

E Pluribus Skium

(Out of Many, One)

Canada Was the First Country Outside of Europe to Form a National Ski Instructors Association.



Courtesy Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele private collection

Hermann Gadner on the slopes of Mount Gabriel in 1945. An Austrian, Gadner started teaching skiing at Gray Rocks in 1934.

By Byron Rempel

From the 1930s to the 1940s a terrible war of ideologies and methods raged across the young nation of Canada. The battlefields were the slippery slopes of Quebec's Laurentian hills, where participants were threatened with bans if they switched sides and leaders were accused of being dictators. It was a war over style, and a great debate about which skiing technique should be taught.

Unregulated and largely unorganized until the 1920s, ski instruction in Canada was a free-for-all, and European "name pros" who made the voyage across the sea were able to set

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themselves up as the final authorities. By the 1930s, as refugees from the threat of real war in Europe arrived in ever-growing numbers, Canadian skiers were presented with a dizzying array of styles, tempted by each master with a breathless new message on the latest revolutionary technique.

There were the Swiss methods of exaggerated movements, and then the wide-stemmed steered turn of Hannes Schneider's Arlberg system. Grey Rocks instructor Hermann Gadner introduced his own reverse shoulder-drop technique, while Mario Gabriel brought a reverse Swiss approach. As Luggi Foeger



Emile Allais, flanked by Rhona and Rhoda Würtele, helped instruct the Canadian team at the 1948 Olympics. He did away with the snowplow in his instruction and championed a parallel technique.



Left to right: Harry Pangman, a friend, Jackrabbit Johannsen and Sterling Maxwell on Mont Tremblant in 1930.



Heinz von Allmen racing in the 1940s.

trumpeted the “Drift versus Lift” method, while other instructors squawked over the unfortunately named Berlin Squat, or argued about the scissor Christie, vorlage, tempo and Telemark turns. Emile Allais did away with the snowplow, brought his skis parallel and dove forward, introducing rotation with an exaggerated shoulder swing.

By the time twelve exasperated instructors met in the Laurentians to form the first Canadian Ski School in 1938, says Wilf Bernier, the co-organizer of that first course, “they had one thing in common: each one was convinced that he alone knew anything about teaching skiing.”

Out of that crowd of techniques and egos, could a consensus ever be reached? Eventually it would, but not until the world was at peace again.

Rough Beginnings

It began peacefully enough, with a Swiss ski instructor. In 1911, Emile Cochand left his native Switzerland with baggage containing luges, bobsleighs and one hundred pairs of thin and polished maplewood strips. He was headed for a job at a rustic lodge, owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway, near the popular resort village of Ste. Agathe des Monts in Quebec. He came to North America to teach Canadians to enjoy the winter, whether they liked it or not.

CP Rail’s ski instruction was a faddish hit in the backcountry Laurentian hills that year. The rigid boots, binding and skis struck such fear into most beginners’ hearts when they faced any descents that the most instructors could sometimes do was hold their hands. But the beginners were often wealthy businessmen or homesick European diplomats, and Cochand soon had plans to start his own lodge. By 1917 it was built, and the Chalet Cochand in Ste. Marguerite became North America’s first

resort offering a full ski school. It was so ahead of its time that it pre-dated any other school-resort by years; the first equivalent in the U.S. opened eighteen years later in 1929, with Katharine Peckett’s ski school in Franconia, New Hampshire. *(To read more about Emile Cochand and his long career as a Laurentian ski instructor and chalet owner, see the December 2009 and March 2010 issues.)*

For all that, Chalet Cochand was still a rustic cabin in the backwoods, even by Emile Cochand’s estimation. “It was just a little more luxurious than camping,” he said. Cochand had no idea what he had set in motion, nor of the coming battles and confusion that would reign in the Canadian hills.

The Name Pros Arrive

“It was the hotel owners who were the real impetus for ski instruction,” says Martin Jean, national program director for today’s Canadian Ski Instructors’ Association (CSIA). “They brought the Austrians out.” But by the 1930s, it could be argued that the boom in ski instruction in North America could be attributed to one man—a German-Austrian politician with an instantly recognizable moustache.

Besides Cochand’s organized resort, other basic instruction had been offered in Eastern Canada, always influenced by the Europeans. In 1910, Quebec organizations like the Montreal Ski Club and the McGill Ski Club held “Proficiency Tests” to evaluate skiers’ levels. Skiers had to make a straight run in good style, and then turn with Christiana and Telemark methods; the “winner” was the one who performed the maneuvers with “the greatest grace and finesse.” By 1920, Canadian skiing had grown enough to merit its own amateur organization, the Canadian Amateur Ski Association (CASA), which began producing an annual yearbook report. It divided ski areas into zones, with the Laurentian Zone the most active and important for years

to come. CASA was meant to regulate skiing, but regulations on instruction were still years away. Instructors followed their own methods and techniques, and what you learned with one teacher would almost inevitably be scorned by the next.

