

Interview with Rudy Maki
Marquette, MI
November 21, 2001

Subject: Ishpeming Ski Club

START OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer (I): This is an interview with Rudy Maki on November 21, 2001. Thank you for being here and letting me interview you.

Rudy Maki (RM): Nice to meet you and good to be here on a nice morning.

(I): Could you state your name again?

(RM): My name's Rudy Maki.

(I): And your birthdate please?

(RM): My birthday, I was born March 18, 1935.

(I): And you were born where?

(RM): In Ishpeming, MI. Well actually in the township north of Ishpeming I was born, but it's Ishpeming.

(I): And your place of residence right now? Still there?

(RM): Iron Mountain, MI.

(I): Can you tell me your address?

(RM): My complete address? 305 W. Dee St., Iron Mountain, MI 49801.

(I): What was your childhood like?

(RM): Well we lived on a small farm and there was eight of us in the family. Then my mother died when I was six years old and we were sort of split up and I went to town and lived with my oldest sister; well not my oldest sister, my older sister who actually raised me and that's how I became involved with skiing.

(I): And did she push you toward those kind of people?

(RM): No it was just the thing to do in my time; there wasn't snowmobiles or four wheelers or TVs or anything. The real recreation was skiing and in our area it was ski jumping and that's what all the kids done and we had fun doing it.

(I): And did you meet some people like Jack Bietila and Ralph Bietila?

(RM): Oh yeah, yeah Jack Bietila and I were neighbors we actually grew up together and Ralph was a little bit older and he was, you know, like our hero. Well he was really a senior jumper when we were kids and we sort of idolized him and wanted to do feats like he had.

(I): And how about Cory Hill?

(RM): And Cory was the same thing. He was a little bit older and he was another one of our idols and they helped coach us. We didn't have, of course, personal coaches or anything, but the older guys would help the younger guys, like Cory and Ralph and other guys would help out. But Jack and I were really close in our young days.

(I): You mean you guys got in trouble a lot!

(RM): No, no trouble! [laughs] We were pretty good kids.

(I): Did you have a goal in mind when you joined the club itself?

(RM): No, not really. It was just the thing to do if you were skiing and if you wanted to compete you had to be a member of the ski club. Then like when we were kids we were in the junior ski club first, and they would send you to competitions in Palmer and National Mine and Negaunee and if you got to go Iron Mountain it was a long trip in those days, and Caspian, MI, and so on and so forth. But that's why you belong to the club so you compete in the competitions.

(I): Why ski jumping? Why not cross-country?

(RM): I don't know, most of the kids done ski jumping in every location around Ishpeming; there were ski hills in backyards and any little hill and it was the thing to do, and there was many. There must have been a hundred or more kids that were ski jumpers in my time when we were kids.

(I): I read somewhere that in 1955 you won a class A national championship?

(RM): Yeah, mhm.

(I): How did you have to prepare for that?

(RM): Well it was... We were training, you know you're trying, that's actually our goal to try and win every time you competed and I sort of started out slow that year, but I kept improving and improving and actually got to be the best at that time when the nationals were held so I was fortunate in that way.

(I): How far did you jump?

(RM): At that time the hills weren't as big as they are now but I forget; I think I jumped 270 ft. as the longest jump that day, but that's hardly nothing today but it was a good jump in those days. Which, that was in Leavenworth, WA that hill where I won.

(I): Over in Washington?

(RM): It was ____, yeah, Leavenworth, WA.

(I): The senior Jack Bietila skied in class B, what was different between the two?

(RM): Well class B, in order to get in class A you have to place in the first three in class B and then you're promoted to A class, that's the top level, A class. In order to get there, like I say, you had to win a either gold, silver, or bronze medal in B class and then the next competition you're moved up to A class.

(I): This one you'll really have to do a lot of talking. [laughs] I found out that you represented the U.S. in the 1956 Olympics. Where was that located?

(RM): Mhm. In Cortina, Italy.

(I): And could you tell me any/all of the experiences you had in Italy?

