

Hall of Fame Honors at Last For Southern Skiing



Story by Randy Johnson



Sepp Kober's stomping ground: The Homestead ski area in the Virginia Alleghenies, near the border with West Virginia (above). Ever since the 1700s, the area's thermal waters have been a destination, among them Thomas Jefferson. Sam Snead learned the game at The Homestead's nationally known golf courses. Sepp Kober (left, and below). His speed and trick skiing skills wowed the crowds when he came south to Weiss Knob ski area in West Virginia.

If you've seen clips of Sally Field's famous Oscar acceptance speech for *Places in the Heart* in 1985 where she gushingly proclaimed "you really like me"—a similar validation has just happened for Southern skiing.

For years, the U.S. National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame dismissed the opportunity to honor Sepp Kober, the Austrian transplant who launched skiing at The Homestead resort in Virginia in 1959-60, exactly 50 years ago this winter.

This year, the vote went differently, and the "Father of Southern Skiing" has entered the Hall of Fame as a ski industry figure of bona-fide national significance. That honor, in essence, has finally signaled acceptance for the Southern ski industry.

It's long overdue. The Homestead's 50th anniversary is the start of half-century status for many regional resorts, start-

ing with North Carolina's Cataloochee in 2011 and Appalachian Ski Mountain in 2012. Though natural snow slopes had been skied earlier in the South—it was The Homestead's massive snowmaking



system, capable of covering all the slopes, that pins it as the key event in the development of skiing in Dixie.

Sepp's being named to the Ishpeming, Michigan-based National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame brings to fruition a 20-year effort spearheaded by David Barudin, a Roanoke writer and publisher of a magazine called *The Southeastern Skier's Companion* in the late '80 and early '90s.

It was David, who after repeated failed attempts to get Sepp nominated, eventually concluded that the region itself was being disrespected by the ski pioneer's being ignored. David convinced the Southern ski

community of that, galvanizing the final 2009 effort that just ended in success.

The effort succeeded not just because David lined up an amazing Who's Who of regional and national heavy hitters to plead on behalf of The Homestead's longtime director of skiing. The list of lobbyists was an impressive one, but more impressive than that is the now legendary span of Sepp's accomplishments in the service of Sunbelt skiing—an industry that has risen from the butt of jokes about "skiing on grits" to now national recognition.

To see just how romantic and unlikely was Sepp's saga, not to mention his contribution, let's take a back at 50 years of skiing south of the Mason-Dixon Line through the eyes of a visionary who helped imagine it into existence.

The Oldest Days

In 1950, all that marked the site of the South's first major ski area (with natural snow) was a huge, irregular snowdrift in an apple orchard under Cabin Mountain in Ca-

In 1958, Kober ran the slopes at Weiss Knob, the first commercial ski area in West Virginia. The antique lodge and rope tow remains still sit in Canaan Valley looking much as they did in the 1950s (right). Today, it's White Grass Ski Touring Center, the South's best cross country ski resort.



naan Valley, West Virginia. The next winter, 1950-51, members of the Ski Club of Washington, D.C., were skiing the roadside drift for the first time and planning a ski area.

The site immediately attracted a small cadre of diehards to "the glacier" that later became Cabin Mountain ski area. A film titled Driftland documented the romantic dedication of these ski club pioneers. That foothold on the Southern side of the Mason-Dixon Line coincided with the invention of snowmaking and started the sport's spread down to Dixie.

Competition for Cabin Mountain came in 1955. Robert Barton, III, had left law school at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, and when he "heard the D.C. Ski Club had a ski area in West Virginia, I joined immediately," Robert remembered in 1980s interviews before his death. Robert visited Cabin Mountain in 1954 and resolved to open another area nearby. He chose a slope on Weiss Knob, called "weese" by the locals but "vice" by Robert, who pronounced the word in the standard German way, meaning "white."

Robert's ski area was the first commercial slope in West Virginia and the farthest South. Today, Canaan Valley Ski Resort is located on the same site.

Sepp Kober Comes Calling

In the late '50s, Robert wanted ski instructors for Weiss Knob and contacted the Austrian Information Bureau in New York. "It was a big thing back then to have Austrian instructors," Robert said. He was referred to Sepp, a fully certified Austrian instructor who had just come to the U.S., spending a year at Stowe.

When Sepp showed up in 1958, said Robert, "I could see immediately that there was nothing in Canaan Valley appropriate to a man of his background. Sepp was destined for greater things."

Sepp taught skiing at Weiss Knob during winter 1958-59 and his aerial ski maneuvers really wowed the crowds: "Trick skiing like Sepp's just wasn't heard of," Robert said.