In 1932 a visiting ski team from England introduced the Arlberg technique during a newfangled slalom competition in Sainte-Marguerite; the McGill University Club quickly adopted it, and promptly won five races at the International Intercollegiate Championship at St. Moritz, Switzerland, the next year. When the Red Birds (1928) and the all-women's Penguin Ski Club (1932) began downhill instruction for their members, it was always with the ultimate goal of training racers for these new extreme sports. Few other people were crazy enough to head straight down hills still largely covered with trees, rocks and the occasional wolf.

American George Wheeler was willing to bet that attitudes would change. His Gray Rocks hotel in the Laurentians started to stay open in the winter: Every weekend, dedicated ski trains from Montreal now brought hordes of people up north. Despite their drawbacks, rope tows made it immensely easier to get atop a hill than climbing on sealskins; evolving ski techniques and equipment made it a little safer to get back down.

Like other hotel owners, by the 1930s Wheeler had hired some Europeans to teach downhill skiing. He found a German

who excelled at jumping, still one of the main attractions of skiing, and another German doctor who favoured the Berlin Squat, an ungainly version of the Arlberg method.

But something even uglier was happened in Europe: Adolf Hitler. Arlberg native Hannes Schneider had taught Austria's troops during World War I, but his anti-Nazi stance during the 1938 Anschluss got him thrown into prison. Schneider's right-hand man, Luggi Foeger, preferred the offers of North American hotel and resort owners desperate for instructors. Friedl Pfeifer, Rudi Matt, Otto Lang and Benno Rybizka followed. Soon Schneider was released and joined the exodus, too. New England and Quebec hotel owners welcomed them with eager arms. In the days before snowmaking, many pros preferred the reliable blizzards of Quebec.

Hawks and Eagles

It was no longer only rustic cabins in the Canadian backwoods that would greet the Europeans. In 1938, "Emperor" Joseph Ryan, an American millionaire profiting from his father's railroad fortune, opened the Mont Tremblant Resort. With his connections and wealth, he instantly transformed the remote Quebec hill into a playground for the rich and famous. Not coincidentally, he also made sure his ski school had the best instructors: With Schneider still in jail, Ryan lured his lieutenant

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Emile Allais, in his trademark beaver coat, with the winners of the 1947 Dominion Championships, left to right: Hector Sutherland, Rhoda and Rhona Wurtele, Pierre Jalbert, a young Lucille Wheeler, and Jack "Porky" Griffin. Wheeler, daughter of Gray Rocks owner George Wheeler, won Canada's first Olympic ski medal, a downhill bronze in 1956 at Cortina.



Luggi Foeger up to the new school in 1939. His clients included Robert F. Kennedy, who met his wife Ethel at the resort.

At neighboring Gray Rocks Inn, proceedings were more typically Canadian and understated. By 1939 Gray Rocks had hired its first Austrian, Hermann Gadner. A jaunty little man, rarely seen without his sports jacket, tie and Tyrolean hat on and off the slopes, Gadner would quietly become "the most influential teacher in Canadian skiing" at the time. He was only five foot eight, wrote William Weintraub in the *Montreal Gazette*, "with a wiry build, but could on occasion lift an injured skier to his shoulder and ski down three miles of Mont Tremblant to a first aid post." He headed what became known as the Snow Eagle Ski School, after an Austrian school, and taught the Austrian Arlberg method—adding his own focus, of course. His innovation was to shift the weight from one ski to the other on turns, and in an evolution echoing man's rise from apes, slowly brought skiers to a more upright position from the squat. It was enough, along with his dedication to continual practice, to propel his students to international heights. He insured that the famous Wurtele twins, Rhona and Rhoda, won almost every international contest they raced during the 1940s, including against most men. Reporters were understandably confused about what kind of magic method Gadner was imparting to the twins. "No magic at all," they said. "He just started us all over on the fundamentals. But this time we learned them correctly." Then he groomed a young Lucille Wheeler, daughter of the

Gray Rocks owner, towards Canada's first Olympic ski medal (a bronze in downhill at Cortina in 1956).

The Snow Eagle Ski School became a center of instruction in the area, and thus for most of eastern North America. Around it circled Hannes Schneider, Benno Rybizka, Luggi Foeger, Mario Gabriel and Hans Falkner, each with their own style agendas. Out in distant Quebec City there was another upstart: Fritz Loosli and his Ski Hawk Ski School, a disciple of Emile Allais.

Although the multiple new techniques confronting skiers every year must have been confusing, among instructors and resorts the differences led first to debates, followed by arguments and fights over the relative merits of the different styles. Laurentian Zone president Fred Urquhart threatened to revoke Association cards if racers dared compete at the upstart Parallel Ski Club at Domain d'Estérel (another Laurentian resort).

Things were clearly getting out of hand, and the scene looked set to scare away potential skiing customers. Who wanted to take skiing classes when you had to confront not only a wide range of techniques, but might be ostracized for choosing one? Worse, anyone could claim to be an instructor. And in the early years, says CSIA founding member Chris Gribbin, acing your instructor exam was simply a matter of "knowing the technical preference of your examiner."

Born of Necessity

Meanwhile, skiing was spreading across the nation. In 1936–37 there were 46 ski clubs across Canada, the majority of them in Quebec; by the next year there were 71. Standardized instruction was becoming imperative.

