

## 'Everything was a contest for Al' - Vermont Ski Hall Inducts Legendary Al Sise

*By Bill McCollom*

At the recent ceremonies inducting Al Sise and others into the Vermont Ski Hall of Fame, one of the younger masters ski racers sidled alongside of me and asked, "So who was Al Sise?" I stammered for a few minutes, thinking, "How is it possible that a masters ski racer doesn't know about Al Sise?" But quickly computing the math, I calculated that when Al died in 1991, this person was about 15 years old. There is a new generation coming into masters ski racing, and memories do fade.

I could have simply said that Al was the father of masters ski racing, having raced in nearly 1,000 races over 60 years, and an inductee into the Vermont Ski Museum Hall of Fame, in addition to the National Ski Hall of Fame. But perhaps it would have been best if I had just cut to the quick and quoted his daughter Sally. "Dad would ski every day possible from dawn to dusk, regardless of conditions, and every day was a great day of skiing."

Al grew up in the early 1900s in Medford, Mass., a dairy farming community just outside of Boston. He was still in his 20s when skiing fever first gripped the Northeast in the late 1920s, but Al was a reluctant convert. Legend had it that Al bet Joe Dodge of Mt. Washington fame, that he could get around a designated race course on Mt. Washington faster on snowshoes than Joe could on skis. Al lost that bet but found a lifelong passion.

Al later wrote, "At the end of the race, I threw the snowshoes away, never to return to them again, a true skier from then on."

Like so many people destined to leave a mark during their lifetime, Al was a man of eccentricities, contradictions and stubborn independence. He attended Harvard University, which spawned so many pioneers of eastern skiing, but left school weeks before graduation to work in the woods of Maine as a logger.

Al soon developed an interest in radio and radar and worked on the summit of Mt. Washington for Yankee Network. The experience deepened his love of the outdoors, honed his skiing skills, and provided the opportunity to enter his first ski races, the challenging top-to-bottom Inferno races on Mt. Washington in the early 1930s.

Al and his brother Hub were among the founders of the Schussverein Ski Club, which moved to the Mt. Washington Valley, and provided a nucleus of lifelong friends. Evenings at the club were spent singing and drinking, and every daylight hour was invested in exploring the ravines and chutes of Mt. Washington in the winter, and hiking and sailing in the summers.

Marriage, three daughters — Betsy, Nancy, and Sally — and the purchase of a farmhouse in Norwich, Vermont, followed in rapid succession.

Nancy was, and still is, an outstanding ski racer, making the U.S. Ski Team in the early 60s, and remembers racing in many Masters National Championships with her father, starting in 1963. By 1971, there was enough participation in "Veterans" ski racing to form a full-time Eastern circuit, which was named, appropriately enough — The Sise Cup, an epitaph Al jokingly described as "premature." Al continued to chair the committee into his 80s and race every year, despite injuries and infirmities, until his death in 1991 at the age of 84.

"Everything was a contest for Al, whether it was tennis, ski racing, or even gardening," said Nancy. "It was rooted in a desire to get better."

As for his legacy, Nancy thought for a moment and said, “He was a pioneer for older people, unlocking the door for those wishing to remain active. He provided the inspiration for so many.”

We had just wrapped up a lengthy masters committee meeting the second week in October in 1991, and were just finishing up a potluck dinner. As was the custom, the meetings were always held at Al and Susie’s house in Norwich. Most committee members came from afar and spent the night, and as was the custom, the wine started flowing during dinner. Being one of the few commuters, I said my good-byes after dinner and headed for my car. While outside, I looked back through the windows to see Al getting helped onto a chair where he gave a toast with his wine glass dramatically waving. He then started in with a song. I laughed as I got into my car and headed home.

A few days later, I was shocked to hear that Al had died of a heart attack.

Al was the oldest racer in any masters race for as long as I can remember, and as a result, he always wore the No. 1 bib. After his passing, the masters committee honored Al by retiring his bib. Sixteen years later, those who knew Al still expect to see him at the start – amiable, gleefully enthusiastic, and ready to take what would surely be the best run of his life.