

Interview with Tom Sodergren
Ishpeming, MI
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Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi
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RM: Good morning Tom. I'd like to discuss your involvement in the ski sport. In particular with the Ishpeming Ski Club and related activities. I'd like to ask you an open question. What is the date of your birth?

TS: 4-15-51

RM: What was your hometown? Where did you grow up?

TS: Ishpeming.

RM: How did you get involved with skiing?

TS: I actually started a little late in life. I was closer to 14 years old. I skied around my location of Cooper Lake a little. We'd build bumps and jump them. I was looking for a little more excitement so I went out to Suicide to see what was out there and started jumping there.

RM: Can you go into how you...that's quite a hill out there.

TS: It's not just Suicide. We have actually 5 different ski jumps out there from small to large. We start on the small hills and as your courage and ability grows, you move up to the bigger hills after some of the coaches think you are capable.

RM: What kind of training...did you have coaches that would give you direction or was it a thing you just do?

TS: Back when I skied, the training wasn't as intense as it is today. Basically, we didn't do any dry land training. Agility exercises, squats, different things...we just started ski jumping. Walking up the hill was enough exercise to keep us in shape.

RM: So how long would you say, in your experience, how long did you stay on the small hills and work up? Just a matter of experience and getting it down?

TS: Experience yes. And getting ready to go. The older ones would sometimes get on a hill before they should. Before they were capable of it. Consequently because when I skied, kids weren't watched close enough. Some of them progressed to a bigger hill before they were ready. They got hurt and quit. We did lose a lot of ski jumpers because of that. Today we have coaches that really watch the kids and do a lot of dry land training to make sure they're in shape physically and mentally. And the ski equipment is safer. Safety bindings release. Skis come off. Things like that. The ski boots is a big thing now, better support for your ankles.

RM: Could you explain what is dry land training?

TS: It's any physical exercise you do to prepare for ski jumping before you get on snow. They have things called borgsoffs???, deep knee bends, quick running agility, jumping, in run positions, we have a roller jump now so kids can come down a roller jump and jump onto an air mattress. That's perfecting their takeoff. They play different sports, soccer, basketball, many different combinations of agility things help you with balance and performance.

RM: So youngsters that are going into skiing today, ski jumping, are encouraged to get into a variety of sports off season.

TS: To a certain extent. In America the kids do that. They get involved in many different sports, which is great. Our foreign coach is Martin Bayer from Slovakia. He doesn't encourage too many sports outside of jumping training because in his country if you were a ski jumper, that's what you did. You didn't do anything else. You didn't have time for it. So the foreign countries are more serious about narrowing down your ability to one thing, but they do play sports and other activities to give you agility and speed. Speed is very important to give you quick jumps.

RM: Could you tell us a little about your involvement in ski jumping?

TS: I started out in ski jumping, interested in only that. When you get involved in ski jumping, at least in the US, ski jumping was more work than actual ski jumping. Probably the most advantages that I've gotten from ski jumping have been work oriented. Learning how to build hills, learning iron work, volunteer help, welding, cutting, equipment, excavating, re-profile landings, do many things like that. So you operate equipment. Plus working with other people in a common ??? to get something done. Basically that's the most advantages I've gotten have been that. I've never been a good ski jumper. I've ski jumped for many, many years, but never performed well.

RM: But you have the ability so you bring that expertise to the construction phase of things. Where if I were to get into construction I would have no idea how you land... you read about it, but need to have experience. What were some of the projects that you worked on?

TS: Well when I got started in ski jumping it was the older hill. In the early '70s is when we built the new structure as it is. I had never worked iron before, but Coy Hill and his friends volunteered to put up the scaffolding so I put up working iron. Wherever we had to work. I found it an interesting challenge. So we erected the ski hill. We didn't have nice big cranes. We used hand winches and what was called a jim pole. You have to raise the jim pole 20 every time you go up the tower, which is a major undertaking. It takes some ability to do that. It was nice to learn from them.