(RM): Well the tryouts were held the previous year in Iron Mountain, MI and there's two-day tryouts and I won both days of the tryouts I was on the team, and made the team there and took six guys and we went to Cortina, Italy. It was myself and Dick Raho from Iron Mountain, MI, Art Deglin from Lake Placid, NY, Billy Olsen from Eau Claire, WI, Roy Sherwood from Southbury, CT, and Ragner Ulland from Seattle, WA. We were the guys on the team that went over. It was quite an experience and the four after we tried out over in Italy during the training, only four of the six get to jump and I didn't make the final four. So I was on the team but I didn't get the opportunity to actually compete. But then Art Deglin was our highest placing finisher, he placed 16th. And the only time in ski jumping in the Olympics the United States won a bronze medal in 1924, so we've never been a powerhouse in ski jumping but competed quite well but never got into the medal counts.

(I): As an athlete back then you were aware of these strengths of ours, did you see any weaknesses or strengths on the entire team?

(RM): Yeah, we never had coaches. Usually you just trained yourself and the only time they assigned a coach is like when we went overseas as the Olympic team they'd pick a guy and he'd be the coach but he was really more of a chaperone. You know, you didn't really know the guy until you went over. So we weren't trained like the other countries that have those kinds of training programs; we done our own training.

(I): Did you do any other events after the Olympics?

(RM): Oh yeah I jumped for three or four more years after that and I competed in the world championships in Lahti, Finland 1958.

(I): How was that?

(RM): It was good; it was a good experience. I didn't place high but got to compete and it was an honor to represent the country, a nice ____ ski ____.

(I): Do you remember any interesting experiences you had when you competed? It doesn't have to involve skiing! [laughs]

(RM): Well I remember it was really cold that year. It was so cold when you climbed on the scaffold you'd almost freeze; it was like 20 below every day. But it was fun doing it. Everybody had to do it and I was there and it was a good experience.

(I): Did you hold any positions or posts in the ____ ski?

(RM): Yeah I was like skier's captain for a few years, I can't remember. And also I was the treasurer, I don't know, one or two years I think. But one thing I was going to mention, it's sort of bragging, but in the Olympic tryouts in 1955 I was the first one to jump to 300 ft. in Iron Mountain on the hill; I set the record.

(I): Who came the second year, do you remember?

(RM): Dick Rahoi from Iron Mountain.

(I): Do you remember his jump at all?

(RM): Yeah he jumped in the 290- something, I don't remember exactly. But that was sort of a milestone to hit the 300 ft. and I was the first for ____.

(I): What is a skier's captain?

(RM): I think it's more or less a position. You know, you just... but at that time Ishpeming Ski Club had many skiers, or jumpers I should say, and there'd be competitions to go to and they could only send so many each weekend. You know a carload would go here or to Chicago for example, another one out there, there'd be competition; well the skier's captain would help pick the guys who actually qualified to go – their training and so on...

(I): What is considered qualifications...?

(RM): Well there might have been 50 guys that wanted to make the ski trip but maybe only 15 could go; the ski club would have money to send 15 skiers so I was on that selection committee that when they pick the guys that deserved to go, that was part of the skiers' captain's job.

(I): In the Ski Club were there any times that were considered ____ ____?

(RM): Oh, yeah they'd run on the shoe-string as long as I remember.

(I): For example?

(RM): Well they never made money, you know, big money or anything, but they paid us skiers gas money and a little bit of meal money when we'd make a trip and that but they were running on a shoe-string like I said.

(I): What was your latest involvement with the Ski Clubs?

(RM): Well I don't know, after I quit judging I became a FIS or an international ski jumping judge and I judged all over the world and I always would judge the competitions in Ishpeming. So I stayed involved even though I lived in Iron Mountain I'd always come to Ishpeming for it, and I tried to help them out with all the rules and, you know there's new rules and I was on the committee for the International Ski Federation. And so I'd teach Ishpeming folks like what they should do and what they can't do.

(I): Once you were an international skiing judge, what was the strangest place to judge skiing?

