

Interview with Ralph Bietila

November 13, 2001

Ishpeming, Michigan

Interviewer:

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INT: Can you state your name and birthdate please?

RB: Ralph Bietila, B-I-E-T-I-L-A. And my birthdate is July 8, 1924.

INT: We'll be focusing on your career in ski jumping. I'd like to start off with some background information. Could you please state your place of birth?

RB: Ishpeming. Born at home, not in the hospital. All my brothers skied so I guess that's how I started. I was the youngest one.

INT: Did you always live in Ishpeming?

RB: Yes. Except when I was in the Service.

INT: When did you become interested in skiing?

RB: I was probably 3 or 4 years old. My oldest brother is the one that started skiing and there were 6 of us brothers. After my oldest brother started then the other brothers done the same thing. Of course me being the youngest, I had to ski I guess. We were real fortunate because we lived in a place where we had a ski hill in our back yard. At that time it was for younger kids. We were able to jump 50 feet. I could ski there before I went to school in the morning. Even at the school, Cleveland School, we had a ski hill in the yard there. So even at recess time we could ski jump. So we were real fortunate that way.

INT: What was the name of your oldest brother?

RB: Anselm.

INT: Can you spell that for me?

RB: A-N-S-E-L-M

INT: So basically through your brothers is how you first became interested in skiing?

RB: There were skis all over the house. A lot of people asked me if my dad ever skied. The only skiing my dad ever done, he was born in Finland and the only reason he skied was to get from one place to another on cross country skis. So he never did ski jumps. Although he was interested in it. He was out watching us all the time.

INT: Did you make your own equipment?

RB: Not really. Not at that time. Even my older brothers had skis they were able to buy. When I first started skiing we had hand me downs. My brother Roy was about 4 years older than I was. When he was getting older I took the smaller skis from him. At that time they were hand me downs. In the 1930s there wasn't much money around so you had to have hand me downs. A lot of my friends probably had homemade skis.

INT: Who were some of your early role models? The people you knew were popular in skiing at that time?

RB: They were just copied from factory skis. There were quite a few homemade skis. There were some carpenters that were real good at making skis. That was great because the kids could afford them that way.

INT: Do you remember the first time you ski jumped?

RB: I don't remember the first day, but I remember the first prize I ever won. We had a neighbor that was older than me. He was interested in skiing. He never skied much himself, but he enjoyed putting on tournaments for kids. I think the first prize I ever won was in what we called the Mine Pit at home where we skied. I won two pounds of dates. I still remember that. I probably was 6 or 7 or 8 years old.

INT: Do you remember your first tournament?

RB: Yes. It was the local tournament. Like I said, it was at the Mine Pit by our house. All the local kids in the neighborhood up to a certain age were jumping on the hill.

INT: Where is that located?

RB: The Cleveland location.

INT: Approximately what year was that?

RB: 1930 or '31. Something like that.

INT: And your brothers had been competing.

RB: Oh yes.

INT: What year did you graduate from high school?

RB: I graduated in 1943.

INT: Is that when you went into the Service then? Did you go right after?

RB: As soon as I graduated I was in the Service. I was in the Navy out in the South Pacific.

INT: Were you also in the 10th Mountain Division?

RB: No. I had several friends like Joe Perrault in it though. I tell everybody I was waterskiing in the South Pacific. I was on the USS Tingey. It was a DD 539, a destroyer.

INT: Can you spell the name of the ship?

RB: T-I-N-G-E-Y.

INT: Where was that stationed?

RB: The South Pacific. I think we were in 26 operations.

INT: And that would have been '43-'44?

RB: Yes.

INT: How serious were you about skiing?

RB: I would say we were really serious about it. Of course it was easier for us because in the family there was 6 of us and they were all older than I was. We coached each other. And of course all through life we coached each other, like other skiers like Joe Perrault. We didn't have real coaches like they have now days. We mostly helped each other.

INT: Was there a lot of competitiveness between you and your brothers?

RB: Oh definitely. Yes. When we were jumping on practice hills we were all anxious to know who'd be on top the hill. If one of the friends went down we'd always go down and see how far he went and try to beat it. We skied just about every day. When we would get home from school we'd grab our skis and go skiing. Even at night a lot of times we'd ski. We didn't have lights like they have now. We'd take a lantern and put that on the takeoff so we'd know when to jump. But there was no light below. It worked okay. We had a lot of fun anyway.

INT: What were some of the goals you had for yourself?

RB: I don't know that we really had goals at that age. We just kept practicing and of course skiing, wanting to beat each other and stuff. We were all good friends. In fact our kitchen was like a sports shop. We'd have to steel wool the bottoms. It wasn't like the plastic skis now days. It was hickory skis. You would have to fix the bottoms all the

time. You would steel wool them and put shellac on them too to make them fast. And there's different waxes also.

