

Canada's Johnny Fripp

In 1945 at Mont Tremblant, he became the first non-European to lead the ski school at a major North American ski resort. **BY LORI KNOWLES**



Above: Johnny Fripp in 2007 with pioneering Canadian downhill ski champions Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele. Right: Fripp takes flight.



It's January 2011 and John Fripp is seated comfortably in his home in Ottawa, Ontario. It's snowing buckets outside, but Fripp—whose name trips easily off the tongues of skiing Canadians who like to “remember when”—has no plans this season to rocket down the race courses he once dominated. At nearly 90, the man they called “Johnny” is nursing his second knee replacement and recalling Tremblant as a start-up.

In 1945, the bold and perpetually controversial owner of Quebec's Mont Tremblant, Joe Ryan, got Canada's relatively diminutive ski world—of which he was pretty much king—all atwitter with his appointment of Johnny Fripp as Tremblant's ski school director.

Fripp, a rough, fit and fast-skiing World War II vet from Ottawa, was less flashy than any other director the irascible Ryan had ever hired. Even more notably, Fripp was Canadian. No Canuck had ever led a prominent North American ski school—a job that previously had been reserved for showy Europeans, primarily Austrian disciples of the revered Hannes Schneider.

Yet there was Ryan, who had opened Tremblant in 1939, causing chins to wag by appointing Fripp, fresh from the Royal Canadian Air Force, to lead his eight-man ski school—an institution known as much for celebrities and parties as for teaching and technique. Fripp himself, 65 years later, puts the blame for his much-talked-about hiring squarely on the shoulders of Blanche Rybizka.

Blanche Rybizka? “She was a real dish,” Fripp explains. “She was on the front page of *Life* magazine.”

Rybizka was indeed the very dishy wife of Benno Rybizka, the Austrian in charge of the Tremblant ski school, who was summarily fired immediately before Fripp was hired. It seems Joe Ryan's equally dishy, notoriously headstrong wife, Mary Ryan, had taken a disliking to Blanche's...um, abilities to attract. “Yep,” confirms Fripp. “Guess I have to thank Blanche...”

QUEBEC KANDAHAR CHAMP

Fripp was born in Ottawa on February 11, 1921. As a teen he'd hop a city street car, pay five cents to ride to the end of the line, then tramp his way across farmers'

fields for five miles to the foot of Dome Hill. There he'd climb up through the maple trees for 300 vertical feet, point his skis downward, and schuss. “We didn't turn or stop in those days,” he says. “We'd just crouch and straight-line it, and hope we made it to the bottom.”

By age 17, Fripp had won the 1938 Journal Trophy in the Gatineau Ski Zone Championships. Correction: Technically, Fripp didn't win the trophy. He was judged too young by racing officials; the actual cup went to a more senior skier. As is Fripp's way, he simply shrugged his shoulders and headed south of the border for the U.S. Eastern Olympic tryouts, where he slid into third place behind Dick Durrance. “I still have those trophies,” says Fripp. “Sterling silver goblets—they're the only trophies I've ever kept.” Fripp won the Journal Trophy as an adult the following year. With that in hand, he boarded a train bound for Tremblant and the fabled Quebec Kandahar.

In the 1939 *Canadian Ski Year Book*, H.P. Douglas describes the Quebec Kandahar race as “unquestionably the wildest, toughest, bush-whacking, pole-riding adventure ever held.” The race was so treacherous in its early years, author W. Ball remarked it “was considered a good way of collecting insurance!” (*Canadian Ski Year Book*, 1938). What better course for a strapping young ski racer like Johnny Fripp? He remembers digging for the precious 25 cents to ride Joe Ryan's brand-new “single chair ski tow” up the Flying Mile for the bottom 1,200 feet of the course, then climbing an additional 1,200 feet up—over and over again while training—to the Tremblant fire tower at the race's start.

Fripp describes the Quebec Kandahar as a “free-for-all course” that was about 30 feet wide with trees on both sides, with three to four steep pitches on which you'd pick your own line. “There was a steep pitch as soon as you came out of the gate,” he remembers. “Then you'd go around this sharp turn, then over quite a jump, and then another very steep pitch at which you'd always be airborne. There was only one turn that was really treacherous, and the idea was to cut the corner. I will always remember the birch tree at the side of the turn—you had to come within about a foot of it.”

Competing as an amateur, Fripp won the Quebec Kandahar downhill in 1939 and placed second in the slalom. Fripp would go on to win the Quebec Kandahar as a professional in 1940, 1946 and 1951, as well as the Eastern Canadian Championship in 1940 and the Canadian Downhill Championship in 1953.

Looking back, it was likely Fripp's speed on snow that impressed Joe Ryan in 1945 when he was looking for a new director to replace Benno (and Blanche) Rybizka. Fripp directed the Tremblant school for a couple of years, and then spent two seasons playing pro football for the Ottawa Rough Riders—proof of his all-around athleticism. He was succeeded at Tremblant by Mario Gabriel of Switzerland, who led the ski school until the iconic Ernie McCulloch took over in 1954.

Today, John Fripp lives in Ottawa with his second wife, Elizabeth, with whom he has raised his daughter, Renée. When he hasn't been skiing, racing, coaching or



Fripp at Tremblant in 1945, the first of his two seasons at the resort. After his tenure, he continued to compete as a downhill racer, winning the Quebec Kandahar and the Canadian national championship. He also played pro football for two seasons with the Ottawa Rough Riders.

teaching skiing, John has been running his insurance and realty company, H.D. Fripp & Son. He also raised four sons with his first wife, Virginia, two of whom competed in the 1970s on the Canadian men's ski jumping team.

Fripp never left skiing. While working in real estate and insurance, he has kept up his on-snow accomplishments. He has been a director of the Canadian Amateur Ski Association, a member of the International Competition Committee, a coach of the Canadian FIS men's ski team, a constant source for the Canadian Ski Museum, a tireless volunteer and supporter of the Ottawa Ski Club, and a Canadian Ski Hall of Fame inductee. All that, and a great storyteller, too. ❄️

Editor's Note: Blanche and Benno Rybizka eventually divorced. Blanche, who was featured as an advertising model for Camel cigarettes, later married Dick Hauserman, an original founder of Vail. She's now in her 90s and still living at the base of Vail Mountain.