corporate sponsored and funded recreational center for all area citizens. In Rumford, the Oxford Paper Company's Mechanics Institute offered a variety of indoor youth athletic programs, among them boxing, track and basketball. The latter was organized into teams representing area grade schools which it's fair to assume was the model upon which the first Chisholm Junior Carnival was based.

Competitions at the first Chisholm Ski Club Junior Carnival and throughout its lifetime were four-event affairs typical of high school carnivals. Throughout the first decade, all events occurred at so-called Scotty's Mountain. Downhill and slalom races took place at the club's rope tow slope. Jumping was done on a natural inrun 15 meter junior jump located between the high school 25 jump and the 55 meter Reidar Christianson Hill. Cross country races started near the foot of the latter jump and followed a one to two kilometer loop which wound along the Swift River intervalle.

Participants in this day long affair were divided into groups representing grades five through eight. Chores of timing, scoring, judging, dealing with race bibs, refreshments and the like were handled by parents. And at the end of the day, competitors and parents gathered at the Mechanics Institute for food and awards which consisted of medals, ribbons and a trophy for the winning school.

From the first junior carnival and for more than a decade thereafter, master of ceremonies at the awards presentations was William "Cy" Broomhall whose interest and enthusiasm in building a strong junior club program constituted the original force that helped get the program underway. For the young competitors, those who had done exceptionally well were offered spots on a traveling Junior Chisholm Ski Team, which in its first season (1950) entered competition with similar club teams from Farmington, Maine and Lebanon, New Hampshire. In the early years, 1950-53, the traveling team numbered no more than eight kids who were packed four to a car

into vehicles driven by coach Cy Broomhall and Bob Gagnon the chief assistant and “chief dad” for that group. The Farmington-Chisholm junior connection, in particular, became a special one. After the meets, teams were often treated to supper at someone’s home. The parents became friends, the boys became friends and it seemed there were always girls around, girls who could as often as not ski circles around the boys.

But, all things being relative, there weren’t many parents involved in those early years, and for good reason: there weren’t many kids. The first Chisholm junior team consisted of boys who were born in the late 1930’s or very early 40’s, hence not part of the baby boom which was to follow in the late 1950’s and beyond. So, other than the Gagnons and Cy, parent volunteers along with CSC adults were numerous enough to help with carnival duties, but not nearly as numerous as the force that turned out for events in the next decade. Also, as the boys left grammar or junior high school their parents moved on as well, leaving Cy as the constant presence. But replacement organizers and drivers were never difficult to find. In the mid-fifties, the Swallows outfitted their car with a large two-tiered rack with vertical spikes to hold all the boys skis, including several pairs of cross country skis donated by the departing Swedish racers at the 1950 FIS championships held in Rumford.

(As an aside, and related to the FIS in a way, it should be noted that although the area had gained recognition as a center for nordic skiing, more youngsters preferred basketball than snow sports. Programs at the “Institute” drew solid numbers of younger players and both Stephens and Mexico high schools had at least two levels of teams for both boys and girls. And most adults who followed schoolboy sports preferred the heat of the gym to standing at the foot of a jumping hill or rope tow slope on a windy February day. Chisholm senior carnivals had become popular spectator events because of the jumping, but, between their annual appearances, followings at junior ski events were small, mainly consisting of families and friends of competitors. The 1950 FIS championships, what with the international contingents boarding at area homes and visiting businesses for several days improved the public’s awareness of what serious skiing was all about. It certainly got the attention of area kids every bit as much as the appearance of the Boston Celtics at the Rumford Armory. In addition, watching Chummy Broomhall skiing right there with the world’s best had a huge effect on young aspirations. Two years later and beyond, every Chisholm junior was more than happy to be coached in any way by Chummy and Bob Pidacks, both of whom were just as happy to do so.)

By the mid-fifties, the Chisholm Junior Carnival and Chisholm Junior Team had taken the form they would follow until the program was finally superseded by middle school ski programs. Exactly how and when that happened is beyond the scope of my work and for someone else to report. But at least until the mid-1960’s, each Carnival consisted of competitions, junior team selections, a coronation of carnival king and queen, a pot luck feed of some sort and a dance. The pattern of team competitions set in the beginning continued, with the field of competing teams expanding from Farmington and Lebanon to include Auburn and Conway, NH. The meets followed the usual four event form, downhill having been replaced by giant slalom by the end of the 1950’s. In 1956, when their son Peter entered high school, the Swallows’ places as “chief drivers and parents” were taken by Al and Alice Miller, whose four youngsters would keep them

in the program until 1968, when daughter Leslie reached high school, and after that Alice Miller kept her hand in it by coaching the first Mexico High School girls ski team.

