

# Race, Old Friends Keep Sven's Memory

By Joyce Weaver Johnson

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Looking a few Olympiads into the future, one hopes our huge, populous nation with its ample snowbelt could become as strong a cross country medal contender as Norway or the Soviet Union.

If that ever happens, some medals will find their way home to Alaska.

After all, we've provided many of the Olympic skiers for some years. Right now in Sarajevo, four of the U.S. squad call Alaska home.

But let's put this future dream and our present pride in historical perspective. Twenty-eight years ago, there were perhaps a half-dozen ski racers at Anchorage's one high school. To race another team, they had to travel to Homer or Juneau.

In those days, recalls Dick Mize, Anchorage wasn't the breeding ground of elite ski racers that it is today. In fact, the city's only hope was Swedish-born Sven Johansson.

"When he first tried out for the '56 Olympics, Sven was the only skier in the Anchorage area who even came close to that caliber of skiing," said Mize.

Four years later, both men were members of the U.S. Olympic team at Squaw Valley, Calif., Mize in Biathlon and Johansson in cross country. Johansson was ill and did not complete the one race he started.

But if our four now in Yugoslavia contribute as much to Alaskan skiing as did Sven Johansson, they won't need to sigh for missed medals.

Sven returned from Squaw Valley to coach the U.S. Biathlon Team during the years when it was headquartered at Fort Richardson.

The young men who trained here under his guidance include many who have gone on to coach at schools and colleges here (such as UAA coach Tom Besh) and Outside. Also a Johansson alumnus is Anchorage's Ken Alligood, the current U.S. Biathlon Team Coach.

Sven was a natural to help clear the steep mountainside of trees when Alyeska was first developed for skiing in the late 1950's. Anyway, the work helped him keep fit for sports. He won the grueling Mount Marathon footrace at Seward every year from 1954 to 1959. His six victories there have been matched, but not topped.

Rather than lower his sights as he passed his prime, Sven took a positive approach. Each year, on his Nov. 24th birthday, he made it a practice to ski his age in kilometers, typically at Hatcher Pass. It would have been 52 kilometers in 1976, but Sven died that September in an electrical accident.

Sven used to observe Fur Rendezvous by racing. Yellowed clippings in The Times library recall that the Swede won the 1952, '53, and '54 Rondy ski races and was the favorite next time he entered, in '59, on a course he had helped lay out at Moose Run. In the earlier races, before the city became too built-up, the course ran from the Park Strip to Turnagain.

Fur Rendezvous ski racing is a long tradition. And so, by now, is the name of the Sven Johansson Memorial Race. The tradition continues Sunday at Goose Lake.

*(2007 note: not Goose Lake anymore!)*