Pioneers on the Slopes

True believers braved ridicule and skepticism to bring skiing to North Carolina's mountains

t's a rare occurrence for a Mohawk-coiffed ski-film star to shred the slopes at a small Southeastern resort, often dwarfed by the big-name slopes out west and around the world. Even more surprising was that world-renowned extreme skiing legend Glen Plake, visiting Beech Mountain in 1993, appreciated a fundamental truth about skiing in Western North Carolina—the industry was built on heart.

"Don't get me wrong, I love the big ski areas," Plake said, looking at Mount Mitchell standing out above a spectacular sea of clouds. "But you know what—the people at



Road to the Top: The Beech Mountain Parkway, with slopes in the distance, was the precursor for the East's highest town.



Getting Creative: Judy Alexander (right) and a ranch-hand use golf clubs as poles at Cataloochee Ranch in 1939, before she and her husband opened WNC's first ski area.

the smaller ski areas are the ones working hardest for the sport."

Indeed, North Carolina's ski pioneers had to labor for respect and success. For skiing to be feasible in WNC, people from destinations farther South had to be enticed to drive hours to peaks covered primarily with man-made snow. With the help of a dynamic promoter, a talented instructor, and other visionaries who saw mountains begging for snow, the sport took hold here.

Grooming the Slopes

The story begins as far back as the 1930s when a North Carolina guide published by the Works Progress Administration showed a photo of Lees-McRae College ski clubbers sliding across the meadows of Beech Mountain, 30 years before the ski area was built.

By the mid-1950s, an Asheville group had formed the Mount Mitchell Ski Club and Governor Luther Hodges approved skiing on the group's namesake peak. A slope was PHOTOGRAPH (LEFT) BY GEORGE FLOWERS AN (ABOVE) COURTESY CATALOOCHEE SKI ARI



Snow Blowers: Rather than hope for the real thing, Appalachian Ski Mtn. uses tower-mounted snow guns to ensure deep powder.

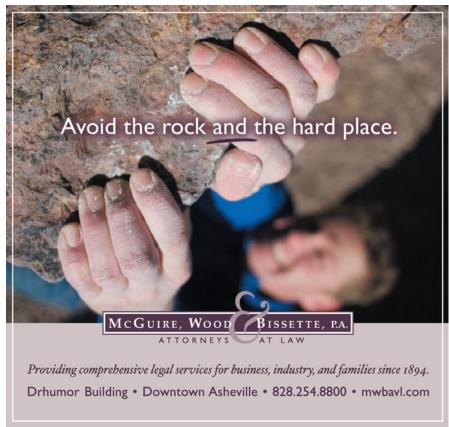
cleared, but the effort faded when the state decided to avoid competing with North Carolina's first commercial ski area, expected to open in Maggie Valley.

Tom and Judy Alexander set the stage when they unveiled Cataloochee Ski Area in 1961. After that, Southern skiing began attracting national publicity, but much of it came with a "backward South" angle. Articles about the "Banana Belt of Skiing" and grits on the slopes were common. One day, Tom recalled, "someone noticed a photographer had gone into the pasture with my cattle and was trying to drive them over onto the slopes. When I got within hollering distance, I asked him what he was trying to do. He said he wanted me to let down the fence and drive my cattle onto the slopes, saying it would make a real good photo for his magazine." Tom threw him off the property.

Shaking the Stereotype

The negative attention didn't deter developers from imagining more resorts or snowsports lovers from joining the scene.

"The rich and famous came in droves," when Blowing Rock Ski Lodge opened, recalled Grady Moretz, who'd later become a shareholder. When financial problems led





Samples arrive in stores beginning in March

100 Charlotte St. Asheville, NC 828-254-4247 25 Miller St. Waynesville, NC 828-456-4297

ustduckyoriginals.com

Fine children's clothing - manufactured in Asheville, NC since 1980

OTOGRAPHS (2) COURTESY OF FRENCH-SWISS SKI COLLEG

the bank to call the note, Moretz and others bought the slope. With a new name—Appalachian Ski Mtn.—the resort surged, eventually with the Moretz family as sole owners. But it was a chance meeting of a slick promoter from Atlanta and a long-haired WNC native that created a powerhouse team for Ski Mtn.

In 1968, Jim Cottrell, a Boone native and Central Piedmont Community College instructor, asked Moretz if he could teach a For skiing to be feasible in WNC, people from destinations farther south had to be enticed to drive hours to peaks covered primarily with man-made snow.

course in downhill at Ski Mtn. Cottrell got the gig and taught 114 students that winter.

Meanwhile at Beech Mountain, an intense, charismatic man with a shaved head and a bizarre past was also imparting his knowledge on the slopes. Jack Lester claimed to be a graduate of The Royal Military College of Australia, the youngest stage director at Hollywood's Grauman's Chinese Theater, and former manager for Marilyn Monroe.

Lester caught the ski bug from Clif Taylor, originator of the graduated length method of instruction—skiers start on small skis and progress to longer ones. Lester was sold on the method, and that winter, was teaching former North Carolina Governor Terry



Meeting of Minds: Jim Cottrell's (left) skiing know-how and Jack Lester's knack for promotion created a winning team.

Sanford when the resort's Austrian ski school director ordered the unsanctioned instructor off the slopes over the PA system. Lester swore he'd show the arrogant Europeans that Americans could teach skiing.

The following summer, when Cottrell found himself living next-door to Lester in Charlotte, the French-Swiss Ski College was born. Come winter, Cottrell's group-booking concept brought in hundreds of students—

 $54~\mathrm{wnc}$ january-february 2008 www.wncmagazine.com



Ski Pros: Jack Lester (center) and Jim Cottrell (center right) with French-Swiss Ski College instructors in the early 1970s.

including Green Berets. To reduce high injury rates among troops learning to ski in Europe, they'd been diverted to Appalachian Ski Mtn. Newspapers deemed Lester either a huckster or a promotional genius, but the local chamber of commerce praised him as the "magic promoter."

For perhaps his greatest feat, Lester brought triple gold champion Jean-Claude Killy to Boone a week before the 1972 Winter Olympics to ski and premiere the Frenchman's feature film, *Snow Job*. The promoter, resplendent in silk ski pants, fur boots, and an American eagle-embroidered sweater, showed off Killy in front of the media. He had proved to skeptics that WNC's slopes could attract the best in the world.

After Lester's death, Cottrell carried on, allying the ski college with the national certification program of the Professional Ski Instructors of America. During the 2001-02 season, French-Swiss Ski College taught its millionth lesson. Cottrell, now president of the company, still teaches today.

These and other trailblazers fine-tuned WNC's ski industry. The area's slopes have proved what locals already knew—skiing has a home in the South, even if we have to make the powder ourselves.

Randy Johnson *is the author of the 1986 book* Southern Snow: The Winter Guide to Dixie *and editor of* Hemispheres *magazine*.





As a destination spa resort in beautiful Highlands, North Carolina, Old Edwards Inn and Spa surrounds you with period antiques, gourmet cuisine, a sumptuous spa and more. All in a distinctly European ambience you'll never want to leave. For reservations, please call 866.526.8008 or visit www.oldedwardsinn.com.

445 Main Street Highlands, North Carolina 28741