

Spring Fever on Skis

By John C. Jay, Jr. Courtesy of "Country Life"

"HEADWALL!"

Two thousand skiers pause in their tracks, two thousand pairs of eyes gaze up to a familiar spot high on the northwest corner of Tuckerman Ravine. It is late afternoon in May. Long blue shadows are already creeping across the thousand-foot slope, turning their path to frozen corn snow. If anyone runs the headwall of Mount Washington now, he must realize that he is taking a terrific chance. Where is this fellow? He must be good.

"Headwall!" Again the well-known cry rings from wall to wall of the vast snow bowl. A lone figure suddenly appears high up on the edge of the rim, a tiny silhouette against a blazing sky of blue. Calmly he leans on his poles, shirt-sleeved arms brown and bare in the warm sun, and looks out over the cliff that drops away from beneath the very tips of his Eriksen skis. From his perch a mile above sea level he can see beyond, range after range of the White Mountains stretching almost to the horizon, where the Maine seacoast gleams, sixty miles away. Though the surrounding peaks are bare, their woodlands green with the coming of spring, beneath his waxed skis lies many a foot of hard-packed snow. Blown over the summit of Mount Washington by fierce winter storms, it has settled a hundred feet deep in the glacial cirque yawning below him and created an immense snow bowl half a mile or more in diameter, a spring skier's paradise.

"Headwall!" Now silence hangs over the ravine. Not a ski moves; the ant-like people scattered below him seem frozen into the snow. The stage is set.

For the last time he carefully wipes the sweat of climbing from his tanned forehead. For the last time he stoops down to adjust the down-pull steel cables of his Kandahar that will keep his heels pressed close to the skis. He wants all the control he can get for this run. Then he straightens up, tightens his grip on his poles, slides his skis back and forth a few times, and is off.

Skiing cautiously, within five seconds he reaches the narrow cleft between the outcropping rocks where the steepest and most dangerous part of the descent awaits him: a nearly perpendicular wall of snow sloping down from the rocky cliffs at an angle of sixty degrees. The slightest mistake means a 900-foot tumble.

In a split second he picks his course. Leaning well downhill, he thrusts his poles firmly into the treacherous snow just to the right of his ski tips; steel edges flash in the sun's rays as they

swing around in a beautifully executed jump turn; and he lands with a crunch that sends a wave of snow surging down the face of the headwall.

Headed south across the ravine wall, starting a long traverse, his skis pick up speed quickly. But some dark objects are looming up ahead; a sickening feeling comes over his stomach as he suddenly realizes what has happened. That beautiful jump turn he just made was done ten feet too high up; instead of being above him, the rocks lie dead ahead, their jagged edges gleaming with tiny rivulets of melting snow. He has skied into the trap.

While a fraction of a second yet remains, he releases the biting grip of his edges on the cliff wall. If he had cut a rope holding him on to the mountainside the effect could not have been greater: like a lead weight he plummets down, slipping sideways, skis wide apart and bobbling beneath him as he struggles to stay upright. Down, down—ten feet, fifteen feet, twenty-five. The rocks shoot up out of his sight. The sharp steel scrapes on the hard-packed snow once more, and the descent is over, temporarily.

He gasps for breath, stunned by his narrow escape. But there is no time for rest. His plunging skis have slid down faster than the masses of snow they have dislodged, and a small avalanche is bearing down upon him. So, leaning forward again, he lowers his ski tips a few inches, and the hickory boards respond to this opening of the throttle with a surge that picks his speed up to thirty miles an hour.

The snow on the headwall is likely to be rough and uneven from the scars of many small slides. Now, as the skier streaks along its tumbled, granular surface, high up on the face of the wall, he finds the going is tough indeed. His skis are bouncing over ridges, chattering now and then over an icy spot. Tears well up in his eyes, to be whipped out instantly by the wind. Taut leg muscles begin to protest; his right knee pains him, bent almost double by the steepness of the slope which forces his right ski to ride even with his left thigh.

Halfway across the ravine wall, he strikes the edge of the great shadow. For a moment, his skis seem to shoot out from under him, so icy is the newly frozen corn snow. For fleeting seconds that seem hours he struggles to throw his weight forward again. Lunging and staggering, he recovers his balance. With his centre of gravity shoved forward once more, he is steadier and will have more control over his turns. And turn he must, for the end of the main headwall is rapidly approaching.

Raising his stiff body out of its crouch for an instant, he brings his left shoulder forward and swings it around and downhill, leaning down into the slope with all his weight on his right ski. For a fraction of a second, the unweighted edge of the other ski seems about to catch in a ridge and throw him. He releases it just in time, and the narrow hickory blades swing around neatly together. He crouches down once more, and his edges shoot up hissing clouds of spray.

