



Sons of Norway Mini Presentations

#365: SONDRE NORHEIM- FATHER OF MODERN SKIING

Image: Postcard of woman and man on a ski trip, 1894, by O. Jespersen. National Library of Norway, www.nb.no

The father of modern skiing happens to come from Norway. Surprised? Probably not, but you may be surprised at how much of an impact he had on the early days of skiing. Sondre Norheim came from a little place known as the “cradle of skiing”, or Morgedal, Norway located in the heart of Telemark County. A fearless adventure seeker, Sondre took advantage of the Norwegian winters and excelled in ski jumping, slalom skiing, Telemark skiing and alpine skiing.

Sondre Ouverson (son of Ouver) was born June 10, 1825 at Øverbø, a small cotter’s farm, near Morgedal. He was a natural outdoors-man. His parents, Ouver Eivindsson and Ingerid Sundresdotter came from very poor families. When Sondre’s mother died in 1827, she left behind 2 year old Sondre and older brother, 4 year old Eivind. When Ouver married again, his second wife, Anne, was often frustrated with Sondre’s restless and thrill seeking nature, saying that she would “rather have ten Eivinds than one Sondre”. This only fueled his passion for trying new tricks on his pine skis.

Sondre was not keen on school but he was passionate about learning new ways to ski down a hill. One time, he asked his brother if he thought it was possible to jump off their family’s roof on skis. To find out, Sondre proceeded to climb up on the roof and ski off. At this time ski jumping was still an unknown sport so daring Sondre was ahead of his time.

Skiing was not an expensive sport during Sondre’s lifetime. Pine skis could be cheaply made by local craftsmen and the ski hills were everywhere. Skiing started as a means of transportation and entertainment. It didn’t turn into a recreational sport until the mid-19th century when, in 1843, the world’s first non-military skiing competition was held in Tromsø, Norway. Skiing boomed primarily in Norway’s Telemark region. Its steep terrain was perfect for downhill skiing.

Morgedal’s finest skier was undoubtedly young Sondre. He experimented on different hills, jumps, and with a variety of techniques and skis. He was also an excellent craftsman which made it easy to test his own handmade skis. In order to maneuver the challenging terrain Sondre created a new ski with rounded edges that made it easier to turn while downhill skiing. He also created a way to attach the skis tighter to his feet.

He experimented with different sized pine skis and fixed twisted willow birch-root bindings over the toes, a technique that was already common at that time. However, he added bindings around the heels which allowed the back part of the foot to lift up but gave the skier more control and support when turning and jumping. This extraordinary binding innovation would enhance the way for Telemark skiing, alpine skiing and slalåm skiing.

In 1854 Sondre married Rannei Åmundsdotter, a local girl from nearby Øyfjell, and they had eight children. The family moved around the Telemark region to various small farms. They named their last farm Nordheim (North home) and changed their last name in the process. Sondre Norheim, however, has been the most commonly used spelling.



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Sondre Norheim was becoming a well-known name in the area but it wasn't until 1866 that he participated in his first competition outside of Morgedal. It was the world's first ski jumping competition in Hødalsmo, and Sondre won first place. Just two years later at the age of 42, Sondre participated in Norway's first national skiing competition in the capital of Christiania (now Oslo). He skied for three days and 120 miles to reach the finish line in time. As the oldest competitor, he showed off his newly created Telemark turn and won the competition. The Telemark turn required skiers to turn back and forth in a zigzag flair while going downhill instead of skiing straight down. The skis stayed parallel to one another while one ski lined up ahead of the other to balance the turn. This new turn created by Sondre influenced modern Telemark, alpine and slalom skiing.

Sondre became a legend and his name was well known all over Norway. He continued to participate in competitions as long as he could but times were hard on the farm. Norwegians were beginning to emigrate and so too would the Norheim family. In 1884 Sondre, Rannei and three of their children left for America. They settled in North Dakota where life was still hard and there were no ski hills in sight. Instead Sondre cross country skied as long as he could on the Dakota prairies where it was said that his skis were often seen outside of his front door waiting for his next trip.

Sondre died on March 9, 1897 in North Dakota and there a stone and plaque sits on his grave.

"In memory of Sondre Norheim Pioneer and Champion of Modern Skiing. He Developed Slalom and Introduced the Telemark and Christiania Turns. Born 1825 in Morgedal, Telemark, Norway. Died in the United States 1897."