

Countdown to the Canadian Senior Championship - Burns Lake, March 9-14



By Mary Anderson

The countdown has started at Burns Lake for the 1989 Canadian Senior Championship.

The Omineca Ski Club is hosting this event and the club's committee are hard at work preparing for when skiers from across Canada will vie for the honour of being national champions.

As the Omineca Ski Club prepares for the big event, the members look back on a proud history of skiing that began on October 15, 1927, when the club's historian recorded that the idea of forming a ski club occurred to "an impromptu gathering of timber cruisers and trappers of Scandinavian majority".

Now, 62 years later, the club they formed is hosting its third national championship. In 1975, the Senior National Championships were at Burns Lake and in 1977 the Junior National Championship came to the community.

The club has produced a succession of outstanding competitors, beginning with Kaare Engstad who represented Canada at the 1932 Olympics at Lake Placid, and whose 16th place in the 50 km stood as the best Canadian placing in a 50 km World Cup, World Championships or Olympics until Pierre Harvey placed 10th at Oberstdorf, West Germany in 1986.

Engstad was one of a group of local racers who made the local ski tournaments exciting events. The skiing tradition thus established, provided the initial momentum for the interest that has propelled the club for over 60 years.

In 1952, the Canadian Championships were held at Grouse Mountain Vancouver and the Omineca Ski Club sent a strong team, which brought back several medals. Niilo Itkonen, a recent immigrant from Finland, won the senior men's 18 km. while Alford Eakin, very much a hometown boy, placed first in the junior boys' competition. Those were the days of 4-way competition, and Eakin also placed second in slalom and third in giant slalom, while his teammate Doug Rowland took a third in the downhill and of course also competed in the cross country.

The following year, Eakin placed second in the Canadian Cross Country Championships in Sudbury.

In more recent times, Esther Miller has been the club's best known racer. Esther was a national team member for eight years and competed in many international events including the European Junior Championship and two Olympic Games.

Another well known skier from the Omineca Club was Marvin Strimbold who won the Shell Cup as the overall best skier at the Junior National Championships at home in Burns Lake in 1977 and repeated the feat in 1980 at Whitehorse.

Lana Lindaas, granddaughter of Karl Lindaas who raced for the club in the 1920s and 1930s, took the Shell Cup as the overall best at the Canadian Junior Championships in 1982. In 1983 Lana took a silver in the nationals, which was the fourth year in a row she had won a national championship medal.

Chris Paulson was a silver medalist at

the 1983 Junior Championship and at the 1987 Juniors he was the gold medalist in the 15 km freestyle Junior Men's competition.

For a decade about half of the B.C. Team's junior members were from the Omineca Ski Club. Some of these skiers were Shelley and Tammy Lindaas, Wanda and Lori Hallgren, Joan Mackay, Paul and Max Strimbold, Ricky Paulson, Lance Hazelton, Roni Haggarty, and Linda Worthing who also skied for B.C. at the Canada Winter Games in 1973.

The club dominated at the junior and younger level for a number of years. It can be justifiably argued that the excellence of the Burns Lake teams was the catalyst that started the fire that has resulted in the phenomenal growth of skiing in B.C. in the last five years or so.

B.C. has always had strong racers like Ed Day, Reino Keski-Salmi, Doug Gudwer, Rolf Pettersen, who won more Canadian Championships than anyone on record. They formed a large part of Canada's National Team and competed internationally for Canada.

With his dedication to coaching and the improvement of Canadian performance, Bjorger Pettersen fired the growth of high quality racing in Canada in the 1960s and '70s.

At the 1977 Canadian Junior Championship at Burns Lake, B.C. won more medals than at any time until the 1988 nationals in 100 Mile House.

B.C. has a proud history of excellence in skiing and Burns Lake's Omineca Ski Club has been a substantial part of it. The Canadian Senior Championships has a fitting home for 1989.