One of many early Homestead photos with the dashing Kober doing his best to promote skiing in the South. Ironically, as the first southern slope with 100% snowmaking, all Kober really needed at The Homestead was falling temperatures, not snowflakes.



Who's Your Daddy?

The recent death of Thomas "Doc" Brigham, an Alabama dentist instrumental in creating Ski Beech, Sugar, and Snowshoe, has led to confusion about who can rightly be called "The Father of Southern Skiing." When Brigham passed away last year, an obituary in Skiing Heritage magazine and an article in High Country Magazine called him "The Father of Southern Skiing." However, the Southeastern Ski Areas Association formally bestowed the title on Kober in 1984. That honor was based on Kober's use of 100% snowmaking coverage to establish a truly new footing for a regional industry. That initial achievement, and involvement in most of the ski areas that followed, makes Kober the giant on whose shoulders stand the accomplishments others. That in no way diminishes Brigham's contribution. In all seriousness, as builder of three of the South's biggest ski areas, Brigham is truly a patriarch of the sport.

A Cleaner World
35

**Pssghetti
31**



Top; Clearing the slopes at The Homestead in 1959. Bottom; The towering edifice of The Homestead. Pulling up out front is a passport to a luxury dining and lodging experience.

**Antiques On Howard
37**



Actually, it was. Sepp was using the same elegant aerial ski maneuvers that Stein Eriksen had made famous during winter 1953 in Sun Valley, Idaho. Stein was hired there as a celebrity ski instruc-

tor after winning two medals at the 1952 Oslo Olympics and before winning world championships in 1954. His aerial maneuvers (and later trick skiing by Art Furrer) helped invent today's freestyle ski move-

Sepp Kober was a widely recognized face of Southern skiing throughout the 1960s. His influence was felt at many of the resorts that opened during the decade when skiing reached critical mass in the run-up to construction of Ski Beech, Sugar Mountain, and Snowshoe.

ment. Sepp's airborne skills were exciting the South a handful of years later.

Sepp Gets His Start

Sepp's early experiences connected him even more deeply to Europeans like Stein who helped popularize skiing in America. Born in Igls, Austria, Sepp was the son of an hotelier. He followed his father into that profession, but Sepp's true love was skiing. In 1938, he made the Austrian national ski team at age 16. Then came war, and Sepp found himself as a ski trooper in the German army.

After the war, Sepp restarted the Ski School Igls-Patscherkofel and in 1948, was certified as an instructor in St. Christoph on the Arlberg, a region acknowledged as the

**MSH Technologies
0**



Kober promoted Southern skiing on TV (upper left) and as a rep for ski gear and fashion firms. Posing with Howard Head, developer of the first modern ski, in the 1960s (upper right). Kober accepts a "thank you" Olds convertible.

"Cradle of Alpine Skiing." It was there, in the first years of the 20th century, that Austrian ski pioneer Hannes Schneider had perfected the modern downhill skiing technique still used today. His ski school helped launch the sport in Europe, and in the United States as well when he relocated to New Hampshire after the Nazis took over Austria.

After achieving the "holy grail" of certification in modern skiing's birthplace, Sepp coached the Spanish national team in 1951 and 1952 while managing Ski School Nuria in the Pyrenees. He coached the Norwegian ski team between 1954 and 1957. Then he taught skiing at Stowe, Vt.

Heading South to Ski

Following the lure of new horizons, Sepp went south to Canaan Valley in 1958—earning his resumé's claim as the "first Southeastern U.S. ski instructor and ski school director" at both Weiss Knob and at nearby Wisp, Md.

In 1959, Robert decided to move Weiss Knob. With prodding and help from Sepp and John Mathewson, salesman for Larchmont, the earliest manufacturer of snowmaking equipment, Robert located a better site on nearby Bald Knob. And like the entrepreneurs running The Homestead in Hot Springs, Va.—where Sepp was simultaneously designing slopes—Robert was installing snowmaking at Weiss Knob. Both early systems began operation the same winter, 1959-60.

Home to The Homestead

After a year at Weiss Knob, Sepp left for The Homestead, the first ski area in the South to combine total snowmaking coverage, exceptional ski facilities and accommodations. In short, The Homestead was the region's first ski area that could rightly be called a ski resort.

In the mid-1950s, The Homestead managers were lamenting the resort's winter decline in business and decided to add skiing. Larchmont was contacted to provide snowmaking, and Sepp was recommended to the resort as a ski professional capable of running the ski area.