RM: Oh, so they would come out on the scene and you'd have on the spot training.

TS: Yes. Coy Hill was an iron worker. He had lots of friends in the union iron workers that would come out and donate their time and help.

RM: Who was the person in charge of designing the ski hill? Did you hire an architect to do something like that or was it an in house thing?

TS: Right now we have an individual named Don Liljquest in the ski club and he is probably as knowledgeable as anybody in the world on designing ski jumps. He's a retired engineer from Cleveland Cliffs. He's a registered civil engineer. He's done a tremendous amount of design work on our hills, however, he did not design the present ski jump. I believe Earl Langsford did that. He was also an engineer from Cleveland Cliffs. But the USA Ski Jumping Association has people in the Central Division that are qualified in engineering ski jumps. They have specifications you have to meet. There is also FIS, which is Foreign International Ski Jumping, FIS will oversee these things. Our ski jump has to be FIS approved in order for us to hold foreign competitors. We have to update ski jumps every 5-10 years. It seems that the ski jumps are not adequate for the new competition. It seems to be an ongoing thing. Basically, the ski jumpers are getting better and able to fly farther because of better equipment, better physical abilities, and changing technique. To jump off a building, anybody can jump off a building and fall to the ground 500 feet, 5,000 feet, no problem. Ski jumping of course is measured in distance from the takeoff to where you land. If the landing is vertical, you can go 500 feet with no effort. But horizontal, getting away from the takeoff is a problem. So the landings now are becoming flatter and farther away from the takeoff so that when the ski jumper leaves the takeoff he has to go horizontally way further, which is more difficult. So that is basically how we have changed ski jumps. The landing has become flatter and a little farther away from the takeoff. With the new technique the skiers used to have their skis in front of them parallel, now it's a V so that they have their body between the skis. It gives them more square inches of flying. Then they can come off on the natural drafts from the landing and follow those drafts and go farther away from the takeoff horizontally.

RM: Let me backtrack. Can you spell...the two engineers.

TS: Don Liljquest...you might want to look in the book. L-I-L-J-Q-U-E-S-T. Earl Langsford. Don Liljquest he is very familiar on the past engineering of the ski jump too.

RM: How do you spell Langford?

TS: L-A-N-G-S-F-O-R-D I'm terrible at spelling.

RM: Is he still alive?

TS: No, he passed away.

RM: But he lived in Ishpeming, so we can back track him. You were going to mention some other engineers?

TS: Scott Bland is from Westby, Wisconsin. He's a central engineer. He's the central guy. Then there's a guy from Canada who's known world wide, I can't think of his name. There's other guys from Europe too that were really well known. Another feat, talking about engineering ski jumps, they changed the way they talk about ski jumps. Big hills used to be 70 meter hills. It was measured from where the takeoff is to where the landing started to get steep. Our hill used to be 70 meters. The landing rolls along a hill and comes to a point where it gets steep. That was P point. That distance was 70 meters. Where the landing starts to break out at the bottom, that's K point. It's 90 meters. They've changed the terminology now and want to call jumps by the K point. Now we have a K 90. It used to be 70 and now we call it K 90, the same hill. The reason I brought that up is because the design of the ski jump and horizontal distances, our K 60 meters, the hill next to the small one was not designed right. It has a laminated wooden structure for the scaffold about 60 feet high. The scaffold was built too close to the landing. It wasn't horizontally far enough away from that. That was another involvement of mine to re-profile the landing. So we put dirt on the landing, then we took that scaffold, which is quite a large structure, and we jacked it up in the air at one time and slid it back 15 feet. Up 3 feet and back 15 feet. It's all volunteer help and mostly iron workers type people. Then, we erected another tower behind it cause we didn't have the proper speed. So we tried to redesigned these hills on and off for years trying to keep up with times

RM: So you have to pull this out of the ground?

