

How Ski For Youth Started

Ski For Youth can be largely attributed to Russell “Spike” Berg, who along with Wausau Ski Club (now Rib Mountain Ski Club) members started teaching skiing to others in 1942 on the golf course at the American Legion. In the late 1940s Spike orchestrated the first classes of Ski For Youth on the slopes of Sylvan Hill. After Sylvan Hill converted to a tubing park, Spike successfully moved Ski For Youth to Granite Peak at Rib Mountain.

Spike was born in 1923 to Hans and Iola Berg in Wausau at his home on Harrison Blvd (now First Ave) near the hydroelectric power plant on the Wisconsin River. His father was a mogul of the skiing community in his own right. At a very young age Hans taught his son to ski on piles of snow in the yard and later taking him to Zastrow’s hill near where the Riverside pool is. They built twenty-foot jumps there on which they launched themselves off on five-foot pine skis. In those days ski jumping was more prevalent and downhill skiing was more like cross country skiing in that you skied back up the hill, side stepped the hill or hiked back up the hill. Sloan’s hill, present location of Wausau Insurance, was another location for ski jumping and skiing frequented by Spike. He and friends also used the riverbank near his home. Before the Civilian Conservation Corp began cutting trails (1935-1937) on Rib Mountain, Spike skied the apple orchard. The orchard was on an old homestead in the crease of Rib Mountain just west of the trails of Granite Peak. Foundations of some of the buildings are still present. Extreme skiers today have nothing over skiers of Spike’s day. As the story goes, he and friends skied behind a 1939 Buick on the river near Brokaw reaching speeds of 50-60mph. Bear in mind the skies of the day were wooden, some home made and most without steel edges. Spike placed 4th in a junior ski jump competition at Rib Mountain in 1936. A J bar was installed on Rib Mountain in 1938 and downhill skiing began to over take ski jumping. Wow! 50 cent rides, 75 cents for three and \$1 for all day. Also that year the Rib Mountain Ski Club sponsored the first slalom championship race. As a member Spike was intensely involved not only as a participant but also in organizing the event. He crashed twice but did finish the race. In addition to jumping, downhill and cross country skiing Spike was among the youngest and earliest to join the Ski Patrol. Not long after beginning to teach skiing to others the United States was drawn into WWII. Like many other young skiers Spike enlisted and then applied and was accepted into the new ski division of the Army, the famed 10th Mountain Division. Try skiing with a 100-pound rucksack on your back. He attained the rank of sergeant. In the mountains of Italy near Mt. Belvedere in 1945 a sniper wounded him. Check out the 10th Mountain display case in the Historic Chalet for more information about our local heroes. The skis on display above the fireplaces are from Spike’s vast collection of skis. Following his return home Spike immersed himself in the activities he loved – skiing, patrolling, teaching skiing and coaching ski racing. He became president of the Rib Mountain Ski Club from 1957- 1960. He became ski patrol section chief and was responsible for starting a ski patrol at Musky Mountain near Sayner, WI. where a day ski program was started for boy scouts to earn their merit badges. He and comrades firmly established Ski For Youth in the early 1950’s. Over the years annual attendance was in the hundreds.

Sadly, during the winter of 2007, a time Spike loved, he died. That was also the first ski season in many years that there was no Ski For Youth. His friends, many of who are former graduates of Ski For Youth now hope to carry forward this program in honor of his legacy. And when the time comes may you share the love of the sport and take our place.

FRIENDS OF SPIKE