The entry of the Miller siblings into the junior program, beginning with Sandy in 1956 and followed by brothers Jim and Pat in 1959, heralded a transformation in the junior program, one that would lead to solid national recognition. And the Millers were but four of an entire baby boom contingent, many of whose parents were active Chisholm Ski Club members and former competitors, people who knew the game inside out and had known it for years. Thus the atmosphere and energy behind the program became charged to a degree unimaginable perhaps in the decade following World War II. Many of them had two or more children which kept them in the picture long enough to provide an seemingly endless cadre of coaches, officials and drivers.

By this time, Cy Broomhall had retired from coaching the junior team and in his stead were club skiers who knew their way around in any of the skiing disciplines. The list was long and some were undoubtedly missed here, but those who stood out in the memories of interviewees were parents Bud Hale, Earle Zinc, Chummy Broomhall, Dick Giberson Ernest "Chendy" Chenard, Ray Hamanne and Blackie Arsenault along with Aurele Legere, Dave LeClerc and Mack Miller, another former Olympic cross country veteran who had moved to Rumford to teach and coach the Stephens High team, yet found time to coach younger juniors.

Added to their coaching and organizational talents, some parent lent other skills: Fred Cunningham, two of whose sons were in the program, became the go-to repairman for scores of inexpensive but fragile and often splintered Jarvinen cross country skis. He and others also built an equipment trailer that served to hauling skis, boots and the like while doubling as a waxing center.

So it went, well into the 1960's. And as one batch of grade school baby boomers passed into high school another filled their places. Each four year generation, supported by knowledgeable and enthusiastic parents and volunteer coaches provided an equally steady contingent of competitors ready to do double duty as Mexico and Stephens high school team skiers and as an equally impressive number of teenage Chisholm Juniors whose exploits would bring the club unanticipated national renown. Practically all decade long, Chisholm juniors were regularly named to eastern squads headed for junior national championships where they took home their fair share of the honors, Beyond that most of them headed for division one college skiing and a few headed for national team selection, FIS and olympic competition.

The cornucopia that poured out the junior talent in the 1960's had a few roots in the earliest program. In the mid 1950's, while they skied on their respective high school teams, a few continued participating in USEASA junior competition ,mainly in northern New England. In 1955, John Roderick, a veteran class A cross country racer and parent loaded his car with five Chisholm juniors who had shown some promise and headed for the USEASA Junior Nordic Championships in Salisbury Connecticut. There, on a rather warm and rainy weekend, they bunked in the infirmary of Indian Mountain School in nearby Lakeville, ate in the dining room and raced and jumped on a combination of rain soaked hay, old snow hauled from banks at the

airport and occasional wet gravel. Before heading home the boys stepped to the podium to receive their medals: Junior I (ages 16-17) cross country, Phillip "Butch" Broomhall, 1st; Bob Roderick, 3rd. Junior II (ages 14-15) Cross Country, Lee Boyle, 1st; Bill Ferguson, 2nd. Junior I jumping, Bob Roderick, 2nd; Butch Broomhall 3rd. Junior II jumping, Paul McGuire 2nd; Bill Ferguson, 3rd. Nordic Combined, Junior I, Butch Broomhall, 1st. Junior II, Bill Ferguson, 1st. By winning one or more events, both Butch Broomhall and Bill Ferguson earned spots on the junior eastern team to the junior national championships held that year in Whitefish, Montana. Bill Ferguson was unable to take part, but in subsequent years, he and Wilson Gagnon, one of the original Chisholm Junior Team members of 1949-50, earned invitations to junior national competitions, in either Duluth MN or Franconia NH. Closer to home, Paul McGuire managed to earn two Maine State Class B High School jumping championships. Thus, despite a lack of many kids pressing one another toward the top of the local heap compared to what would come, there were a few precursors to the flood of Chisholm juniors that eventually got to play on the national and world stage in the 1960's and beyond.

At this point, one might reasonably ask where the girls were while all this was going on. Why was it that one could be a queen but not a skimeister? From the beginning in 1949, girls were part of the picture, but never as team members or in any other capacity in the Chisholm program. It was not quite the same in other junior programs, namely Farmington, where young junior girls vied for honors in competitions such as the Farmington Ski Club's annual Dartmouth cup race. I recall that whenever the Chisholm juniors traveled to Farmington, girls often fore ran alpine races, usually in better times than most of the boys. Such was the difference in physical maturity in the late grade school years. But there was no equivalent offered by the Chisholm Ski Club, nor would there be one for well over a decade, certainly in nordic skiing which was the last set of ski disciplines to offer opportunities for girls and women. And there was never much doubt that despite a few hardy souls who crossed the local grain, the Chisholm Ski Club was a nordic club through and through.

