

Foreign Relations



UNIVERSITY OF UTAH ATHLETICS / STEVE FULLER

In collegiate skiing, Americans compete for increasingly scarce roster spots with athletes from abroad, a trend that started after World War II. While international athletes raise the level of competition, do they also diminish U.S. ability to develop world-class racers?

BY EDITH THYS MORGAN

At the 2017 FIS World Alpine Ski Championships in St. Moritz, Switzerland, 589 athletes represented 76 nations. Sprinkled top to bottom throughout the field were 16 former or current National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes from eight countries. Three of those athletes finished in the top 15, underscoring that collegiate skiing in the United States, particularly for male ski racers, can be a viable path to the sport's highest level. As further proof, in this year's World Cup slalom event in Kitzbühel, Austria, three former

NCAA skiers were among the top 10, and at least three more (including two Americans) were in the field. The 2015 World Championships in Vail included six past NCAA champions, making the case that an NCAA title may be a predictor of future success.

The United States is the only country where collegiate ski teams are fielded and funded. There are 32 NCAA skiing programs (23 alpine and 25 nordic) spread across the East, Central and West Divisions, and roster spots on those teams are highly coveted. But fewer and fewer of those spots are going to American athletes. Of 32 athletes who earned All-American first and second

Left: The University of Utah won its 11th title in March 2017 at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships in Jackson, New Hampshire. The Utes' 2017 ski-team roster included eight Americans and 17 student-athletes from Norway, Sweden, Canada, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

team honors at the 2016 NCAA skiing championships, seven were American. In 2017, American representation improved, with Americans earning 11 of the 31 All American honors. Nevertheless, many U.S. skiing fans and participants remain frustrated. If the American collegiate system has proven it can develop world class skiers, why aren't more Americans part of it?

From the formation of the first intercollegiate ski competition in 1914, between Dartmouth and McGill, collegiate racing has been a celebration and collaboration of the talent and enthusiasm that traverses national borders. Europeans and Scandinavians, whether visitors coming for an education or immigrants playing the sports of their homelands, popularized and populated the events that would become the basis for NCAA skiing.

COLLEGIATE SKIING BEFORE THE NCAA

"Ski jumping was the premiere skiing event from the early 1900s through probably 1920," says Chip LaCasse. A New Hampshire native, he was recruited to the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU) as a ski jumper and then went on to lead the University of Vermont (UVM) ski team from 1969–2003. "Then came cross-country and then alpine," adds LaCasse. The first modern downhill and slalom competitions in North America were run by the Dartmouth Outing Club, in 1927 and 1928 respectively, and Dartmouth soon became the hub for alpine skiers. Skiing got a major boost the late 1940s when many Norwegian skiers came to the states by way of the Marshall Plan's effort to create opportunities for young Norwegians after the German occupation from 1940–1945. They built and bolstered ski programs—led by jumping—at the schools from coast to coast where they landed, and established a tradition of Scandinavian talent on college ski teams. The standouts included Norwegians Gustav Raaum at University of Washington, Georg Thrane at Washington State College and Sverre Kongsgaard at University of Idaho. Through the 1940s and 1950s, most collegiate skiers competed in four events: cross-country, jumping, downhill and slalom. Competitions were staged around winter carnivals and major events in Lake Placid, Sun Valley and Aspen.

THE MOVE WEST

It was an Easterner and a European who radically changed the power center of U.S. collegiate skiing. Willy Schaeffler immigrated from Germany in 1947, and started coaching at the University of Denver (DU) the following year. From the start he aggressively recruited Norwegian ski jumpers for his team, because there were so few competitive American jumpers. When the very first NCAA championships took place in 1954,



COURTESY TORIL FØRLAND

Members of the 1948 Washington State University ski team included Norwegians Lars Førland, Georg Thrane and Tormod Førland. Many Norwegian skiers came to the USA after World War II via the Marshall Plan, and competed for college ski teams.



COURTESY TORIL FØRLAND

Tormod Førland's daughter, Toril (top row, center) was raised in Norway and then competed for the University of Utah. The women's team is shown here en route to winning the national Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) title in 1978. Toril went on to become a five-time pro tour champ.

featuring the four events plus a Skimeister award for the top four-way skier, Schaeffler was ready. DU won the competition that year and for the next three straight.

