

STEAMBOAT; SUN, SNOW, AND BILLY KIDD

by John DeYoung,
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and Jamie Lynch

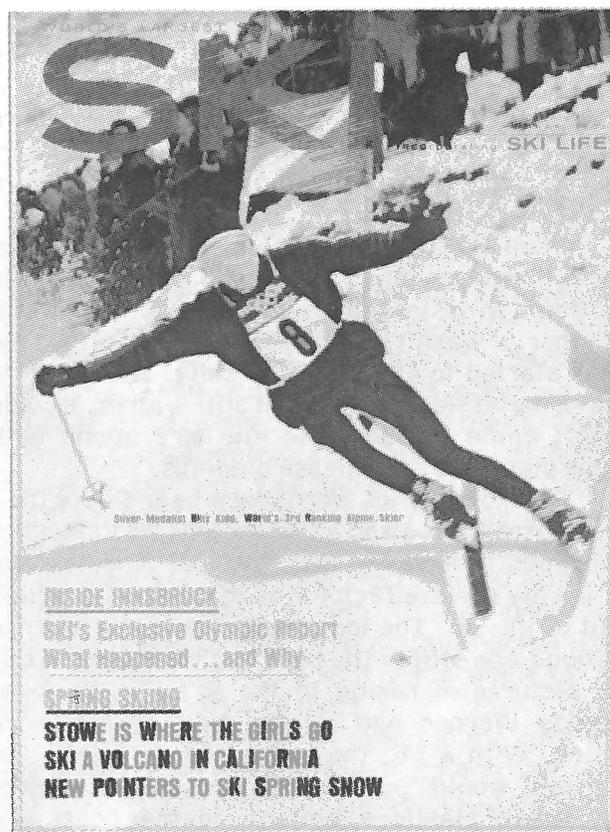
Billy Kidd, a Steamboat trademark in magazines and pictures, is one of the best skiers in the United States. He won a silver medal in the 1964 Olympics, and a gold in the World Championships. From pro racer he went to marketing director for the Steamboat Ski Area. He was married to Kristin, in 1976 and has two children, Buff and Christian.

"I was born in Burlington, Vermont, on April 13, 1943. I grew up water skiing and playing around Lake Champlain. In general, I had a pretty ideal childhood. There was a touch of city life in Burlington, and when I was twelve, we moved to Stowe, Vermont. It was sort of like Steamboat, and Stowe was the ski racing capital of the country then.

"My dad did a number of things, but he was mainly in the resort business. He had a hotel, motels, a lumber business, and a few other things. His schedule was flexible enough that he could help me do some things that I wanted, and he didn't push me at all. I had to make my own race schedule and choose what I wanted to do. He never said what races I had to go to. I decided what I wanted to do, and he supported me fully.

"I remember winters being great times. I skied in my back yard. I cut down trees to make ski trails, so that I could practice. In my first race, when I was twelve, I got 66th out of 120. I was pretty happy because I had beaten half of the field, and they were college kids. I later was disqualified because I was only twelve.

Within a short time I started to ski well. That's why Dad moved the family to Stowe. With the coaching I got I could race pretty well, and by the time I was fourteen, I made the team in the Eastern National Junior Championships. That was in 1958.



Billy on the cover of Ski Magazine.

"At school in Stowe we got out two afternoons a week to ski. The top classes were coached by the best ski instructors from the Austrian ski school. The head instructor and a number of the others were former Olympic and world champions. They were Othmar Schneider, Peggy Goggle, and some others I doubt you would know. Some of the best racers in the world came to Stowe to teach skiing. I was glad I had a chance to train with them.

"Skiing was a fairly new sport when I was growing up. There weren't many ski racers. Then racing was basically turning around a pole. The coach would tell a racer what to do. There was very little organization. We did what we could to go as fast as possible. I really loved training and running gates. I would practice after school, behind my house, until dark.

"I raced every weekend from Christmas until April. I traveled around New England and out West to national championships, like the Roch Cup in Aspen and the Hariman Cup in Sun Valley. The Ski Club in Stowe sponsored us. There was no official training program. Basically we went out and ran gates for as many hours as we could. We had a place set aside for racers. We had slalom poles at our disposal, and we could cut lines on one lift. As a result we had excellent training. We set our own courses, and basically were on our own.