TS: It was on concrete pillars, with wooden...

RM: So you had to have tacks on the four...

TS: Well we put on channeling horizontals, tying in the base, and then we put I-beams on the footing, and we jacked it up and slid them on ? without any power equipment except for hydraulic jack.

RM: You didn't have a crane out there, just lift it up. I mean that would have been simple. How long did that take?

TS: We had to hand carry railroad ties into place because you couldn't get there with equipment. We were working on an incline. We had all these railroad ties, and there was probably a week of preparation, two days to jack it up and jack it back. We had everything in place to set it back down. It was a project that required an awful lot of common sense.

RM: It sounds like there's all this activity going on. It's the type of thing that's important, but the public doesn't really hear about it. The average person doesn't know what went on there.

TS: I believe that there's been different codes cause we tried to get funding, grant monies, etc. So studies have been done on the value of our area. It's over a million dollars in value of what we have there. Also, the community has helped us, local businesses have helped us. We basically don't have any money. We never have had any money. But when we need something we ask for help

RM: So you get volunteers, any kind of services. So the whole complex would be worth about a million dollars now?

TS: That or more.

RM: But you're not including the volunteer hours. Just the physical structure.

TS: Yes. Those kind of dollar figures...I'm not good with statistics, but those dollar figures can be gotten from Liliquist

RM: Who is the agent in the organization who is overseeing the development of the ski hills?

TS: The Ishpeming Ski Club is in charge we'd like to think. It's more complicated now. The property owner doesn't want us there anymore. We've become extinct I guess.

RM: You mean the club?

TS: The ski jump. The land owner doesn't want us there anymore because they need the property for mining expansion. We need to move everything, which is almost impossible in my opinion. We don't have the money. I don't know where the money will come from. Today people do not want to volunteer their time anymore. I think a lot of organizations still want us, but they can't get involved anymore. They're too busy with their own personal interests.

RM: This particular project, all the ski hills that are there, would have to be moved at approximately the same time. In the past you could probably get volunteers, work for a while, let them rest, and then continue. But in this case it has to all happen at the same time.

TS: It needs to be orchestrated with money and a bid from a contractor. That's why major money has to be acquired before we start.

RM: What is the time frame for all this to happen?

TS: Cleveland Cliff has given us our notice to remove and vacate the premises. I believe we have a year after the date they gave us that letter to vacate the premises. They've already given us our letter.

RM: So time is ticking away. The year ticking away.

TS: Yes.

RM: Has there been any fundraiser or grant money or anything like that? To get the money for a contractor?

TS: We just got the letter here within the last month. Because we only have a handful of volunteers, our main push is the tournament on January 20. All our energies are put into trying to make this a successful tournament. It costs us over \$40,000 to put on a tournament. So we have to come up with more. There again, the community, we can put up sponsors, people donate money, ticket sales...ticket sales only average about \$10,000. We still have to get sponsorships and donations for \$30,000.

RM: So it sounds like it's a full time job for a number of people...fundraising and developing it. The ski club is just a club. Does it have any paid officers?

TS: No. We try and help our coach out and we give him a small salary. He's a great guy and willing to help out and work hard.

RM: Does he have other employment?

TS: Yes. He came here as a competitor in one of our competitions. This was years ago and he liked it here. We invited him back. When he came back he had a 2 year visa to stay here. He didn't have a green card. Then we tried to get his visa extended and failed. He had to go back. Then we hired an attorney who is familiar with visas and that sort of thing and we got him back. He has a green card now. Basically he came here with ski jumpers in the Triangle Motel. The people who own the Triangle Motel liked him and adopted him on the spot. Basically he lives at the Triangle Motel. Plus people there got him a job. He's a truck driver. He'll do anything within reason to help out.

RM: So he's really committed to ski jumping.

TS: Yes. He's from Slovakia. He has competed himself in 2 Olympics. Cross country and ski jumping. He's been around. He's only about 29 years old right now.

