

Alpine Training Ground

Some of Canada's top ski racers got their start on the steep slopes of Mount Norquay near Banff. **BY JACQUELINE LOUIE**

PHOTO COURTESY OF NORQUAY



From the slopes of Mount Norquay, skiers can see the town of Banff, the famous Banff Springs Hotel, and the distinctive summit of Mount Rundle across the valley.

hill on a beautiful mountain in a national park. There's a friendly vibe; you see lots of kids learning the skill of skiing and developing a love for the sport. Norquay has kept its down-to-earth feel."

NORQUAY EARLY DAYS

Skiing in the area—mostly cross-country and touring—goes back to the late 1880s, notes author Chic Scott in his book *Powder Pioneers* (see *Skiing Heritage*, June 2007). The mountain is named for John Norquay, the Manitoba premier from 1878 to 1887; he climbed the peak in 1887 or 1888.

When Swiss and Austrian mountain guides came to the Rockies in the early 1900s, brought over by the Canadian Pacific Railway in an effort to bolster tourism, they brought with them the European passion for skiing. It was thanks to their efforts that skiing became an important part of local culture.

In 1910, Austrian mountain guide Conrad Kain built a small jump on Tunnel Mountain in Banff, and encouraged local people to learn to ski. But alpine skiing got its strongest start at Norquay.

About a decade after Kain, skiing pioneer Gus Johnson built jumps and taught local children to ski. Johnson also searched the area for a suitable location for a ski camp. He chose a slope 1,000 feet above town on Mount Norquay, where the mountainside had already been cleared for lumber. After Johnson's death, the Banff Ski Club carried on his vision and built the region's first ski cabin at the base of Norquay in 1928. "It was the cabin that made it a ski area. It started to build the socializing of skiing," says longtime Banff resident Eddie Hunter, author of *The Spirit of Norquay*. "Just about everybody contributed to the little log cabin. It was the early years that set the personality for Norquay; it was local and it was community development."

Fourteen-year-old Mike Gillespie routinely schusses the steep slopes of Mount Norquay at speeds reaching 60 miles an hour. "I'm excited every day just to push myself," he says. Gillespie is a leading member of the Banff Alpine Racers, a club that trains out of Mount Norquay ski resort in the Canadian Rockies. He's also a hot prospect on the national ski-racing scene: This past March, Gillespie won silver in Super G and bronze in Super Combined at the Canadian National Championships in Ontario. His goal is to make the Canadian ski team "and go to the Olympics as part of Team Canada." If he makes it, he'll be upholding a Norquay tradition.

Located four miles north of Banff, Alberta, Mount Norquay celebrated its 85th anniversary this past winter. Generations of locals have learned to ski on its rugged terrain, including some of Canada's finest alpine racers. "Norquay embodies a passion for skiing in its raw form—there is no hoopla," says nine-time World Cup medalist and three-time Olympian Thomas Grandi, who first put on skis at Norquay when he was two years old. "It's not a resort like Whistler-Blackcomb; it's a ski

Right: The opening of the North American chairlift, installed in December 1948 by resort owner George Encil. Four years later, the resort opened the Norquay Cliff House at the top of the lift. It became a popular summer tourist attraction; Marilyn Monroe was a famous guest. Below: In the early 1920s, Gus Johnson started his ski camp on the slopes of Norquay.



CANADIAN SKI MUSEUM

Races took place at Norquay during the 1930s, with teams from Germany and Switzerland. A road was built to the cabin in 1935, and in 1941 Norquay installed a rope tow powered by an automobile engine, the first mechanical lift in the Rockies.

The post-World War II period brought an influx of immigrants from Europe. One was John Monod, who had been a world-class skier and racer in the 1930s. Monod arrived in Canada from Switzerland in 1947, joining his brother Jerry and Swiss mountain guide Bruno Engler, who were ski instructors at Norquay. When Monod arrived, skiing in Banff consisted of the Norquay rope tow and a small lift near Temple at Lake Louise, 36 miles west of town. There were no lifts at Sunshine Lodge, five miles west of Banff. Norquay, on the other hand, was quickly accessible by road and boasted its simple day lodge, where people could congregate, warm up and eat lunch.

It was a good time to be involved in skiing, because interest in the sport was exploding. Skiers from Calgary and Edmonton and elsewhere in Alberta flocked to Norquay. "It was very popular, especially for the more athletic Calgarians," says John Monod's son, Peter, the four-time slalom and three-time GS Canadian champ. (Peter and his brothers now run Monod Sports, the outdoor gear shop their father founded in 1949.)

In 1948, the resort's owner, George Encil (*né* Eisenschiml) installed the North American chair—nine years after Canada's first chairlift was installed at Mont Tremblant in Quebec. Around this time, Canadian Olympian Harvey Clifford came to Norquay, where he headed the ski school for a couple of years. Clifford later worked as general manager and vice president at Mount Snow before buying Glen Ellen (now Sugarbush North) in Vermont.