He heads back in another long traverse, losing altitude fast. Now the other knee is bent double, the other pole useless, but the relief of his cramped muscles feels good. Smoother snow lies ahead of him, packed by other skiers. Already some of the people who looked so antlike from the rim are growing to human size.

Blue shadows race by under his skis. The rushing wind blots out all sounds save the hiss of his skis on the snow and the staccato flap-flap of his trousers.

At fifty miles an hour he bursts out of the shadow into the dazzling glare of sunlight again, and the sugary snow grabs at his skis. With a swift movement, he shoots his right ski forward and suffers no more than a sudden lurch; balance assured, he swings into another wide turn in a glistening wave of snow, then points his tips straight down. For several seconds, he lets his flying boards ride free in a breath-taking schuss. Wind screams through his hair. Faster and faster he races along the comparatively level floor of the ravine, his knees smoothing his ride with piston-like efficiency.

In a cleared area among the crowd he finds room at last for a series of rhythmical linked turns, each a little shorter than the last, till he finally comes to a stop with one last christy, one last shower of spray, at the edge of the bushes guarding the end of the ravine. Knees trembling, eyes crying, every muscle in his body aching, he looks up to the faraway spot where he stood less than five minutes before.

Ever since the East first took up skiing in a real way, a great thorn in everyone's side has been the shortness of our season. About two months on the average was all that could be relied on, if even so much. Washington's Birthday was usually a signal for the metropolitan skier to put his boards away.

Today the season lasts till June for those who want it, and the twenty thousand skiers who thronged the slopes of Mount Washington last spring evidently wanted it badly, for they came from such distant points as New York, Montreal, and Philadelphia.

Secret of most spring skiing is either a northern exposure or a high altitude, sometimes both. Snow lingers lovingly on the Thunderbolt Trail down 3500 foot Mount Greylock in Massachusetts. From Vermont comes word that Woodstock's Suicide Six hill provides perfect skiing throughout the whole of March and

sometimes part of April, and that Manchester's 4,000 foot Bromley Mountain and Stowe's 4,500-foot Mount Mansfield both offer good running till well past the spring equinox. But the greatest of all is New Hampshire's Mount Washington, 6,293 feet high, where nature has helped out the skier by creating the glacial cirque that provides open slope skiing unparalleled in eastern North America. For sheer majesty and grandeur alone, few spots in the world today can surpass it.

To visualize it, imagine a china tea-cup, placed at eye-level, with the nearer half sliced away. Now stand one foot away looking into the open side of the other half, and the result will be an approximation of how Tuckerman looks to a skier a mile away. The bottom of the cup represents about 80 to 100 feet of snow; the sides can be imagined rearing a thousand feet up into a deep blue sky. All the picture needs to be perfect is some tea leaves clinging to the centre wall, just below the lip, for rocks.

Starting at Pinkham Notch, where the Appalachian Mountain Club maintains log cabins on the main highway, the John Sherburne ski trail, three miles long, leads up into the ravine. Smooth, broad, and not too steep, it is ideally suited for the heavy downhill traffic of spring skiers.

Every year, from March to June, they arrive in increasing droves. They crowd the sleepy little towns of Jackson, Gorham, and Intervale like an American Legion convention. Over Easter weekend, or when the Inferno races are being held, they swamp the available beds for forty miles around. A boarding house in Gorham charges 25c. a night to college skiers for floor space only, and packs them in like subway passengers. State officials have been compelled to hew out several vast parking spaces out of the surrounding forests to hold as many as a thousand cars each, but still the roads are lined for miles on either side on a warm spring Sunday.

As a final barrier to the ravine, a cliff known as the "little headwall" must be surmounted. It is here, on some convenient flat rocks, that the pause for lunch is often made, for a clear mountain stream cascades down right under the icy cliffs of the little headwall itself—and drinking water is scarce in the ravine. Lunches come out of the little knapsacks that are so universally carried; and he is lucky who has had the foresight to carry up a can of beer. Canned fruit juice, raisins, chocolates, and sandwiches are popular.

Not until the last foot of the little headwall has been climbed does the full majesty of the ravine come into view, because for the last five minutes your eyes have been doggedly fixed on the trail. But as the top is reached at last, the towering white walls leap up on three sides. To the uninitiated, the sight is awe-inspiring. The ivory cliffs, gleaming against the bluest of all blue skies, dwarf the tiny, crisscrossing skiers.