Bob Beattie grew up in New Hampshire and attended Middlebury College. Beattie came to CU in 1957 and started his long rivalry with DU and Schaeffler. "Willy had the Norwegians first," says Beattie. "Then we recruited Americans to fight them." Among them were Jimmie Heuga, Billy Kidd, Buddy Werner, Harry 'Rebel' Ryan and Bill Marolt. At the time, the best American alpine skiers were in college, many of them in the east at Dartmouth and Middlebury. Beattie lured them to CU until, as he often jokes, "it was harder to make the CU team than the U.S. Ski Team," which Beattie also coached. His All-American CU squad won the NCAA championships in 1959 and 1960, but DU remained

dominant, typically bolstered by a strong Norwegian core, winning 13 national titles from 1954–1970.

With Schaeffler at the helm, DU offered irresistible deals to foreign alpine skiers. Norwegian World Cup racer and 1968 Olympian Otto Tschudi remembers being approached by Schaeffler in the finish of the Kitzbühel World Cup in 1969. “Come ski in the NCAA champs for DU,” he offered the 20-year-old rising star. “Get your education and continue racing on the World Cup for Norway.” Tschudi went on to win five individual NCAA titles and race for Norway in the 1972 Olympics.

Bill Marolt, one of Beattie’s Buffs, who started his coaching career at CU in 1968, called Beattie’s heated rivalry with Schaeffler “one of the classic rivalries in sports.” While Marolt credits Beattie with much of his coaching style, “he didn’t agree with me on foreigners.” Marolt stuck to mostly American kids for alpine, but, taking a page from Schaeffler’s playbook, started recruiting Norwegians in jumping and nordic. “The goal was to win and it was tough to do that without foreign nordic skiers and jumpers. That’s how I did it starting in 1968.” Marolt’s Buffs won eight straight NCAA titles from 1972–79.

By then, all the other Western schools were heavily recruiting foreigners, even for alpine roster spots, in part because Beattie had collected all of the top American skiers at CU. George Brooks started the University of New Mexico (UNM) ski team in 1968 and coached it from 1970–2007. “When we got scholarship money to offer to U.S. athletes we would go for them,” explains Brooks, “but they went to CU.” That led schools like New Mexico to recruit the next-best available skiers, who were usually foreign. The UNM roster reflected a direct connection to the Swedish national team and the University of Wyoming’s “Little

Norway” community of recruited student athletes even hosted an annual Norwegian Olympics.

MEANWHILE, BACK EAST...

Jim Page skied for Dartmouth, won the NCAA Ski Meister title in 1963 and jumped in the Winter Olympics in 1964. He went on to be head coach of the Dartmouth ski team from 1972–78. “The decision to recruit foreign athletes is not one I took lightly,” says Page. “On one hand it was denying a spot to a committed, enthusiastic American. But on the other hand, having the foreign jumpers was our only opportunity to win, and I owed that to rest of the team, who were good enough to win.” Page realized his best recruiters were the athletes themselves, so when his Norwegian athletes went home for the summer, they did so with a request to find more skiers who also were also good students.

Dartmouth posed significant hurdles to Norwegian student athletes. Ivy League schools offer no athletic scholarships and have a more complicated and selective application process. Furthermore, the Norwegian government did not yet recognize liberal arts institutions like Dartmouth, so students there did not receive the generous government stipend for studying abroad. Nonetheless, Christian Berggrav, before heading into his year of mandatory military duty in Norway, was convinced by his neighbor, one of Page’s athletes, to try for Dartmouth over a Western school. “I put all eggs in one basket, applied and got in!” It all worked out. Berggrav and his friend Arne Nielsen came to Dartmouth—both received 80 percent of their tuitions through financial aid available to any student—and Dartmouth won the 1976 NCAA championships.

