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Cross-country skiing pioneer honoured

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As a youngster, Bjorger Pettersen conquered cross-country ski trails.

After he moved with his family from Norway to Prince George in 1953, Pettersen won the northern B.C. cross-country ski title seven straight years between 1957-1963 and had a three-year undefeated racing streak from 1958 to 1961.

But then tragedy struck and put his career in the sport in jeopardy.

"I was on the Olympic training squad in 1963 and wrecked my Achilles tendon and they said they couldn't repair it," said Pettersen.

"I was only 21 and injured. Then I went into coaching full-time."

His coaching career took off and he continued to shape and develop the sport he loved locally, nationally and internationally.

Pettersen, now 72, was inducted into the 10th class of the Prince George Sports Hall of Fame under the pioneer athlete category Saturday at a ceremony at the Hart Community Centre.

What makes it even more special is his dad John Pettersen was inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame post-humously on Saturday under the builder/category. The father and son duo now join Rolf Pettersen, Bjorger's brother and John's son, who was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997.

"It's very rewarding for us," said Bjorger from his home in Okotoks, Alta. (He didn't attend Saturday's ceremony due to illness). "Our family all got involved and became part of the sport.

"It's awesome that so many of us [Dave Wood and Ed Day] from the sport went in to the Hall of Fame [on Saturday]. I hope we've done something for the sport."

They did something all right.

Bjorger co-founded the Hickory Wing Ski Club in 1957 and then collaborated to develop the cross-country, ski jump and biathlon facilities at Tabor Mountain in 1960.

He became the first-ever full-time coach of the national cross-country ski team in 1971 and guided the team at the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan.

Prior to the '72 Games, Bjorger went to Inuvik and launched an innovative program for young skiiers.

His influence and the program had an effect. Seven of the nine skiiers on the 1972 Olympic team were from Inuvik.

Bjorger recalls it was a hard sell getting people involved at the local level in cross-country skiing, despite the success of himself, his brother Rolf and their friends Day and Wood.

Day was a rising star on the national team and trained under Bjorger.

"We had a hard time developing the sport here [in Prince George], there was no culture in it," said Bjorger.

"The sport takes so much training and endurance. It was a hard fight and it gradually started to improve. The guy who did that back then was Dave Wood. In Canada, it wasn't really recognized, it was more of a health fad."

That's unlike Bjorger's native homeland of Norway, where cross-country skiing is "just nuts."

"In Norway, there's dominance because it was the sport of the Vikings and a mode of transportation," said Bjorger. "Here in Canada, it's hockey and it means a lot to do well."

"I was a technical delegate at the '94 Games in Lillehammer and I jumped on a Ski-Doo and went along the edges of the course because there was too much smoke from the campfires from the 35,000 people who camped out."

Bjorger spent 27 years as a Canadian representative on the Federation International de Ski (FIS).

In 1985, his forward thinking resulted in making the sport more fan-friendly by adding mass start and pursuit races and pushing for the inclusion of skate-ski races.

"In North America before then, watching cross-country skiing was like watching paint dry," said Bjorger. "We needed to liven it up and we made it more TV-friendly and exciting."

When Calgary earned the right to host the 1988 Winter Olympics, Bjorger was instrumental in designing the cross-country ski courses at the Canmore Nordic Centre.

Bjorger said that national team wasn't quite ready to win medals yet (that came in 2002 in Salt Lake City under Wood's guidance of the national ski team), even though the top men's skier Pierre Harvey was ready. But there was another issue – doping.

"The problem in Calgary, and I can say this now, was there was way too much doping," he said. "Doping was rampant and we [Canada] didn't have a fair shot."

Bjorger was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame in 2007 and is an honourary life-time member of FIS.

He's now chairing a committee to bring the 2023 Nordic World Ski Championships to Calgary and eventually would like to see the Olympics return to the Alberta city.

"With 23 events over 12 days, it would mean full-time TV coverage and would bring the sport home to Canadians," said Bjorger.

Bjorger Pettersen and his dad John were among six others inducted into the Prince George Sports Hall of Fame Saturday.

Others included: Gibby Chasse (powerlifting); Pat Harris (wheelchair basketball); Jason LaBarbera (hockey); and Glen "Moose" Scott (lacrosse).