Skiing debuted in 1959. Overnight, The Homestead became the region's premier ski area, but not just for the quality of its skiing. Sepp was a world-class ski coach, and each winter, his imported team of Austrian instructors brought expert instruction, and European atmosphere, to the South. Sepp's ski area construction and management skills

Adam Hill DSS 78

Planet Tan 55



The history of Southern skiing abuts the larger history of skiing in the United States in a surprising number of ways. One of those is that when The Homestead's slopes debuted they shared the quirky "skimobile" chairlift that had also graced Cranmore Mountain in North Conway, New Hampshire since the 1938. Skiers didn't like having to take off their skis, so a chairlift replaced it in the 1970s. Cranmore Mountain's skimobile lasted till 1989. They were the only two such lifts ever built.

were second to none.

Sepp's winter garb typically included an ear-warmer headband that swept his hair back like a ski racer underway. It would take a book to detail Sepp's decades-long influence on so many Southern ski areas. Suffice it to say, his expertise, wide ranging publicity activities and involvement as a representative for manufacturers of ski lifts, ski equipment, snowmaking machinery—and even ski apparel—made his influence felt, in one way or another, from Weiss Knob to virtually all the Southern slopes that followed.

Sepp's ski area design, management, and consultation directly shaped at least 10 Southern resorts. His young associates went on to create other ski areas. One said that "in the early years, there wasn't a new

chairlift, rental ski, or ski school director that didn't go through Sepp."

Sepp also led the way in what may be his profession's most important achievement: the creation of the Southern ski market. Homestead's "Come South to Ski" promotional campaign signaled the start of mass public awareness of skiing in the South. Traveling extensively, Sepp met skiers at department and sporting goods stores that were just starting to stock ski equipment. He addressed and encouraged fledgling ski clubs.

There were television and radio appearances. The appeal of The Homestead and Sepp's reputation attracted wide publicity for the resort and the sport. At The Homestead, Sepp helped establish the newspaper and television practice now common of running ski photos and video

when resorts open for the season or when major winter storms strike.

Along the way, Sepp helped found the Mid-Atlantic Ski Areas Association in 1960, the Southeastern Ski Areas Association in 1964, the Southeastern Ski Representatives Association in 1970 and, in 1962, the National Ski Areas Association. In 1984, after 25 years at The Homestead, the Southeastern Ski Areas Association honored Sepp as "The Father of Southern Skiing."

As The Homestead was setting the South abuzz about skiing, Tom Alexander brought skiing to North Carolina at Cataloochee, his cattle and guest ranch in Maggie Valley. The resort opened the weekend before Christmas 1961 after consultations with Larchmont's John Mathewson, and—who else?—Sepp Kober.

This classic, 1990s shot of the "The Father of Southern Skiing." (right), now nearing 90 and in poor health, shows the South's National Ski & Snowboard Hall of Famer as a ruggedly handsome, weather-worn icon of the skiing lifestyle.

In 1962-63, the Blowing Rock Ski Lodge opened, becoming the first of an eventual six ski resorts near Boone. "The rich and famous came in droves," recalled Grady Moretz, owner of Appalachian Ski Mountain. Sepp associate Tony Krasovic initiated the mountain's ski rental and instruction programs. He was followed by Peter Reinecke, a German referred by Sepp.