RM: So you were extremely lucky to get a person with that kind of commitment to want to ski here.

TS: Yes. If you remember in the past year or two we had ??? from Marquette who was the top American ski jumper. He was just doing a fantastic job. Basically he was ??? Unfortunately he got hurt too many times because of circumstances that weren't always the best. They were not his fault. When you get hurt too many times in ski jumping you lose your interest, which is understandable. Most people take a bad fall and it's difficult to come back. A slight bit of hesitation and you can't compete at the top level.

RM: And that's the point of takeoff?

TS: Yes. Where you enter the air.

RM: So if there's any hesitation at that point...

TS: You can not be defensive. You have to be aggressive. Once you get out there then you have to hold your skis and feel, know, where your body is, where your skis are. Is there good air, extra air...if you don't have extra air, can you feel it rise and go? If it's not good air...if the takeoff isn't timed right, wait and see.

RM: So when you're getting ready to jump, what do they do, give you the clearance to go, do you have to go? Do you wait for something?

TS: The coach flags you when he wants you to come down. If he feels you are an inexperienced skier, he will wait and wait and wait until it's very quiet and there is no extra air. Those skis are going to lift you up. When you're ready, climb on and go.

RM: At that point, if you have some kind of problem and fall, you just drop?

TS: You don't just drop. If you do something drastic, you get in big trouble. You don't just want to drop. Look for the outline at the bottom of the hill. But if you're in the air and drop your head like this, you'll go upside down. That simple. A lot of different things, when people get in the air...???(moved away from microphone, too much echo) If you're afraid, and don't know what's happening, your skis are pushing on them, you'll go over. Falling with a pair of skis digging in ??? beating you up...???

RM: You're on hard snow.

TS: That's a plus...I don't want you to get the idea that ski jumping is dangerous. It's not. Statistics have been done and found the percentage of injuries in ski jumping is way down in comparison to almost every other sport. Downhill skiing is worse. We prepare our hills so that the land is hard and smooth so that if you fall, chances are you're just going to slide. But with downhill skiers, the snow might be soft, it might be bumpy with holes. And if it's soft and you fall and dig in, your shoulder digs in, you tear your shoulder up. You dig in with your legs and tear your knee up. But when we fall on a hard landing there's an impact that may give you a bruise, but it's not the slowing effect, tearing in. And of course when you have other bumps and things, you start tumbling. The bumps don't help either. That's why you have injuries. The hill is prepared to perfection plus our athletes don't go up to the top of the hill unless they feel confident they can do it. Downhill skiing, anybody that gets on the chairlift and goes to the top, they think they can ski the hill. A lot of them can't. Plus there are other skiers on the hill getting in their way. We only have one skier on the hill at a time.

RM: I guess I saw one of the Olympics or contests that was on tv, a ski jumper fell. Everything was going fine and then he got pushed over into the side and got caught up in the fence.

TS: The Agony of Defeat. The wide world of sports or something.

RM: Yes.

TS: That was an older ski jumper a few years ago. You know what happened to him? He had a sprained thumb. That's all that happened.

RM: Even going into the...

TS: Yes. He apologized to the organizing committee. He was sorry he fell. He had a sprained thumb.

RM: So everything is prepared. It's your jump and your ski hill for that run. There is all this engineering background and preparation besides the skier being in good shape and all. How long have you been a member of the Ishpeming Ski Club?

TS: 37 years.

RM: How have you seen the club progress? What was it's major activity?