As Division I schools, UVM and the University of



The 1954–55 University of Denver (DU) national championship men’s ski team in Aspen, Colorado. Front row, left to right: Willis Olson, Craig Lussi, Bud Werner, Larry Lewis, Alfred Vincelette, Keith Wegeman. Back row: John Cress, David Shaw, Bamse Woronovsky, Dave Miller, Henning Arstal, Coach Willy Schaeffler, Ole Gotaas, Gunnar Jansen, Dale Thompson, Tom Carter, Paul Wegeman.



Schaeffler recruited Norwegian World Cup racer and 1968 Olympian Otto Tschudi (above) to race for DU. Tschudi won five individual NCAA titles, including slalom in 1972, shown here.



The University of Vermont won the national women’s title in 1981 with an all-American team. Chip LaCasse (far right), who led UVM skiing for 33 years, recruited Norwegian jumpers but tried to fill the rest of his roster with Americans and Vermonters—including future Olympians from Vermont’s well-known Cochran family.



The University of Colorado (CU) 1959 national championship team had an all-American roster. Front row: John Dendahl, coach Bob Beattie, Frank Brown, Harold Shaeffer, assistant coach Helge Gagnum, Bob Gray. Back row: Dave Steed, Norris Durham, Gary Gisle.

New Hampshire (UNH) are the rare Eastern colleges that offer athletic scholarships. LaCasse, however, tried to carry on Beattie’s homegrown tradition when he started coaching at UVM in 1969. He recruited Norwegians as jumpers, but tried to fill the rest of his roster—nordic and alpine—with Americans, and particularly Vermonters, who until then had headed west for skiing scholarships. He hit paydirt with Bobby Cochran and later the entire Cochran clan, now in its 3rd generation of UVM skiers. With minimal international recruits, LaCasse put his UVM Catamounts alongside Dartmouth and Middlebury as top contenders, winning the NCAA championships in 1980.

That same year, due largely to the fact that women’s ski jumping was not an event, jumping—once the premiere skiing event—was eliminated from NCAA competition. Ski Meister had been eliminated in 1973. The alpine downhill was dropped in 1975, and was replaced with GS in 1976, maintaining equal weighting between nordic and alpine events.

The passage of Title IX in 1972, with its mandate for equal athletic opportunities for women, brought in female skiing recruits. At first that was through the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), founded in 1971 to govern women’s collegiate sports. Among the first international women skiing recruits, in 1975, was 19-year-old Norwegian Olympian Toril Forland, whose own parents had attended Washington State University under the Marshall Plan, and whose father Tormod jumped for WSU. By the time Vermonter Lyndall Heyer arrived at Utah in 1977 they automatically enrolled her in remedial English. “They figured as a recruited athlete I would need it,” Heyer recalls with a laugh. Forland led Utah to its first skiing national championship—the AIAW Title—in 1978. Starting in 1983 the NCAA hosted its first combined national championships, split evenly between men and women competitors.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

As the expense of fielding ski teams caught up with the Western schools, many of them dropped their NCAA ski programs: DU eliminated its ski team in 1983; Wyoming dropped Alpine in 1992; Western State dropped all in 2008, and the University of Nevada, Reno, defunded its ski team for the second time in 2010. University of New Mexico dropped and then provisionally reinstated its ski team last spring amidst a major outcry from the ski racing community. University of Alaska’s program is also on the ropes. Sustainable funding, and institutional will, are critical keys to survival. Tschudi successfully resurrected DU’s team in 1993, starting several endowed scholarship funds. DU was back on top by 2000 and has won nine NCAA championships since then, powered largely by Norwegians and Canadians who stay connected to their own national teams.

This flow of foreign athletes to U.S. schools is directly related to the funding of foreign national teams. When there is no B or C Team in a country, its athletes flood U.S. schools where they can. For coach Richard Rokos, in his 28th year as head ski coach at CU, the situation presents a challenge. Rokos proudly won the NCAA championships in 1998 and 1999 with an all-American alpine team, but his next generation of U.S. recruits could not compete against the “Foreign Legion” at the rest of the schools—typically older athletes, often straight off their national teams. DU won the next four NCAA titles in row, and then UNM with no Americans on the roster. For Rokos it was a tough lesson. “We weren’t competitive until I brought kids from across the pond,” he says. The Buffs won again in 2006 and four times since.

