



Penguin Ski Club

The Penguin Ski Club was the first ski club to be founded in Canada by women for women only. Founded in 1932 to complement McGill University's all-male Red Birds Ski Club formed in 1928 by graduate ski team members, the Penguins were Montreal women who had become friends and shared a love of skiing. From the outset, friendly relationships existed between both clubs with marriages between Penguin and Red Bird members being a common outcome. Initially, the women suggested they call themselves "Bluebirds" to emphasize an affiliation with their male counterparts in contrast to their male counterparts. However, the name "Penguin" was chosen as being more appropriate because they represented birds of snow and ice.

The Penguin Ski Club was committed to providing instruction for, and competition between, women skiers. It also provided a reason to travel, to maintain old friendships and foster new ones. Montreal had been well established as a skiing city for thirty years when the Penguin Ski Club was formed. The sport was becoming more popular with downhill or Alpine-style skiing beginning to emerge as a popular variation on what had previously been Nordic or cross-country skiing. Popular demand introduced the era of the ski trains that allowed Montrealers to spend weekends in the Laurentians. The Great Depression found people with extra time, but little money and skiing was an relatively inexpensive way to spend time outdoors with friends and have fun.

In 1933, the Penguins began training club members for downhill competition and held an unofficial ski meet to demonstrate their new competence. The level of skill and, indeed, the profile of the club itself, was raised when Duke Dimitri of Leuchtenberg gave two classes, two hours in length, to the club's



members. In 1934, the first Penguin Combined Championship at Ivry was held with about 15 participants. The Penguins joined the

Canadian Amateur Ski Association in 1935 and were able to begin competing in women's races. In that first year, they won all eight races in which they competed. That year also saw the first Penguin-organized Canadian Women's Skiing Championship, won by member, Madeleine McNichols. She was the first recipient of the Holt-Wilson Trophy. Holt-Wilson was the president of the Ski Club of Great Britain. From 1936 to 1939, the Penguins were repeatedly winners, or in the top five, of competitions at which they were represented inspiring many young girls to take up the sport.

In 1939, because of the generosity of John and Bert Molson, the Penguins were received their first permanent clubhouse located three-quarters of a mile from St. Sauveur. It could comfortably accommodate 24 women, was generously stocked with blankets, mattresses, pillows, furniture, a three year coal supply, and even had 24 toothbrushes already in their holders. The Penguins finally had a home. Previously, they had been renting accommodations that were often too small, too costly, and too cold. When World War II came in 1939, many members left the club and skiing to take part in the war effort. As such, it was hard to maintain the clubhouse during this period. The Canadian Championships were cancelled, and the clubhouse was used as a refuge for British Children, aged 5-14. During these years, the remaining members introduced novice races to encourage more young girls to ski.

After the war, the Penguins were not only trying to recover their lost members, but their connection with McGill was creating controversy and frustration. The Penguin Ski Club was losing its exclusivity to represent McGill's women. Women students attending McGill were obligated to represent the university at ski meets. Not only were Penguins losing potential members, they were also losing competitions to women who might, before the war years, have been their own. The Penguin Ski Club had no option but to recruit new members from the general population. Among those new members were two remarkable women who had never been McGill students, Canada's famous twins, Rhoda and Rhona Wurtele.

Both Rhoda and Rhona were named to the Canadian Olympic Team in 1948. Unfortunately, Rhoda cracked her anklebone just prior to the 1948 Olympic Winter Games at St Moritz, Switzerland, and was



unable to compete, while Rhona crashed during the Downhill medal event, broke her ankle, but still finished. Canada placed last.

1952 Winter Olympics in Oslo, Norway saw three Penguins attend: Joanne Hewson, Rosemarie Schutz, and Rhoda (Wurtele) Eaves. Lucile Wheeler, who would later become an honorary member of the Penguin Ski Club also attended. No medals were won, but Canada placed sixth that year. The next Olympic Winter Games, held in 1956 at Cortina, Italy, saw Lucile Wheeler win a Bronze Medal in the Downhill event, the first skiing medal awarded to a Canadian athlete.

The 1950s saw the introduction of the Silver Penguin Award. This was presented to the Penguin who contributed most to the operating of the club, going above and beyond the call of duty. Those who were honoured received a special silver pin. The first recipient of the award was Barbara Kemp.

In 1957, the Penguins started the Ski Jay Club, a ski club for teenage girls, in Montreal. The girls would visit a different ski hill by bus every Saturday. This 'club within a club' was founded by Ann Bushell (Johnson) and Bill Matthews. Some years later, in 1964, Rhoda Wurtele Eaves and her sister, Rhona Wurtele Gillis, founded a club called Twinski for the mother's of the Ski Jays. These women skied together every Wednesday for many years, allowing their husbands to join as they started to retire. Today there are around 50 active members and 25 associate members with an average age of 75 still taking part in activities monthly throughout the year. In 1961, the Polar Bear Club was established to teach children aged four to eight years old how to ski. The Polar Bear Club was also run by Rhona Wurtele Gillis.

The original Penguin Ski Clubhouse was sold in 1972. Increasing costs of ownership, the maintaining of winter roads allowing skiers to drive up just for the day rather than a weekend, and the increasing absence of local competition as ski meets were being held further afield, all contributed as reasons, among others, for the sale of the clubhouse. The building has since been destroyed by fire.

In 1982, the Penguin Ski Club celebrated its 50th Anniversary at a banquet in Montreal. It was the beginning of the end for the club. At that point, 315 women were, or had been, members of the club. It was around this time that the club cancelled their incorporation. The "official" club no longer existed. A



committee was organized to ensure that three meetings a year were held, and prominent anniversaries recognized. The club held its "Final Fling", three days of cross-country skiing, in November 1991 in conjunction with its 60th anniversary in 1992. The one hundred or so remaining members decided to continue with annual luncheons and newsletters.

Today, despite the unofficial status of the club, the spirit of the original Penguins continues. Their 75th Anniversary was celebrated in 2007 with 42 Penguins. The remaining members still meet twice a year, for an autumn luncheon, and a cross-country day. They still send out at least two newsletters a year containing updates and many photos of activities.