

# Downhill, All the Way

Lucrece Beale Special to The Washington Post

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## Adventures

# Downhill, All the Way

By Lucrece Beale  
Special to The Washington Post

John Newdorp is standing at the top of the mountain. He adjusts his goggles, slides his skis back and forth, plants his poles.

"Go!" snaps the starter.

John shoots forward, triggering the timing wand, and heads for the first gate in the slalom course. The turns are rutted and soft but John skis with style and finishes 13th in the group of 40 racers. John is 79 years old.

Dean Worcester is next to start. He, too, carves stylish turns and finishes 7th. Dean is 74.

I am next to last out of the gate. I leap forward, a tornado of zeal and determination. I end up DNF. Did Not Finish. Halfway down I rip off the 6th gate and slide, gate in tow, into the woods adjacent to the course. I am 75.

The race was at Mont Sutton and the racers were members of the Potomac Valley Skiers Inc. (PVS), a 25-year-old Washington area club, limited to 200 members, who were spending a week skiing in the Province of Quebec.

There were 49 of us on the trip. Discreet inquiries made to determine who rated senior-citizen discount lift tickets revealed that of the group, 28 were over 60; 15 of those over 65; 8 of those over 70; and five of those over 75.

Just who were these fogies I was with on the slalom course in my first race ever?



Hank and Aina Thomas take a break.

John Newdorp, a retired medical care administrator from Catonsville, Md., started skiing at age 46 and competed successfully in downhill and slalom races. He now skis recreationally as often as possible. "Age," he says, "is not important unless you are a cheese." To keep in shape, John runs marathons and does white-water canoeing. "But," he declares, "nothing can match the exhilaration, the joy of skiing."

Dean Worcester, a retired engineer now living in Annapolis, has skied since his Dartmouth days in the '30s. He was a downhill racer in his youth. Now, with competitive racing behind him, he skis several weeks a year for the sheer fun of it. He rows daily on the Severn River to keep in shape.

I keep in shape running up and down the stairs looking for my glasses.

Twenty-five years ago, at age 50, I went on a learn-to-ski week in Canada. The Washington Post later published a series of articles I wrote on the experience. The theme was: "You're never too old to learn to ski."

Having just celebrated my silver skiing anniversary with a week at Mont Sutton in Canada, I am updating that message. The theme now is: "You're never old enough to quit skiing."

In ski movies and advertisements, skiers always are lithe, gorgeous and radiant with youth. Maybe they started out that way but, as the poets say, the river of time flows on, and those beauties and hulks grow older. And wearier. And stiffer.

Yet some ski on. On the recent Mont Sutton jaunt, those 28 over-60 skiers, when their joints began to ache and their muscles began to cramp, chose to sit in chairlifts, not rocking chairs. They intend to keep bombing the slopes until, like Douglas MacArthur's old soldiers, they just fade away—probably into a whiteout.

This is the fifth year Gaithersburg resident Jack Peoples, 62, has led a group from PVS to Mont Sutton. After rearing seven children and 36 years as a pharmaceutical salesman, Jack now is living his life's fantasy. In his first year after retirement he skied 22 different mountains and developed a talent for leading ski trips. He and assistant leader Charles Huggins, 60, from Potomac, like leading seniors. "They rarely bitch," says Jack. "They are flexible and they are usually experienced skiers."

At Mont Sutton this year, we have perfect conditions. A deep base. New snow almost daily. All 53 trails and glades are open.

As usual, we occupy the Auberge La Paimpolaise, located on the slope and just a brief climb to the nearest lift. We take over all 30 rooms and innkeeper Rolland and his staff of 40 cater to our every whim. There aren't many.

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PHOTOS BY JANET MARK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Dean Worcester starts a downhill run at Mont Sutton.

We're just so glad to be back one more year running the slopes all day and raising hell all night. Raising hell?

Let's face it, there's not a whole lot of night life at Mont Sutton and what there is is do-it-yourself. For us it was bingo and a pajama party, which turned out to be the most successful events in the history of PVS trips.

The bingo was a first for the group, and the leader swore it would be the last. I mean you could hardly stand the excitement. The competition became so intense and tempers so frayed that Silver Spring psychiatrist Paul Yessler, 67, offered a free hour of consultation to the most disturbed. When the frenzy grew worse, he made it a free group-therapy session for all.

I guess you had to be there.

The highlight of our social week was the pajama party to which everyone came attired in his sleep clothing for an evening of disco dancing. Well, really, the things people sleep in on a ski trip!

Bill Anderson, 61, a fourth-generation Washingtonian, came attired in a raccoon coat straight out of the Roaring Twenties. He danced with abandon and was a big hit. A 75-year-old woman wore her red-striped thermal uppers and lowers. She said she'd spent thousands of dollars on ball dresses in her lifetime and it wasn't until she appeared in her red-striped underwear that she was a belle.

As I said, you had to be there.

Frank Shelburne, 76, a retired congressional shorthand

reporter who took up skiing at age 50 and skis three to five weeks a year, says, "PVS is like the college fraternity I never belonged to and coming to Sutton is like Old Home Week."

Shelburne skis from lift opening to closing, and stays with the après group until lights-out.

Every day, Bowie resident Hank Thomas, 75 and retired from the U.S. Weather Bureau, and his wife, Aina, a retired dentist, ski the baby slopes. Hank has been skiing for 35 years and Aina, born in Latvia, skied almost before she walked.

Now Hank suffers from lupus and arthritis so they ski the easy slopes. "I'm not after any merit badges," he says. "I just want to live to ski another day." "It will be a long time yet before we hang 'em up," Aina declares firmly. Next month they plan to ski with the club in Italy and France.

On the other side of the mountain, Kirk Burns, 70, and wife Peggy are leading a contrail of PVSers down the black trails. Kirk Burns, a retired American University professor who started skiing at 46, says: "Next to the discovery of the opposite sex, skiing was the most important discovery of my life." He never tires of it . . .

Peggy Burns, with three daughters and five grandchildren, thinks skiing is the perfect family sport. "Where else can young and old be outdoors together, having fun all day long?"

Back at the Paimpolaise, after three or four hours on the slopes, hungry skiers are pouring into the dining room to refuel for the afternoon. They talk of skiing. It never ends.

Seniors Mary Jane McCarthy, Bette Walker and Dorothy Mills have skied nonstop all morning. Their faces are flushed with the cold and exhilaration.

McCarthy, retired from the Public Health Service, has been skiing more than 20 years. The widowed mother of six daughters, she declares, "I'm not sure I could have survived to my golden years without skiing and the friendships made on the slopes."

Walker learned to ski in Europe where her Marine Corps officer husband was stationed for seven years. Widowed now, she takes yearly ski trips.

Dorothy Mills, retired from government intelligence service, has been skiing since 1955. A pianist and gardener, she also hikes, ice skates, swims and plays tennis. "I think I would give them all up," she says, "before I'd give up skiing."

The days fly by and finally it's the final afternoon and time for the last run. The skiers gear up and stagger outside, where it's now 12 degrees and snowing.

"All skiers are crazy," says 68-year-old Charles Gordon cheerfully. "I mean you gotta be crazy to suffer all this misery."

"Yeah," agrees 78-year-old Franklin Fiske, as they board the chairlift and ascend to make one last run. Information from Marilyn Clark, PVS membership chairman, (703) 978-9435.

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