

Golden-Girl Anne Heggveit

With quiet resolve, she won Canada's first Olympic gold in skiing, then embraced a lifestyle on the opposite end of the lens. **BY LORI KNOWLES**

The persona of a fearless ski champion is not normally associated with that of a number-crunching accountant or a serene nature photographer. Anne Heggveit, who went on to successfully pursue those careers after winning Canada's first Olympic skiing gold medal a half century ago, is a notable exception to the rule.

There's a black-and-white image preserved in the Canadian Ski Museum of a pint-sized Heggveit—laced-leather boots, black cap, blond curls spilling over the collar of her woolen coat. It might surprise today's coaches, who instruct their youngest athletes to limit the racing, much less any far-flung travel, until they at least achieve the maturity of their teenage years. But the 8-year-old Heggveit in the picture has just forerun the 1947 Ladies International Downhill and Slalom at Lake Placid, N.Y., and she's standing—still and quiet—next to a robust Lucile Wheeler, a fellow Canuck who is just 12.

Search her winsome face and there is little to predict that this timid-looking skier was poised to make Canadian ski history thirteen years later at the 1960 Olympic Winter Games in Squaw Valley. And there's certainly no clue this petite, unassuming young thing would thump her opponents so completely that her winning margin of 33 seconds over her nearest competitor would remain the largest in post-World War II women's Olympic or world slalom competition—and stand as the only Olympic slalom gold in Canadian history.

Perhaps that was—and is—Heggveit's secret to her life's success: maintaining a quiet, bravado-free confidence. "Anne is deliberate and she is focused; there is certainly a quiet resolve about her," says fellow Canadian Olympian Nancy Greene Raine. "But what she is not is an extrovert."

SKIING AT AGE 2

Anne Heggveit was born in Ottawa, Canada, in January 1939 into a combination of Norwegian, British and American blood. Her Canadian mother, Doll



Deliberate, determined, focused: Heggveit on course at Lake Placid in 1947.

COURTESY ANNE HEGGVEIT

Clark, was a descendent of Mary Osgood, one of the Witches of Salem. Her father, Halvor Heggveit, had arrived in Ottawa via North Dakota, his parents having emigrated to the United States through Ellis Island from Norway years before.

It's no surprise Anne's introduction to skiing at age 2 came so swiftly. Her father was Canadian Cross-Country Champion in 1934; Anne's uncle, Bud Clark, raced cross country in the 1936 Olympics. Another uncle, Bruce Heggveit, crafted Anne's first pair of skis and attached them to her tiny feet with leather bindings. Her mother packed a hill for her to ski in the backyard of their home in New Edinburgh, a suburb of Ottawa.

At an early age, Halvor convinced Anne she could be Canada's first Olympic gold medalist in skiing. "He didn't make me do it," she says now, "as much as he led me to do it. He told me the Olympics were something I could aim for."

VICTORY AT AGE 7

Anne's first win on skis came fast: in 1947 at age 7 in the Ladies Senior Slalom and Combined at Wakefield, Quebec... keyword: Senior. Anne's success escalated from there: a second place in the 1948 Central Canadian

Championships; a first place at the 1949 Junior Ladies Slalom and Combined Championships. By age 12, she'd placed sixth in downhill, fifth in slalom and sixth in the combined at the U.S. National Championships.

By 1954, Anne Heggtveit was on her way to ski races in Europe; her travelling partner was fellow Canuck Lucile Wheeler. A veteran of the European ski circuit, Wheeler had already approached Austrian ski coach Pepi Salvenmoser to help them. A former coach of the Austrian women, Pepi assured Lucile he was more than happy to work with the Canadians. With no formal Canadian national team, Wheeler and Heggtveit were paying Pepi themselves with money from donations and fundraising. The investment paid off. In 1954 Wheeler earned some strong finishes—notably a fifth in the combined at the Arlberg-Kandahar. For her part, Heggtveit racked up a slew of top-10 finishes in both Sweden and Germany. European and Scandinavian chins really started wagging when Anne won the wicked Holmenkollen giant slalom in Norway.

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Like all good tales in sporting history, all did not run smoothly for the quietly determined Anne Heggtveit. Leading into the 1956 Olympics, while training in the Laurentians under the eye of Mont-Tremblant icon Ernie McCulloch, Heggtveit suffered a spiral fracture in her left leg. Confined to an Ottawa hospital for 12 weeks and in a cast for seven months, there was nerve damage. Worse, the injury nearly finished her psychologically. "I became afraid," she says simply. "I was afraid of doing it again."

“ANNE was extremely calm. She had a routine. She kept telling me how important routine was, and she never wavered.”

Despite her hesitation, pain and absence from the 1956 Olympic trials, Heggtveit was named to the '56 Canadian Olympic team anyway, based on past performance. "But I didn't do well at all," she remembers, dismissing her 15th-place combined finish at Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. "I held back; 1956 wasn't a good Olympics for me."

Her friend and training partner Wheeler won Canada a bronze medal at those Games, and it was Wheeler's success that helped convince Anne to get herself back on track. "I knew then," Heggtveit says, "that if I could get myself back to where I was in the past, both physically and psychologically, that I, too, could do it."

And do it she did. By 1959 Heggtveit was once again burning up the race courses of North America and Europe. She placed first in the slalom, fourth in the downhill, and first in the combined in 1959 at St. Moritz, Switzerland. She aced both downhill and slalom at the '59 Canadian National Championships at Mont-

Orford in Quebec. She won both the downhill and slalom at the esteemed Quebec-Kandahar at Tremblant.