In 1952, the resort opened the Norquay Cliff House at the top of North American, at 7,000 feet in elevation. It was used as a teahouse and "was a very famous summer attraction," says former Banff mayor John Stutz. Visitors to Banff would head up to Norquay to ride the chairlift and have their photograph taken; Marilyn Monroe was one of the most famous guests.

STRONG SKI-RACING HERITAGE

Ski racing has long been part of Norquay's heritage, with the first slalom courses set in 1929. Over the years, the mountain has hosted many prominent races, says two-time Olympian and five-time World Cup winner Ken Read. Norquay hosted the 1937, 1940 and 1948



Dominion Ski Championships; in 1948, the woman who was to become Read's mother, Dorothy "Dee" Burden, 22, won gold in the downhill and combined. For 25 years, Norquay also hosted major intercollegiate ski competitions involving universities from the U.S. and Canada for ski jumping and alpine racing. When Banff mounted three Olympic bids, for the 1964, 1968 and 1972 Olympics, Norquay played a major role. All three bids were unsuccessful, but in 1972 Norquay hosted a World Cup for the first time, in giant slalom and slalom.

With 190 acres of skiing and a vertical drop of 1,650 feet, Norquay continues to provide an important training program for future Olympic and World Cup champions. Among them are John Kucera, who



In the 1960s, when this archival photo was probably taken, Norquay attracted more skiers than Lake Louise and Sunshine resorts; in 1972, it hosted a World Cup GS and slalom event.

started out with the Norquay racing club and won a gold medal in downhill at the 2009 FIS World Championships, and Thomas Grandi, winner of eleven Canadian championship titles. Several athletes on the Alberta and Canadian ski teams are graduates of the Norquay racing program, including Jan Hudec, Paul Stutz, Erik Read and Stephanie Irwin.

“Canada is one of the prominent ski racing nations in the world, and the success of many racers can be traced back to Norquay,” says John Stutz, racer Paul Stutz’s father. Norquay has played an important role in developing ski racers for several reasons, including the fact that “we had good steep terrain,” says Doug Robinson, who coached the Banff Ski Runners for nearly three decades. “The hill’s owners were always very generous with the ski club,” he adds. Scott Henderson, who went on to coach international ski racing and helped to develop the Crazy Canucks—the men’s alpine squad that dominated the World Cup in the late 1970s and early 1980s—was in Robinson’s program at Norquay, as was his brother, Wayne Henderson. Olympic double medalist Karen Percy, who started out in the junior program, was another protégé.

“It was a challenging hill,” recalls Scott Henderson, a national ski team member in the 1960s. “Going to any other ski area, we weren’t afraid of the steeps.” It was also a gathering place. “It was a place where you could be safe and have fun,” says John Monod’s stepdaughter, Stephanie Townsend Bucher, who competed on Canada’s national team from 1965 to 1969. “Instead of meeting your buddies at the mall, you met at the hill.”

A FAMILY RESORT

“Norquay used to be the busiest ski area in the Banff region. Even in the 1960s, Norquay drew more skiers than Lake Louise and Sunshine,” historian Eddie Hunter recalls. “But then [the other areas] became much larger.” At Sunshine, the open slopes made it easy to



DETAILS

Season: December to mid-April

Location: Four miles north of Banff, Alberta

Vertical drop: 1,650 feet **Lifts:** 1 high-speed quad, 2 fixed-grip quads, 1 double, 1 surface

Runs: 28 **Terrain Park:** 1 **Average Snowfall:** 120 inches

Snowmaking: 85% of skiing terrain

Lift tickets: Full-day: adult \$55, child \$17, seniors and youth, \$43; night skiing twice weekly

Amenities: Two day lodges, ski school, mountain tours, snow tubing park, snowshoeing

Phone: (403) 762-4421 **Website:** banffnorquay.com

cut trails; Lake Louise also had more available terrain. “They started putting lifts in, and overtook the number of skiers going to Norquay,” says Hunter. Even so, Norquay still has advantages. “You’re not committed to a long drive, nor a whole day. If visitors have jet lag, they can go to Norquay and ski for a couple hours.”

Norquay’s terrain is tough: The three double-black diamond runs off the North American chair are a test for expert skiers, with the steepest run touching 39 degrees. “Norquay has always offered some of the most challenging terrain anywhere,” says John Thornton, a senior manager at Norquay. He describes the North American, known locally as ‘the big chair,’ with affection. “The big chair takes you to the best viewpoint in Banff, and offers access to some fabulous ski terrain. That chair is the soul of Norquay.”

The current ownership group, who purchased the resort in the mid-2000s from previous co-owners Peter White and Kika Grandi, consists of operating partners Peter and Bob Sudermann, who also operate Mont Sainte-Marie and Camp Fortune in the Ottawa area; their brother, Len Sudermann; and limited partners Ken Read, Scott Hutcheson and Stephen Ross. “Norquay doesn’t try to be what Lake Louise and Sunshine are: They are major destination resorts that offer an enormous variety of skiing,” says Read. “Norquay is great for learning to ski, for racing, and for an all-mountain experience.” ❄️