"Skiing then was quite a bit different. You may

have seen the skis that I had as a kid here in the Pioneer Museum. My first pair were wooden hand-me-downs. I chopped the ends off, but it didn't really matter much because they were wooden. They didn't have steel edges and certainly not release bindings. The boots were basically hiking boots.

"When I was about twelve we started to get better equipment. The best skis had plastic bottoms with steel edges, but the Boots were still leather. It wasn't until the 1964 Olympics that the skis started to change drastically. We began to have metal skis and boots of stiff leather. Buckle boots came in about the mid 60's, along with fiberglass skis and release bindings.

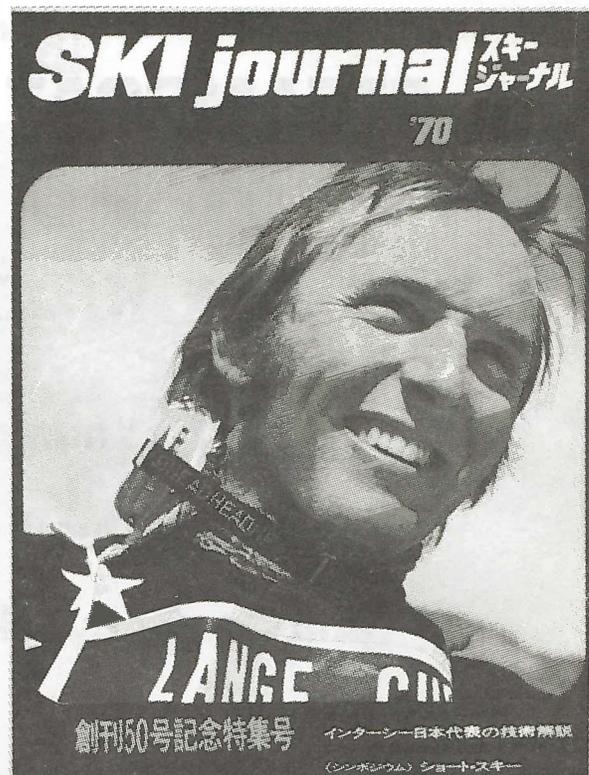
"The old bindings were like a bear trap with a clamp for the toe and a six foot leather thong that wrapped around the foot. We tied ourselves in. The only release factor was if the screws pulled out of the ski. The long thong was used to wrap around and stiffen the boot to give control. Look at pictures of racing in the 50's. That's what Buddy Werner and all the best racers were using. With a fall the skis would break or the screws would pul out. Speeds were slower because of plastic ski bottoms, leather boots, and unsophisticated techniques.

"Skiing changed drastically between '64 and '70. In 1960, the Winter Olympics were on television, so a lot of people came in contact with skiing. The race results improved drastically because of the better equipment, and more people became skiers who weren't before. It used to be that skiers were people who lived in the mountain towns like Steamboat or Stowe. Some had the money to go to these resorts.

"Then skiing became a sport that lots of people could afford. Metal skis could be made cheaply and durably. We had release bindings so that people didn't have to be daredevils to become skiers. Teaching methods improved, and many saw skiing on television and said, "Geez, that looks like a lot of fun. I'd like to try that." Many saw pictures in "Life" magazine or "Sports Illustrated". Skiing became a thing that you could try if you lived in New York City, Miami, or Dallas. Travel has changed skiing.

"In my last year in high school I wanted to try out for the World Championships, but I couldn't enter the try-out races because I was too young. It wasn't a sudden thing, my saying, "I want to make the Olympics. It was more gradual. As I did well in regional races and state races I set my goals higher. I realized I had potential. I skied well enough in the last year of high school to make it, but they didn't have a U.S. Ski Team then. They only had a team every two years for the Olympics and the World Championships. That was when I realized that I might get to the Olympics.

"Skiing is a very individual sport. When racing



Billy on the cover of a Japanese magazine.

a downhill course there are no team mates. Whether I win or lose is entirely up to me. However, there is the strong feeling of a team at the Olympics or other big races because we travel as a group and train as a group. Then as we're standing in the starting gate we're knowing that if we fall we've get several people to ski behind and represent our country. Most are very aware of our country when we're racing internationally. At the Olympics these are flags and a nationalistic feeling.

Another good feeling is to know that other people can speak your language and are supportive. When you're in a small town in the mountains of Austria or France, few people speak English. The food is strange, and often its been two or three months since home. Team-mates are linked with home, and they make us feel more comfortable. The psychological factors are important. It doesn't take much affect performance, and at the higher echelon of competition the slight difference is significant.

