

DEATH OF A LEGEND

“Classic” and “Legend” are lightly applied in this time of hype and hyperbole, but those words will belong forever to the Mt. Washington Inferno and to Toni Matt. An inferno was downhill racing in the original manner: a gate at the start and a gate at the finish and no course preparation other than what the competitors did climbing up. Toni Matt grew up in St. Anton and in 1938 came to North Conway, N.H. to help establish the American branch of the Hannes Schneider Ski School. Mt. Washington was twenty miles up the road.

The Mt. Washington Inferno course dropped 4,288 feet in 3.8 miles, and although technically the competitors could take any route they wanted, skiers and spectators alike knew they'd ski down the Headwall of Tuckerman Ravine, where the racers' knees bumped the snow as they climbed. Ed Hollis won the 1933 Inferno in 21 minutes 18 seconds; in 1934 Dick Durance lowered the record to 12 minutes 35 seconds. The next-and-last-running was on April 16th 1939, and Toni had never seen the course before he hiked up with boyhood pal Herbie Schneider.

The traditional line called for racers to make wide turns down the open snowfield on the summit cone, then hang on as well as they could as they approached. The Lip—the narrow opening in the rocks which marked the entrance to the Ravine. Once through this vertiginous drop, they swung to their right under the broad line of rocks and then made as many steep traverses as their nerves or judgment required before they straightened out their line for the run across the floor of the Ravine, down the Little Headwall to the Sherburne Trail which ran two and a half miles to the finish in Pinkham Notch. The problem was the Headwall, the dizzying thousand-foot drop entered after passing through The Lip. “What are you going to do?” asked Herbie. “That’s what I’d like to know too,” said Toni.

There are forty-two racers that day, and Oscar Cyr, who was further back in the start line, remembered what the top looked like when he ran: “My course down was a series of sweeping snake-like Christies, uneventful except for the presence, right through the heart of my every turn, of two straight parallel tracks, the schusses of Durance and Matt.” Then came the Headwall. Everyone else made turns; Toni Matt took it straight—more or less by accident. A gate had been set three hundred yards above The Lip to guide the racers into the Ravine. “I ran as straight as I could, and when I got to the gate I figured I’m going to make three or four turns,” Matt said. However, he miscalculated the combination of speed and distance and found himself still above The Lip, heading for the rocks. He had to straighten it out to avoid hitting them, “and before I knew it I dropped over The Lip itself and there wasn’t any sense in turning—it wouldn’t slow me down anyway.” Spectators in the Ravine that day still remember the terrific rattling of Toni’s clothes as he plunged past them on his way into history.

“Going over The Lip,” he said later, “is a terrifying experience, especially for the first time. It’s like jumping into a six-hundred foot deep hole from a speeding car. I

figure I hit eight-five mph, but there wasn't time to be afraid because I was too busy watching for bumps." He cut the old record in half.

Decades have passed, yet people still ask the Forest Service ranger assigned to the Ravine to show them where Toni Matt schussed the Headwall.

Last April brought the fiftieth anniversary of that race and Toni Matt went back up to Tuckerman Ravine for the first time since that day in 1939. It would be his final visit. On May 17th, he died at his home in Pawling, New York. No other racer ever schussed the Headwall, and modern sanctioning rules now prohibit inferno racing. Toni Matt is alone with history now. —Nick Howe

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