(RM): Well I don't know. Once you're at the hill they're all pretty much... but every country is different. I'd say Czechoslovakia was, you know with the language, but they always provided you with interpreters but it was sort of interesting there because the language was so different and it was hard to pick up any of the words there. But it was good experiences.

(I): Did you eventually pick up a little Czech?

(RM): No, no way. [laughs]

(I): You didn't know if they were swearing at you or not! [laughs] With the Ishpeming Ski Club, do you think it's good for young adults, old adults, etc...?

(RM): I really do. It's such a good, healthy sport. And I can't say that it isn't, but I never in the United States heard of a kid in a ski club, and I'm speaking of ski jumping, that was involved with drugs or anything like that. It was just clean fun. And it's not a team sport; once you shove off the top of the scaffold you're all on your own regardless of how much coaching you had, you have to do your thing. The coach can't put the skis on for you. So it's a fun sport. You have to like to fly. And I think now there's a lot of women starting out jumping, and it's going to get more and more [popular], which I hope it does.

(I): In a previous interview Don Hurst said the skiing equipment changed?

(RM): Oh, unbelievable. Unbelievable...

(I): Do you remember what the original ski equipment was basically?

(RM): Well my skis were wooden skis and you had to rub them down with steel wool to make them smooth and then every night you'd have to put new shellac on them because it would wear off. But now they're all man-made materials with plastic bottoms and there isn't any shellacking or anything you just put a little paraffin wax on them and away you go. So it's entirely different equipment. And the suits; we used to wear heavy wool sweaters and gabardine ski pants they called them. Now they have these jumpsuits and helmets; they wear helmets and we wore a ____ hat, so it's different, but that's the way it was in my day.

(I): I notice that in sports as they get older they get more safety precautions. How were the safety precautions at the time you were...?

(RM): Well there wasn't much to tell you the truth. Although it really isn't a dangerous sport. There's only a few guys that got killed that I know in my time and they were pure accidents. But like now for the competitions there's a competition jury; they decide if it's too windy or the hill is in too poor condition

to jump for them. But in our day when they were holding a tournament you were expected to jump and if conditions were bad you got to decide yourself if you wanted to jump.

(I): So it was always left up to the person?

(RM): Yeah up to the person.

(I): Wow. ____ _____. [laughs] What is special about your participation in ski jumping?

(RM): Oh I don't know, I think when I won the National Championships that was really a... you know I was 19 years old and it was really an honor to say that you beat everybody in the whole country. When I think of it as a member of the Ishpeming Ski Club up to this day I'm the last one that accomplished that; winning the National Championship.

(I): Why do you think that is?

(RM): Well I don't know because the jumping has phased down, there isn't as many jumpers now. Like I said there's four-wheelers and snowmobiles and TVs and everybody got a car and they don't want to put in the effort to go train and have fun ski jumping.

(I): Have you ever seen the NMU Nordic Ski Team?

(RM): Oh yeah, sure.

(I): What do you think of those?

(RM): Well that's great, they have a nice cross-country trail there at the Suicide Bowl and then I remember when Northern had the Nordic combined where there was also ski jumpers; you jumped and cross-country. In fact they won the National Championships one year at Northern that they did skiing. I forget what year, but when I think of it last winter I was in Finland and one of the members of that team was from Finland and I met him and we were talking and had dinner together. But he jumped in Ishpeming on the jumping hill; that's where he trained on Suicide Hill. So he trained with all these ski club members. So, they had a good team that year, I can't remember the others but...

(I): Why is it called Suicide Hill?

(RM): I don't know somebody gave it that name and I guess it started in 1926 and I guess the name stuck. I forget the real history of it.

(I): Is it big enough to be Suicide Hill? [laughs]

(RM): Nah but like I say it turned out to be a good name, but yeah it was a great hill.

(I): Do they still use it at all?

(RM): Yeah, they still use it but I don't know for how long because the mine is getting closer and closer.

(I): Oh yeah mining...

(RM): Yeah, mhm.

(I): If you had a chance to coach skiing would you do it?