"I used to like to travel a lot. The first year I made the U.S. Ski Team I was really excited about going to Europe. Being from Vermont and getting a change to go to Europe and South America is pretty exciting. I really wanted to go to Australia, and I did through skiing. I stopped in Fiji and Tahiti on the way home from Australia. The travel was not just to get from race to race, it was an important part of skiing."

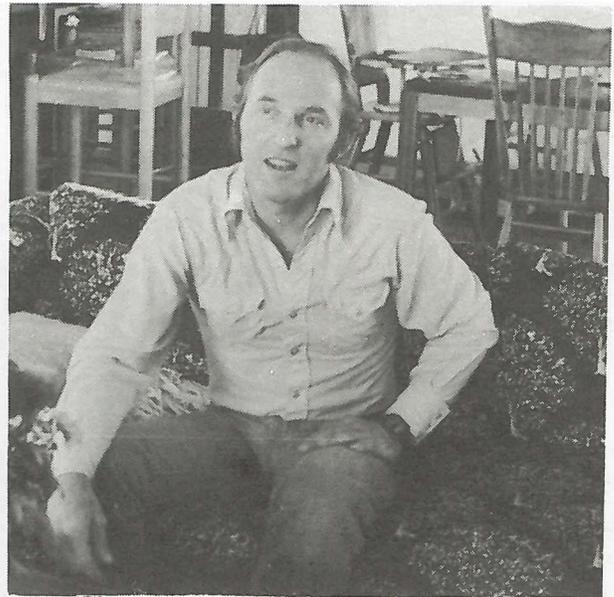
John asked what made the Olympics so special. Billy talked about the difference between the Olympics and other races. He explained, "Well, the courses aren't all that different. The Olympic downhill course is easier than the other races. Each country is allowed as many racers as qualify. For people who haven't had a lot of practice they make the courses easier. The slalom and giant slalom are similar to most big races. They put water on the course for a week or two before the race, so that the sharp edges don't make big ruts and holes. That makes it fair for everyone. Even number 120 can still win because of the smooth course. They are extremely well prepared.

"Ice is the most ideal racing condition, because it's faster and fairer. A racer doesn't want wax to become a factor. On new, wet, snow, it is. On solid ice it's basically skiing ability that's the factor.

"Running a course is kind of by instinct. It has to be pretty automatic on the way down. For instance, a racer must make one turn per second, for sixty seconds. You must know exactly what's coming and what's going on. A racer can't wait until they get there to react because there's no time. You average 65 miles per hour and have top speeds of 90 miles per hour, so the course must be memorized. At the starting gate when the starter says "Go" you know exactly how the course is laid out. You have to know where the gates are, how the combinations are set, the relative distances between poles, and whether it's steep or flat, or has a sidehill. You must know it by memory because sometimes in fog there are only two or three hundred feet of visibility, and at 80 miles per hour there's no time to react.

"A skier makes mistakes or slight miscalculations. There are many variables. In bowling, running track, or swimming, there are constants. In ski racing the course has never been run before. Skiing from day to day depends on the snow. It can be solid ice, new snow, or a ruffy course. The snow changes from hour to hour depending on how the light shines. When going 80 miles per hour one goes from sunlight to shadow. On an overcast day the light is flat. A run or race is not without mistakes. For example, in a tuck going 70 to 80 miles per hour if a hand comes out, it slows the racer down a couple of a hundredths of a second. There are seldom perfect runs.

"A racer accumulates F.I.S. point. It is a complicated system, basically a percentage against the winner of the race, and the winner is compared to the best. In World Cup events each country is allowed as many racers as qualify. If a racer is seconds behind the winner, and one of the tenth best skiers in the world then he/she get so many F.I.S. point. A computer keeps track of



"There are seldom perfect runs."

the points. As a skier gets better, he/she gets invited to national training camps in the summer. If some coach thinks the racer has potential he will put him on the U.S. team. The top people from each region are brought together so that they get a chance to race and train together."

John asked Billy how placing at the Olympics had altered his way of life. He said, "I came in second, and that didn't change my life drastically because when I won the silver medal at the Olympics in 1964 I was 20 years old, and I wanted to continue ski racing. Ski racing then was not a very big sport. It wasn't like winning the World Series where people knew your name. What changed my life more was winning the World Championships in 1970.