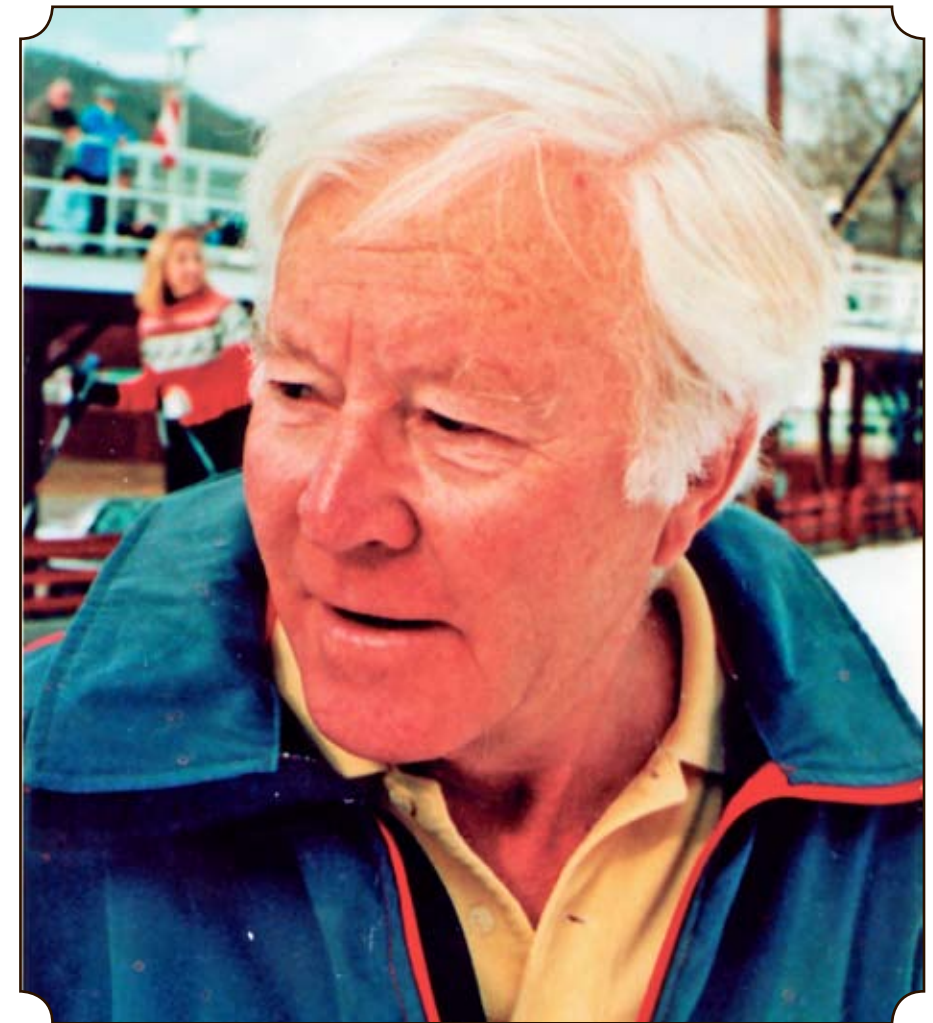
Sepp was called in to design slopes and install Virginia's first chairlift at Bryce Resort in 1965. In his letter recommending Sepp for Hall of Fame honors, Bryce Resort owner Paul Bryce specifically nodded at the economic impact of skiing: "Just our ski area contributes 14 percent of the total tax base in our county."

In 1966, brothers Horst and Manfred Locher arrived at Bryce to co-manage the ski school. "Sepp Kober helped us get here," Manfred said. The European ski immigration didn't end with the Lochers. The brothers hired Gunther Jochl as a ski instructor. Gunther, who arrived in America in 1971, is today the owner of Sugar Mountain in Banner Elk.

Many Europeans came to America for economic opportunity that didn't seem available in the crowded European ski industry. "In the fifties," said Manfred, "skiing in the United States was young and American resorts had to bring in Europeans to staff ski schools. Eventually, American ski instructors took over."

Without ski instruction, ski areas might never have become economically viable. Sepp's certified Austrians and other Europeans were first. Then Americans, like Dick Heckman at Cataloochee, began teaching and affiliating with national organizations like the Professional Ski Instructors of America. Today, PSIA Region 4, which includes the South, is the organization's largest and teaches more lessons than any other region in the nation.

In 1996, Sepp was honored with lifetime membership in the Professional Ski Instructors of America. In 1998, he retired from The Homestead. And in 2006, Sepp received the Order of the Silver Ea-



gle, the second highest honor bestowed by the Austrian government.

Quest for Hall of Fame

For decades, Sepp was a fixture at breakfast in the dining room of the Homestead. His Old World roots and the refined atmosphere of The Homestead were a perfect fit. One doesn't know whether Sepp reveled in the atmosphere of The Homestead or if the resort gained from his presence.

In the late-1990s, David Barudin and others launched an effort to see Sepp named to the National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame. Sepp's role in Southern skiing had included direct involvement in most of the resorts that followed the opening of The Homestead, but the effort to name him to the Hall was repeatedly unsuccessful, including in 2008.

An adequate appreciation of Sepp seemed destined for the future.

For a time early in the last decade, skiing seemed to ebb in importance at The Homestead and Sepp was sorely disappointed. Since then, skiing has stabilized

at The Homestead in time for the 50th anniversary—and Sepp has finally seen success in his quest for the Hall of Fame.

"The nation may finally be realizing the significance of what's going on down here," David said.

"The South is where more lessons are taught to new skiers than anywhere else in the nation," David said. "It's home to the nation's biggest ski clubs that send thousands of club members each year to destination resorts in the North and West. For all of that and more—the South deserves the national ski industry's gratitude and recognition."

At long last, America's ski industry has embraced Sepp Kober—the man who more than any other person, turned the dream of Southern skiing into a reality.

They really like us.

Randy Johnson's 1987 book *Southern Snow: The Winter Guide to Dixie*, has been called "a cult classic." It's the definitive guide to Southern skiing and its history. An updated edition will be published in 2011 by the University of North Carolina Press.