TS: Well our major activity is to have a tournament. It's difficult to get organized and meet all the requirements for a tournament. You've got foreign skiers, you've to house them, feed them, give them day money, fly them over here. The hill has to meet other specifications to meet foreign skiers. It has to be up to date. We have to have foreign judges, TVs. The skier is in charge of the hill. If he doesn't like something on the hill, he'll shut you down because the hill doesn't meet the specifications. Landing too soft, profile not right, track not right... Today ski jumping is somewhat different from the old days. In the old days we just skied the hill. There was no track until the skiers wore it in. The first person on the hill just had a completely flat area to go on. Not too many skiers always wanted to be the first one on the hill. There were a few of us that would. But now, to have a tournament, you have to have a mechanical track set up. You have to cut a perfect track. I've designed one. My track has gone to Japan, other places in the US. Other people have used my design to make a track setup. It works. If you know anything about patents...it's very difficult to get a patent. I've known people to spend thousands of dollars going through patent attorneys and not getting the patent. There's too many other people out to try and steal your idea. But the other problem with this particular thing is, where's the market to sell it? You don't have one. You can't patent something that there's no market for. I've made a lot of different things in my lifetime that are successful. My wife...???(too quiet)

RM: So even if you spent all the money patenting this device, you would end up not really making any money on it.

TS: No, there's no market.

RM: Or if it was successful somebody could come in and steal it...

TS: It comes down to who can market the best.

RM: So all of this activity in preparation for the tournament takes up...this is the focus, the reason for the Ishpeming Ski Club, the tournament. Everything from the engineering of the hills in the summer time to interaction...

TS: That's not the only main thing we do. We'd like to think our main reason is to provide and train ski jumpers. Provide a facility for them and train ski jumpers. Basically we also have a sub-division called the Ishpeming Skiers Training Facility, which ??? through education we can give people a tax deduction. As a volunteer organization, doesn't necessarily mean ??? (too quiet). It has to be in a certain category like education. That's how we come up with the Ishpeming Skiers Training Facility. It educates skiers. I believe they started that initially to build the presence of the ??? (too quiet). We had to come up with big bucks to pay for the material to build the scaffold. They ??? to organize that committee. In order to get good donations from people, they wanted a tax credit. So we developed that sub-division of the ski club.

RM: So the Ishpeming Ski Club summation is a local volunteer group that works hard to get the expertise to develop these plans. All of this is volunteer and donations.

TS: That is correct.

RM: You kind of talked about it earlier, I don't know if you want to go over it again...what you see as the future. Where are you planning on putting a new ski hill?

TS: Well there's a group that wants to put it on Bluff Street in Ishpeming right by ??? Cleveland Cliffs has said they will donate the land for the ski jumps. They have donated the land, but in 5 years if the ski club has not come up with a sufficient plan and the money to do it, the land goes back to Cleveland Cliffs. They've asked us to vacate the premises we're at now because they want to bury their waste rock. It's the closest place they have to get rid of their waste rock in order to continue the mining operation. I've asked them and the city of Ishpeming ??? the manager told me if the expansion goes through there's going to be a waste rock pile right up to Negaunee. What's that going to do to the community? So I've asked many people, if you want to bring waste rock into Suicide Bowl, could we go higher with the rock instead of spreading it out, and make a downhill ski area, in and around Suicide Hill and save the ski jumps. That was my thought. They said it will cost more money to drive the trucks up higher. That's true. So they weren't interested in doing that. However, if they did that, the rock pile would provide us with something, plus the community would help stabilize it. Get vegetation growing on it, keep the dust down, and make something on it. But that doesn't seem logical. So they said it would be too expensive. After some thought I said maybe we can go out and get a multi-million dollar grant and hire Cleveland Cliff to build around it. I'm not saying Cleveland Cliffs has to make a lot of money off it, but offset their expenses. Tax dollars are wasted in a lot worse ways than that.

RM: You bring up an interesting point. There was something I was just reading, oh, it was the Commencement speaker at Northern Mary Houghton, in charge of the South Shore Bank ????. She was saying that in the old days you had an Andrew Carnegie or a Rockefeller that made all this money and then at the end of their lives they gave it back for libraries, schools, museums, and what not. In today's world people want to get businesses involved to work with the community, like you're saying. Do this project now to benefit the community in the future. Say the ski hill and all that will attract visitors and tourists. Someone will go to the top of the hill. Then you have all this activity in the winter that would stabilize the community. Unfortunately you're in the group that wants to do this, invite the company to have a more responsible approach than just letting it go and basically walking away from the community. Dismantling all the work the Ishpeming Ski Club has put into the site.