INT: How big was ski jumping in the Marquette area at that time?

RB: Well...skiing was founded, the National Ski Association was founded in Ishpeming. So you can tell at that time there was much more ski jumping here than any other place in the country. In the spring of the year we would have a special ski tournament between Ishpeming and Iron Mountain. At that time we would have anywhere from 70 to 80 ski jumpers just between the two of us. Now it's hard to get 70 or 80 ski jumpers in the Midwest or even the US. So it was pretty popular at that time. It wasn't like cross country skiing at that time. It was more jumping than anything. Now there's a lot of cross country plus jumping. We didn't have combined meets. Now they combined the two of them together to see how we'd make out.

INT: So you'd say it was bigger then, much more so than it is now.

RB: Yes. Mostly it was jumping at the time. It's a little bit of each now.

INT: What were the years of your ski jumping career?

RB: I probably started right around 1930 and I jumped until I was 51 years old. I still jumped on the big hills at that time. It was probably a little longer than most jumpers, but I still enjoy it. I'm still involved in it. I'm always out to the ski hills getting them in shape for the kids.

INT: So did you just jump for recreation at that time?

RB: Well there were tournaments in October. It was always a lot of fun going against competitors.

INT: What was your finest achievement in ski jumping?

RB: Probably making the Olympic teams. I was on the 1948 Olympic Team and the 1952 Olympic Team.

INT: You were on both of them.

RB: I was on both of them yes. I was on 1948 in Switzerland and 1952 was in Oslo, Norway. Then the World Championship team was in 1952 in Lake Placid, New York.

INT: And you were in that one as well?

RB: Yes.

INT: Joe had mentioned that he was also on the '48 Team?

RB: I had an accident in practice and broke my wrist so I didn't get to compete. Then again in 1952 in Oslo, Norway, I had bruised both of my heels so bad that I couldn't jump there either. It's just one of those things.

INT: Did you get to compete in the World Championships?

RB: No I didn't do that either. Oh, yes I did. I don't remember what I placed in that. Joe Perrault and I were together on that one also. That was in Lake Placid.

INT: Did you ski jump in Riggley Field?

RB: Not in Riggley Field, but I did in Soldier Field. They had put up...oh did Joe tell you something about Riggley Field? See I was in the Service at that time. They happened to be in the Service too but they were lucky enough to get off. Two of my brothers skied there too. My brother Walt and my brother Roy. Then there were the other boys there like Joe Perrault. I was out in the South Pacific at the time.

INT: What year was the Soldier Field?

RB: Soldier Field was the early '30s, '34 or '35 something like that. In fact we had it 3 years in a row. They made the scaffold out of scaffolding that carpenters use for building. That's what they made the whole thing from. I was probably about 12 or 14 at the time at Soldier Field.

INT: That's very young.

RB: One of the Norwegians set the record. 163 feet I think. Which is pretty good for an artificial hill.

INT: What was the occasion to do this? Was this a tournament?

RB: It was a tournament yes. It's all they ever had on it.

INT: Did it have a special name when it was at Soldier Field?

RB: No, just Soldier Field, Chicago. Riggley Field, that came afterwards. That was when they were in the Service at that time.

INT: You were unable to get leave for that?

RB: No. I was in the South Pacific. It just so happened that my brother Roy and my brother Walt were on leave or something, in this country. So they were able to go there just like Joe. So that's how they got to go.

INT: Your brother Paul was also really...

RB: When Paul was about 12 years old he had set the world boys record on our own hill here in Ishpeming. He was probably...he was picked as the number 1 ski jumper in America at one time. Then Paul got hurt ski jumping in St. Paul, Minnesota.

INT: Were you at that tournament?

RB: I was there. But he was sick in the morning. He got up with the flu or whatever it was. But he still figured he should go out to the ski hill to have a practice jump before the meet in the afternoon. At the time, now days they have starting gates at the top of the hill. If you think you will have too much speed you can come down a gate or two. At that time they didn't have starting gates. Paul was watching other skiers and thought he would jump too far so he tracked down part way and then jumped. At St. Paul there was a creek across the bottom of the landing. They had made a wooden bridge across there. The side of the bridge had big hemp ropes to keep the crowd back. When Paul jumped that morning there was no crowd, it was just practice. He, even though he took less speed, he out jumped the hill and landed a little sideways. If he had fallen that would have been great. He didn't like to fall. None of us did. He went into the side of the landing and ran into that hemp rope which stretched out like a sling shot up against the bridge. That's how he got hurt. Then they took him to Madison, Wisconsin to the University Hospital there. Pneumonia set in and he died 3 weeks after. He was just going to be 21 at the time.