I had just graduated and decided I wanted to go to graduate business school, stay in the ski business, and basically stop ski racing. Then I won the World Championships, and opportunities opened up. First of all, I continued ski racing on the pro racing circuit, and I shelved or postponed the idea of going to graduate school. Business opportunities opened up so that I could work for a number of different companies and stay in the ski business. Thus, I could do what I liked best and get paid for it.

"I turned pro in 1970, after I won the amateur championships. L.T.V. had just bought the mountain, and they were putting up a lot of money for lifts and other things. They asked me to be the resident pro here, kind of like a resident golf pro. I represented the area. On the pro circuit it's obvious a skier is from Steamboat, because of the Steamboat bib. Hank Kashiwa and Lonny Vanatta represent Steamboat. In any race I was labeled Billy Kidd from Steamboat



“I’m not crazy about recognition.”

Springs, Colorado. That gets attention for the ski area, and I got paid to do that.

“Now I am the director of skiing at Steamboat. I work in the marketing department and travel quite a bit. I talk to ski clubs, do radio and television interviews, and make appearances at ski shops and ski shows. It’s a busy schedule. If I’m at a racing clinic people hear I’m from Steamboat and want to know what it’s like skiing here. Colorado is a magic name for skiers, like California was in the 50’s with sunshine, surfing, and cute girls. So many pictures of the Rockies have waist deep powder, sunshine, and crystal clear days. People just can’t believe it’s true. They hear that the people are friendly, and they want to know if these things are true. So I spend time talking about it. I don’t have to exaggerate or make up anything. All I have to do is tell what it is like here. I tell them about the ski area, what the people are like, and what to expect when they come out. Almost no one is disappointed. It’s a nice situation to be in.

“I ski most of the year. I also help design skis for Hart. I’ve helped with the development of other equipment and ski-related things. I went to New Zealand, France, and Austria this summer. I ski 10 months and talk about it the other two. That’s my job. It’s ideal!

“I’m not crazy about recognition. I don’t search it out, and I don’t like being in the spotlight. There are people who like it, but I’d rather not have the attention. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable because I’ve lived with it, and I make my living that way, but it’s a tough balance between public and private life. I’m in a position to make a living by being recognized and it isn’t that I want to separate the two, but I don’t

like being in the spotlight enough to have celebrity status.

“It’s not tough to sign an autograph. I remember when I was twelve, Andrew Moulter, who lives in Aspen now, was probably the best skier in the world in the 50’s. He was a hero of mine. I got a chance to follow him down a trail once, on the absolute edge of control. There was no one on the trail, and he was trying out the line that he was going to be racing. I decided to follow him through this difficult section, called the Seven Turns of the Nosedive. I could barely keep him in sight through the first three or four turns, and I got farther and farther behind. In the last couple of turns I barely made it through on my feet. Finally, in the last turn, he was way in front of me, and I fell and slid a couple of hundred yards, stopping right at his feet. I was embarrassed because I was a kid falling at the feet of my idol. Years after I was coaching with him in Red Lodge, Montana, and I told him about that situation and asked him if he remembered. He said he was at Stowe for many years, and skied with a lot of kids. It didn’t stick in his mind. It made me realize that to sign a piece of paper for a kid or to ski down the hill with them is a pretty easy situation for me. It might be memorable for them because of what I’ve done with my racing. It probably means a lot more to the kid than the inconvenience it causes me. It’s pretty easy thing to do signing for memory’s sake.”

John was curious about how skiing in Steamboat compared with other places. Billy said, “Europe has spectacular skiing. If you’ve never been there I suggest you go. The Swiss Alps are outstanding. The quaint little towns perched on mountainsides have a lot of character. It all varies, from Switzerland to France, Austria, Italy, and Germany, but the skiing is outstanding, and the travel is too. I would take my kids to Europe and have them experience all the things that go with the sport. I would make sure they wouldn’t miss going to France, Austria, Switzerland, etc. But if you’re looking for the best skiing, go to the Rockies, from New Mexico to Montana. It’s the best skiing in the world with light, fluffy, dependable snow and good weather. I grew in the East and raced throughout Europe. I have been to South America and New Zealand, as well as Australia and Japan, but if I want to go skiing and find the best, I go to the Rockies.

“COLORADO IS A MAGIC NAME FOR SKIERS”