Asked about the subject in her interview, Leslie Miller Morrill remembered being on a girls squad of some sort during her time in the junior program (1965 thru 1968), a period in which Alison Owen, at age 13, broke the barrier by competing as a member of the northwest team at the junior nationals in 1966. She also remembers that Junior III (thirteen and under) races, particularly alpine races, were plentiful by then which opened possibilities for girls that hadn't been available even a half-decade before her involvement. But by the mid sixties and until her graduation from Mexico High School in 1972, she witnessed positive steps through new programs such as the Torger Tokle League which placed girls under age 13 into separate classes. As for girls who jumped, other than Diane Fournier, and possibly one or two in the 1930's, few were encouraged enough to give it a try. That would come later - much later. Finally, it was likely the emergence of the Torger Tokle and subsequent Bill Koch Leagues that brought an end to the Chisholm junior ski program in its original form. That's a different story for a different story teller.

A few anecdotes: Jim Miller recalled the building of close social relationships among the volunteer parents, particularly on pre-meet evenings at the Miller home when the kids were left

to “hell around” on their own upstairs while the dads were in the cellar prepping skis for the next day’s race. Any kid who managed to descend the cellar steps to see what the laughter was all about was immediately shooed back up lest he set his eyes on the refreshments on the workbench.

Peter Swallow recalled times when prepping the facilities for a meet at Scotty’s, Cy Broomhall would meet the kids at a certain point and load them onto the deck of his pulp truck for the ride to Scotty’s. Imagine how that would go down in 2015!

Sandy Miller recalled an afternoon following practice on the high school jump when his dad offered a dollar apiece if he, Mike Mickeriz and Art “Pinky” Cunningham, would take a ride off the 55 meter Christiansen Hill, not so affectionately known as “Suicide.” I recall the path to the top as a consequence of the usual kids having dared one another but often only after getting some serious advice by adult club jumpers. His was the first I’d heard of anyone doing it for the money.

For my part, I have vivid memories of being packed like so many sweaty sardines in wet wool in the back seat of Bob Gagnon’s car for the trip to and from Titcomb slope in Farmington in February, 1951. The program was in its second year and I was a newbie and the only Mexico kid to boot. I had been selected for the team by scoring a second in the sixth grade jumping event at the carnival. Other than occasionally coaxing my jumping skis through narrow trails in the woods behind our house in Ridlonville, I had little experience beyond our neighborhood jump of shoveled snow in those same woods. My folks knew even less than I did, but were thrilled at my selection.

So, a week later, wearing a new home knit hat and real wool stirrups ski pants like the ones the others wore I piled into the back seat of Bob Gagnon’s sedan and headed for my very first meet at Titcomb. Having been told I would ski in four events and owning only a pair of Lund junior jumping skis, I borrowed my sister’s much longer skis mounted with free heel leather bindings but without steel edges, which were to be used for the other three events. I also borrowed her too-long aluminum poles. After encountering a rope tow for the first time in my life and being dragged for endless yards toward the top I was in the gate for the first event. It was the downhill race, which in my case consisted of consisted of a fall near the top followed by a long slide on my back to the bottom of the course for a solid DSQ; in slalom, not understanding that each gates consisted of two poles, I turned around every pole and between falls finished what should have been two twenty-odd second runs in several minutes. During the cross country race my sister’s skis weighed a ton by the time I’d gotten half way around a long flat loop. I lost that one by a good mile - literally perhaps.

The jumping, which to me was the only reason I was there at all, was much kinder to me, and a 5th place score saved what confidence I had left.

I was thankful that Cy and Bob figured I hadn’t been coached very well about what to expect and offered to help get some proper equipment if I couldn’t manage to do so. After my tale of woe at the supper table, my folks swung into action and by the time of the next meet we had driven to South Paris, gotten a pair of decent steel edged skis of the right size, just like those the the other boys used! And I got to ski cross country on a pair of those Swedish Linex skis and real Bass cross country boots as well. Yes, life was ever so much nicer then. The results were, too.

That did it - I've been a four eventer of sorts ever since, (except for jumping when at 55 a close call reminded me that that slower recovery time meant that even a thirty meter hill could do some real damage)

While it is true that the Chisholm Junior program was a path to true skiing greatness for some, for all of us those brief years ushered us into continued friendly competition, coaching at various levels and further years years spent volunteering our time and talents. I think it is fair to say that for all of us, the process helped shape our lives in ways probably neither we nor our folks could have imagined.