INT: What year was that?

RB: We better come back to that. I'll look in this article and see.

INT: Did he get a chance to get on any Olympic Teams before that?

RB: Paul was already picked for the 1940 Olympic Team. It was 1939 when he died. He was already... my brother Walt is older. He was picked for the 1940 Team. My brother Paul would have been picked already in 1939. My brother Roy also would have been on the 1940 Olympic Team. When it came up, Paul had the accident, but Walt and Roy were still on the '40 Olympic Team. Then the war came to Finland and Russian and stuff. So they didn't have the Olympics that year.

INT: What year was that?

RB: 1940. They would have been in Finland.

INT: And the next one was in '48 or was there another one in between that?

RB: It would have been...yes I guess '48 was the next Olympics.

INT: Was there one in '44?

RB: I don't think so. I think the wars and that were going on. I think '48 was the next time they had the Olympics.

INT: How much older was your brother Paul than you are?

RB: Paul was about 6 years older than me. Roy was 4 years older. Walt was 8 years older than I am. My oldest brother was 17 years older than me. I think my nephew Jack, he was my oldest brother's son. He was a dentist here in Ishpeming.

INT: Was he also involved in ski jumping?

RB: Oh yes. He was a good skier. But then he got pretty involved in going to school and it was hard for him to still ski, although he still skied some when he was going to the University of Michigan. But he didn't have the time to train or anything because he was down there. The only time was vacation times or something. He also had a couple sons that skied. He can tell the other girl more about that than I can.

INT: When you were competing on the Olympic Team, what were some of the big names of skiers, maybe from other countries?

RB: I can't think of the...there's Gullen from Norway, Rudd Brothers, I think their pictures are in here.

INT: How do you spell that last name?

RB: R-U-D-D I think their pictures are in there.

INT: Were they local?

RB: No, they were from Norway. My brother Walt, he was on the '36 Olympic Team. He skied in Germany...Bergerude. He won the Olympics at that time. He was a good jumper. He had two brothers that were good jumpers too, but not quite as good as Bergerude was.

INT: What were some of the big events you were able to compete in?

RB: There were many events here, even in the central, Duluth, Minnesota, St. Paul, MN, Minneapolis, MN...

INT: Were most of the big ones in the mid-west?

RB: Yes, we probably had more ski jumpers here in the mid-west than they had...and we had more hills also. Choloran, MN, Racine, Wisconsin, Plymouth, WI had a ski jump there. Chicago of course. White Hall, WI, Iron Mountain, MI, Iron Wood, MI

INT: Was that Copper Peak?

RB: Before, it was just plain Iron Wood.

INT: Did you ever jump at Copper Peak?

RB: No. We were through jumping by the time they had started ski flying. Copper Peak was the ski flying hill. That would have been fun, but we came too late. I think I told you about White Hall. Duluth, Oclare...we had a lot of ski jumps. It think that's why we produced more jumpers in the mid-west than any other place. We skied at several places. We skied out west in Colorado. We used to like to go to Colorado. Steamboat Springs, Colorado. They had a lot of down hill skiing. We had a little bit of it here, but we don't have the mountains like they have. While we were out there, we'd go out for maybe a week. We'd do some skiing plus the jumping. That's about all I can think of right now. There were quite a few out east too. Vermont, Lake Placid which is still going strong. That's a training center. They also have plastic hills there too. That's great because European skiers get to ski just about all year long. That's their main sport. So they have plastic hills and several different sizes of them too. Usually skiers from Finland, Norway, or Germany will ski until the month of May. Even then, some of the younger ones will ski a couple times a month just to keep in shape. So they have a big advantage compared to the Americans because of those plastic hills.

INT: Do you consider ski jumping a dangerous sport?

RB: No I wouldn't say it's dangerous. It's just one of those things. Like football can be dangerous too. But not if you've been training. There's always accidents.

INT: Did you have a lot of injuries or accidents?

RB: Like in St. Marista when I broke my wrist. Hurting my heels also. The only other accident I had was I broke my leg in Choloran, MN.

INT: Was that because of a fall?

RB: That was a ski meet there. They had redesigned the hill and I jumped a little too far and lost my balance and I fell. I split my fibula bone from the bottom to the top. A spiral break.

INT: What is the furthest you've ever jumped?

RB: I would say that was in practice at Iron Mountain, about 300 feet. Joe had the record there. Joe Perrault. Yesterday he probably told you that. Joe, he's one of our neighbors. We go to coffee together. A lot of us go down for coffee. There must be 10 or 12 of us. We've been together all our lives. We fish together, hunt together, ski together. So we've been friends for a long time.

INT: You and Joe are the same age right?