(RM): Well I coached some young kids and that. But like when I quit ski jumping I wanted to help out and put something back into the sport and you could go into coaching or whatever, but I took officiating instead and that's when, like I said, I became a international judge and a technical delegate for ski jumping. So that's how I put back into the sport.

(I): Do you watch the Winter Olympics?

(RM): Oh, absolutely.

(I): Do you see any improvement in their techniques that you would have wanted to use back then?

(RM): Oh yeah it's changing every year. It's almost scientific now. They have videos where you would jump and we didn't have any of that. You'd have to have one of your friends watch what you were going to do on this jump and then he'd tell you what you done wrong or thought you done wrong, where now every ski jumping nation they have coaches and take videos and they study the videos of the jumpers and it's completely different. But I can tell you this, I don't think they have any more fun than what we had.

(I): Why is that?

(RM): I don't know there was more comradery in our day than there is now. Everybody seems to be more of an individual and it wasn't like that it our day. Especially Ishpeming Ski Club was one of the strongest clubs in the whole United States in my time, because our carload of jumpers that left, if you could beat everybody in your car 99 times out of 100 you won the competition. That's how good the ski jumpers were in Ishpeming.

(I): Were there any negative feelings among them in your time?

(RM): I don't think so, we always got along with everybody. I didn't dislike anybody. We got along great.

(I): What would you guys do in the afterhours?

(RM): We were practicing on the hills around here, we'd always go for coffee and the guy who jumped the furthest had to buy the coffee, you know. [laughs] It wasn't a big expense I think it was a nickel a cup in those days but still was a nickel.

(I): If you had one interesting experience with skiing that you would remember for a long time, what would that one event be?

(RM): I think when I jumped that 300 ft. in Iron Mountain because Iron Mountain had enlarged their hill about 7 years before and they thought the hill was capable of having 300 ft. jumps and when I had done that it was sort of a milestone, and I was sort of a hero and so on I suppose.

(I): Did you know you were going to make the 300 ft. when you went down?

(RM): When I went down, when I landed, I knew I did.

(I): How did you know?

(RM): Well at that time they had like a red line across the landing where 300 ft. was and I knew when I was coming through the air that that's the spot I'm going to land right on the line. Which I did.

(I): Could you tell me how do you ski jump? I mean, how is the body positioned?

(RM): You just go down on a crouch on the in-run of the hill from the top of the scaffold and when you hit the end of the take off your body has to move faster than the skis are; you got to lean forward and keep the air pressure under your skis and body and it to this day it takes good timing, you know, just to jump and leave the take off at the right time and in the right position and that's ____ even today, you know, jump the furthest.

(I): You said you quit ski jumping. Do you remember why you quit ski jumping?

(RM): Well I got married and I couldn't devote that much time to the sport anymore so it was kind of worth it and I just got involved in officiating after so... It was a fun time in my time and I made great friends all around the world. You see guys that ski jumped in my time and everybody got along and had fun and I see many of them every year. Then I had opportunity to go all over the world when I was officiating and I'd see all my old friends from all over so it was a great sport.

(I): Is there kind of like a reunion every year that happens with these people?

(RM): Yeah, mhm. Like for example many old skiers come to Ishpeming to watch the competition at Suicide Hill there so everybody gets to see each other again. Same in Iron Mountain when they have their competition. At all the tournaments wherever in the country there's always the old ski jumpers that come and see it and see all the guys they haven't seen for years or haven't seen since last year's competitions. So that was nice seeing everybody.

(I): Is there anything you want to say about Ishpeming Ski Club for anyone who is listening to this tape?

(RM): Well like to me I thought it was an honor to represent the Ishpeming Ski Club because of its history and holding their first competition in 1887 which is one of the oldest in the whole world, of ski clubs. So it's really got a long history and to be a member of it was an honor. I hope they continue.

(I): Do you feel honored now?

(RM): Sure, yeah. I thought I represented the Ski Club well and I've always had good friends from the Ski Club. Couldn't ask for a nicer relationship.

(I): I guess that's all the questions I have. [laughs] I had to make some up on the way but I thank you again for letting me interview you.

END OF INTERVIEW