TS: It is the best site in and around this area. It's close to the community. The winds and natural air currents are fantastic out there. It's protected by certain hillsides. It's in a valley, but it's not dead air. There's still nice air coming in and moving up. It's a fantastic area. I was going to make one more point when we were talking about companies donating. Years ago, to my understanding, the big money people were taxes a bit more heavier than they are now. And if they donated say a quarter million dollars to knock off ??? part of the way the tax base was, the cost that was saved was \$300,000 by giving \$250,000. So basically they're ahead because of the tax credits they got. My understanding is they don't save that now so that's why big businesses are not that willing to donate. They're donating now out of sincere concern rather than getting a tax break like they used to get. That's my understanding. The big money people could save big bucks by giving to non-profit organizations. They've already got the tax break now.

RM: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Something I didn't get into?

TS: Well you question whether ski jumping will survive. Do the kids want to ski jump? I think there is a move toward kids wanting to do extreme sports now. To me ski jumping is an extreme sport. So I think there's some interest there. Do kids want to discipline themselves, train, push themselves for a sport like this? I don't know. I think you'll find that a lot of the high school sports are not getting the numbers they used to get to turnout because kids are lazy. They have other interests, computers, snowmobiles, things they can go and do on a whim. They can go and do extreme sports on a whim. They don't take training. But ski jumping takes commitment, training, and it will hurt if you don't. So I personally think we could get the kids involved and that we could get the commitment of enough kids to make it work. But the volunteer base of the Ishpeming Ski Club is getting low and the people that have had energy have been spending all their time to fight for survival. They've not been able to put their time into kids. I think it's a fantastic sport and we have something to offer the kids today. I think a lot of kids get into trouble and most kids do things because they want to be noticed. If they don't fit in with basketball or football, they want to do something. Maybe they'll turn around for excitement and do something to be noticed. A club...a gang. So I think ski jumping could provide an out for some of these kids and keep them out of trouble and give them

the excitement they need plus they will be noticed. I think we have something to offer. I think we could develop a program that would be successful in this area. But too much energy has been spent just fighting for survival. The volunteers can only do so much, plus take care of their family and jobs.

RM: ??? (too quiet)

TS: That's why I'm still in the ski club. I was burnt out many years ago doing other things. President of the ski club, competing in tournaments, trying to ski myself. Now I'm basically involved in trying to groom the hills and keep the hills ready for the kids to ski. I'm not a people person. I can go up on that hill and work all day by myself. What do I accomplish? If nothing else I stay in shape. I don't have to pay to go to a gym. I'm out working with a shovel in the ski path to stay in shape. If nothing else to stay in shape. I own my own business and I've gained some respect, so it's probably helped my business.

RM: What is your business?

TS: I'm in the septic service. I pump them. I've been at that for 33 years. I think I'll probably retire in 2021. As you know my Dad worked til he was 74 as the County Treasurer. But you get burnt out. There's other people in the ski club that are taking over the management and those areas. So I don't have to manage people, which is a bonus. I can go on the hill and try and keep the hills in shape. It's good exercise. I still work with the people in the club. That's the reason I'm still there. I'm doing the things I like. That's all you can expect from a volunteer. Doing what they like to do. Some people like to manage people, be in charge, make decisions...not me.

RM: ??? and when you get done you actually see what you've accomplished.

TS: Yes. I've been in the area of teaching. I agree. Sometimes you don't know if you're accomplishing anything.

RM: ??? Years later you might find out. There's no immediate results.

TS: Except the pay check. That's the reward.

RM: Okay, well this sounds real good. You did a nice interview. Gave us good background. I thank you.