And best of all, that same year Heggtveit rocked the European ski world by becoming the first North American to win the combined Arlberg-Kandahar at Garmisch Partenkirchen, Germany—a landmark victory she does not even remember. Her friend and fellow Canadian racer, John Semmelink, was killed on-course the same day at Garmish in a nightmare accident.

"My heart was in my mouth," Heggtveit says now, her voice barely audible. "I don't remember much else from that victory."

MAGIC AT SQUAW VALLEY

The Canadian Olympic team arrived in 1960 at Squaw Valley for what Nancy Greene Raine calls "a magic, magic Olympics." They came to Squaw following several weeks training and racing throughout the Western U.S.—a tactic Heggtveit largely credits for her gold medal. The Canadians were acclimatized while the just-arriving Europeans were still becoming accustomed to a different time zone, different snow, and a different elevation—a circumstance that put the Canadians at an advantage.

Anne herself remembers being rested and at peace. Her roommate, Greene Raine, agrees. "Anne was extremely calm," she verifies. "She had a routine. She kept telling me how important routine was, and she never wavered."

Both women describe Squaw's Olympic Village as a fairyland, one of milk bars and movies, with Walt Disney in charge of athlete entertainment. The weather had been dreadful leading into the Games, but on race

day the sun came out and lit up the course. For Anne, everything fell into place.

"We had two hours to study the course (on the day before the race)," Heggtveit told CBC in 1960, "and I think I was the only girl ... who didn't go up and study it. Instead I went to bed early and had a good night's sleep."

Heggtveit's astounding 33-second win over silver medalist Betsy Snite of the U.S. and 7-second lead over bronze medalist Barbi Henneberger, the top European, brought the crowds tumbling into the finish area. Loads of interviews followed, along with what Anne calls "exhilaration." Heggtveit spent much of her winning night reading telegrams of congratulations from all over the world. Typical Heggtveit: the conscientious ski racer answered nearly every one of them.

DIVING INTO LEDGERS, LENSES

Now, 50 years later, leading what sounds like an artful, bravado-free life on North Hero Island in the midst of



COURTESY ANNE HEGGTVEIT (2)

All grown-up: an aggressive Heggtveit in her gold-medal winning run, and on the top step of the podium at Squaw along with silver medalist Snite and bronze medalist Henneberger.

upper Lake Champlain, Vermont, Anne Hamilton (her married name) is as quiet and as determined as ever.

It's been half a century since her Olympic gold—encased neatly in a California redwood box—was placed in her hands atop the podium. (Ask her where the medal is now and she replies simply: “Oh, it’s around here somewhere.”) And it’s been 50 years since she answered Bing Crosby’s post-Olympic questions, allowed herself to be interviewed by Walter Cronkite, and smiled politely on the Ed Sullivan Show. She then retired, married Ross Hamilton, and became a star, criss-crossing the country as a model for Dupont Canada—an adored Canadian sweetheart. Yet true to form, these days you’d never know it.

Instead, Anne Hamilton has moved quietly beyond skiing to other occupations and interests: motherhood, sailing, photography, horticulture...even boring old accounting.

“I go in head first into everything,” she says now of her diverse achievements. Once Hamilton’s children were raised, for example, the former ski racer headed back to school and earned a degree in accounting. She worked for 10 years for small firms, enjoying the order and neatness of numbers.

By age 60, she’d left those numbers behind and moved into horticulture, growing a cutting garden in the meadow next to her island home and creating elaborate flower arrangements for wedding receptions and local hotel lobbies. On weekends she’d ski at Vermont’s Jay Peak, sometimes with Lucile Wheeler.

Somewhere along the way a neighbor handed Anne an old Nikon. “It had more lenses than I knew what to do with!” she recalls. Hamilton quietly figured it out, as is her way. She fiddled with it some—snapped photos of flowers and stunning North Hero sunsets—until her skill grew remarkably. Today, Hamilton’s work hangs in Vermont galleries and is featured on greeting cards. *Vermont Life* has selected one of Anne’s sunset photographs to appear in its annual calendar for August 2011.

HONORING THE FIRST GOLD

Canada has been fairly good at commemorating Anne’s skiing achievements. She’s won the Lou Marsh Trophy, awarded annually to Canada’s top athlete, male or female, amateur or professional. She’s in the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame. She’s a member of the Order of Canada. Yet in today’s climate of instant gratification and 15-minute fame, accomplishments of even a year ago have faded from the collective consciousness, let alone one that happened in 1960.

Still, the perspective of 50 years makes Ann Heggtveit’s accomplishment even more impressive. No other Canadian has won slalom Olympic gold. No one has equaled her margin of victory. And few Canadians have ascended to the top step of the podium in alpine skiing. Even with an Olympics on home soil in 2010, the goal of Olympic alpine gold—or any medals at all—proved elusive.

What’s more, Anne Heggtveit’s accomplishment was achieved without a huge national team, without government support, and without a lot of athlete bravado... It was just one young, quiet, determined woman against the best Europe and the U.S. could throw at her.

Anne’s gold is an accomplishment for the ages. Perhaps 50 years from now, time and distance will bring the scope of that accomplishment into even sharper focus. ❄️

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