Rokos and Beattie engage in an ongoing debate, with Beattie maintaining that scholarships to foreign skiers deprive U.S. skiers the chance of an education, and a future in racing, and Rokos pointing out the

realities of college skiing. If he passes on the Europeans who call him up, they will end up racing for a competing school. Both concur with Rokos' assessment: "U.S. kids have very limited chances unless we arbitrarily eliminate or regulate a foreign influence." That, however, is unlikely to happen.

Over the years, LaCasse and Rokos have both been part of efforts to limit foreign skiers, but the NCAA balks on the grounds of discrimination. "Nobody will mess with that," says LaCasse. Chip Knight, Alpine Development Director for U.S. Skiing, agrees that any NCAA rule regulating foreign athletes is unlikely, and does not support that type of regulation anyway. More to the point, he asks, "Why can't we compete?"

Knight encouraged Alex Bocock, a Utah ski-racer parent with many of these same questions, to compile data from the past 25 years of NCAA skiing championships. In alpine skiing, from 2000–2016, American participation is down 41%, while foreign participation is up 200%. Bocock hopes the numbers—along with ongoing analysis in both alpine and nordic—will inform conversations, and lead to tweaks in the system so it can still benefit from European skiers but also support U.S. athlete development.

Dartmouth men's alpine coach Peter Dodge has seen many of his athletes go on to World Cup competition. The current U.S. Ski Team roster is well-fortified with accepted, enrolled and graduated Dartmouth students. Among them is the current top American slalom skier David Chodounsky, who was barely recruiting material when he came to Dartmouth. Four years spent maturing on the NCAA circuit readied him for the international stage. Dodge points out that the U.S. Ski Team could help support efforts to recruit American skiers by pointing qualified kids towards the U.S. National University team—a two-year pilot program that allowed student athletes to compete for college and train with

the national team, without violating NCAA rules—instead of the D Team, where they are not part of the college ecosystem.

"For those kids, Nor Ams and NCAA races would be their target races anyway," says Dodge. He notes that current college skiers who participated at the World Championships or World Junior Championships missed about a week of school and one or two carnivals. Accommodating such unique student athletes requires some level of flexibility, willingness and cooperation from both the college and the national team. Typically college coaches fully encourage these opportunities.

In discussing what may evolve from the Uni Team, U.S. Skiing CEO Tiger Shaw acknowledges that college level skiing can support elite development. Says Shaw, "...we all can benefit from better collaboration, embedment and coordination between college skiers and the USST. With both foreign and U.S. skiers achieving international results, both in school and afterwards, there is a great future in combining academic and skiing goals at the college level while pursuing World Cup achievement. We will continue to optimize the arrangements and find ways to better leverage the college and university Division I programs as we learn from the most recent seasons."

While integrating development with college skiing is starting to happen on the men's side, U.S. women have yet to benefit from a shift in philosophy. Internationally, however, a handful of female NCAA grads are finding full-time roles on the World Cup stage.

THE UPSIDE OF EUROS

There is no question that foreign skiers at U.S. colleges have had a huge positive influence on the quality of skiing and the experience. "U.S. skiers and the U.S. Ski Team have prospered greatly from foreign NCAA skiers," says Brooks, pointing to the lower FIS point penalties generated from foreign athletes—a direct result of investment by their home countries. "We enjoyed having Europeans on the team," says Heyer, echoing the sentiment among American teammates. "We wanted to win, and it made the experience more fun." Cami Thompson-Graves, Dartmouth's women's nordic coach for the past 25 years, puts it well: "When foreigners are in the league, it raises the level of competition and training for everyone and that is great. But it's too bad for U.S. athletes who don't get the opportunity to ski in college."

How we manage that balance is a work in progress. Perhaps all would be wise to take on Middlebury coach Stever Bartlett's team motto: "We don't buy skiers; we build skiers." ❄️

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U.S. SKI TEAM / SARAH BRUNSON

When David Chodounsky failed to make the U.S. Ski Team (USST) after high school graduation, he enrolled at Dartmouth and led the college to a national title. He's now the top men's slalom racer on the USST and competed in the 2014 Olympics.