

Sheer Talent

A new book recalls the career of two of Canada's greatest skiers.

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No Limits:

The Amazing Life Story of Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele, Canada's Olympian Skiing Pioneers
Byron Rempel

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What timing. Just as young Canadian female ski jumpers take on the Old Boys Club of the world, namely the International Olympic Committee, over their right to compete at Vancouver's 2010 Olympics, two of the greatest women skiers in the nation's history decide to tell their story. From the day in 1933 when they jumped off the senior jump on Côte des Neiges in Montreal at age eleven to the present time that still sees them skiing, golfing, hiking and riding bikes, the identical Wurtele twins constantly challenged, in their humble and matter-of-fact way, what it meant to be a woman and a great athlete. Rhona Wurtele took 36 wins, five second places and six third places in national and international Alpine ski competition between 1942 and 1956, while her sister Rhoda took 58 wins, 15 second places and three third places between 1942 and 1959.

Their enormous and innate talent as athletes and their upper-class upbringing never really allowed them to understand the myths they were shattering, or the deep insecurities they laid bare when they totally kicked every male skier's ass down the hill during a race. But in the immediate post-World War Two era, they were stars as big as Jackie Robinson in Montreal and beyond.

No Limits: The Amazing Life Story of Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele, Canada's Olympian Skiing Pioneers is a book that matters in that it shapes the stories of two great Canadian athletes, and lays those stories over decades when huge changes occurred, not only in their province of Quebec, but world-wide. The story begins in the conservative stronghold that was Quebec in the 1920s with the privileged life two very fortunate little girls lived as they grew up on the slopes of Mount Royal and at the family's country house, Acton Vale, in the Appalachian foothills. We wind up in a very different world 350 pages later as the Wurtele fam-

Laura Robinson has been a devoted skier—even racer—for 37 years. Her book *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (HarperCollins, 2002) looks at the way in which the sport media “disappear” female athletes, unless they pose for nude calendars. She coaches the Anishinaabe Nordic Ski Racers.

ily gathers to be near Rhona's son, Christopher, whose career as a dancer in New York was cut short by AIDS. Her daughter, Margie Gillis, is still internationally renowned for pushing boundaries as a dancer and choreographer, although her mother shifts uncomfortably when Gillis appears naked on stage. In the decades in between we follow the twins up and down mountains in North America and Europe—a journey that is sometimes repetitive, confusing and tedious.

Rhona and Rhoda rarely had a coach; they skied beautifully mainly because, as great athletes, they had an innate sense of themselves, speed, snow and mountains. But if editors are the literary equivalent of coaches, this book needed a much sterner taskmaster. In the time period immediately after the war, the twins competed in the United States and Europe, but the chronology in the book is confusing. It seems as if every time the skiers went somewhere after the war there was a “changes came fast and hard to skiing after the war” kind of introduction. The book becomes mired like a skier caught in a slalom gate.

Biographies, especially those that involve the subject matter financially (the publisher is Twinski Publishing, which is also the name of the very successful club the twins founded), are difficult. How do you achieve the right balance of intimacy, distance and the influences of the culture around the subjects while exercising a degree of critical analysis?

Nevertheless, the folksy way in which the Wurtele twins' story is told is endearing, and it reveals a great deal about how little our media cares about the great women of this country. Had the twins been male, they would have had any number of sports columnists, the self-appointed chroniclers of Canadian sport history, lining up to tell their story.

And this leads, inevitably, to the men who have ensured that such heroines go unnoticed. It is a very lengthy list, so let's start at the top with the IOC, and the notion that somehow women cannot jump on skis. They have declared that there are not enough women competing in the sport internationally to warrant their inclusion at the 2010 Olympics. Statistics submitted by the very cool Canadian women's team easily disprove this claim. Then we have Gian Franco Kasper, of the IOC and the Fédération Internationale de Ski, stating in 2005 that ski jumping is “like jumping down from, let's say, about two metres on the ground about a thousand times a year, which seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view.”

To him I say exactly what the Canadian hockey establishment needed to be told when it claimed for decades that medically it was not safe for girls to play with boys: if they are so concerned about women's health, they should be speaking out about romantic relationships, because the number-one reason women need emergency room attention is not because they've just had a great day on the slopes or the ice, but because someone who supposedly loved them beat them up.

Next there are the contemporary Canadian culprits who do their best to ignore what our amazing female winter athletes do on ice and snow. In January, at the time I was reading *No Limits*, I was covering the World Cup of Nordic Skiing in Canmore, Alberta. In the fourth and final event, the skate sprint race, Canada's Chandra Crawford skied so beautifully and fast that she dominated her heat, her quarter and semifinal, and moved to the final, where she eliminated the other fastest women on the planet and took the gold. She showed us why she flew to gold at the Torino Olympics in the same event in 2006.

The next morning, I looked forward to the feature on this exciting Canadian the country's newspaper of record would surely publish. But search as I might through *The Globe and Mail*, there was nothing—not even a mention of her race in the tiny print of the “Winter Sports” column. The lacklustre NHL All-Star game that even those of the tucked-in tail—sports reporters, in other words—admitted was boring, took up most of the ink, with Tiger Woods taking much of the rest. One week later, Alpine skier Emily Brydon won the World Cup giant slalom race in St. Mortiz after coming fourth in the downhill the day before. This spectacular Canadian win was relegated to page four in sports, while the American Super Bowl and the freak-show pharmaceutical experiments who played in it took front and centre, not only in the sports section, but on page one of the paper too.

I can just imagine Rhoda and Rhona reading *The Globe and Mail* and shaking their heads all these years after they opened so many doors for Canadian skiers and for women in general. *No Limits* is worth reading. The photos are many and wonderful, and while the storytelling may not be the smoothest around, the subject matter is far more important than any of the endless trades, injuries, salaries and boring games reported non-stop by the supposed chroniclers of Canadian sport in the mainstream media. □