So in 1937 the Laurentian Zone of CASA formed the Canadian Ski School Committee, headed by William Ball, skiing pioneer Hermann “Jackrabbit” Johannsen, and Harry Pangman. Both Ball and Pangman had been on the 1936 Olympic team in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, the first time Alpine skiing was allowed (and where Emile Allais won a bronze in downhill). On the committee as advisor was Duke Dimitri of Leuchtenberg, who was teaching skiing in St. Sauveur. They resolved to begin by registering all instructors.

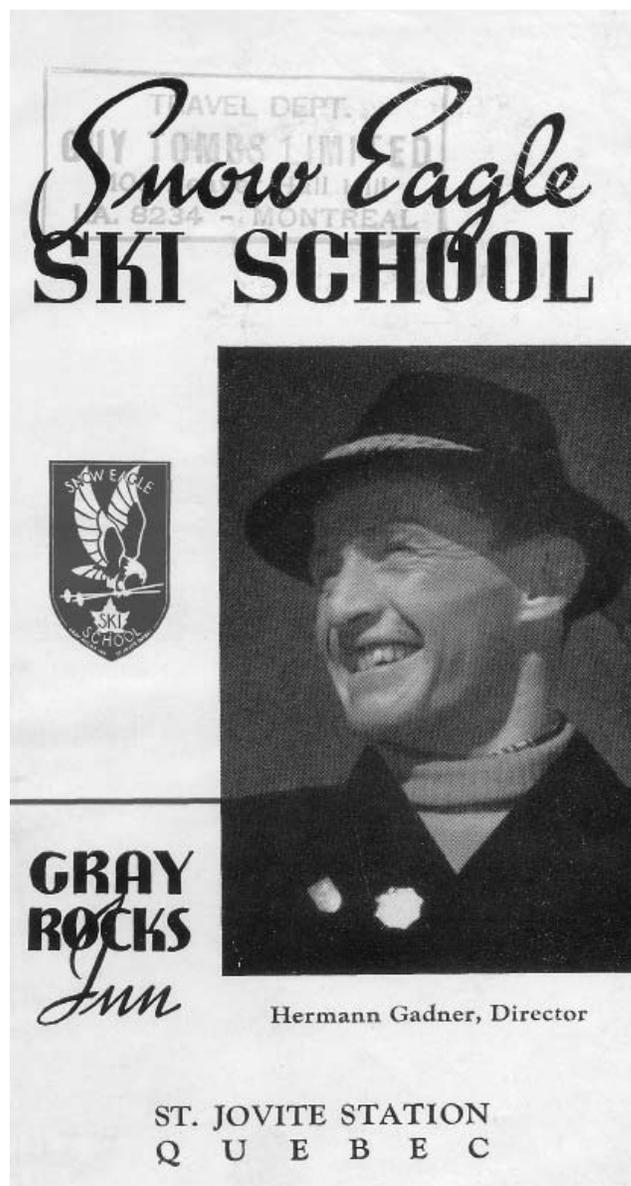
Things didn’t quite fall in place as planned, however. Trying to track down and register the disparate ski instructors throughout the Zone was a headache, as the CASA had no official hold on the instructors. Then they hit on a solution: Flush them out by letting ski instructors race in open competitions, then quickly register them and hand out certificates. At the same time, a little protectionism was in order: Immediate action was taken to limit the influx of instructors from the United States.

That led to the certification of six men, and subsequently the first certified Canadian Ski School was held in St. Sauveur, run by the Duke of Leuchtenberg and Luggi Foeger. In other centers “it was not found practical to hold schools,” notes the Canadian Yearbook. The Laurentian school would be the only one in the country for almost a decade.

The next year, the Committee hired a professional to run the organization: Twenty-five year old Heinz Von Allmen, an accredited Swiss ski teacher and Alpine champion, was persuaded to come to Canada and run a school at the Alpine Inn. Now Chief Examiner and technical advisor of the Canadian Ski School, Von Allmen began the difficult work of “developing a course embracing the best points of the Swiss, Austrian and American school technique and adapted particularly to the Laurentian type of country,” reported the Canadian Ski Yearbook. Candidates would take two courses, then serve two years as assistant instructors; they were then eligible to be tested as full-fledged instructors. Von Allmen was also to establish ski schools through the Laurentians, where instructors would have to pass tests annually. “Under this system in a few years the Laurentians will have a chain of ski schools with instructors equal to any in the world, and most important, all teaching the same routine and technique. This is something long looked forward to...”

By February of 1939, the Canadian Ski School had 14 certified instructors, and the Ski Instructor’s Alliance was born. Created to advise the School on all matters concerning instructors, and with Jack Miller, Heinz von Allmen, Hans Falkner, Hermann Gadner and the Duke of Leuchtenberg on the committee, they were also commissioned to put together the definitive Canadian Ski Manual. That “proved to be a more formidable undertaking than was first expected,” the Yearbook reported. It was put on hold. But the Alliance was nothing if not ambitious:

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It was the first instructor’s alliance outside of Europe; the U.S. wouldn’t have one until 1961.

Then the Alliance received some help from Emile Cochand’s son Louis, freshly returned from racing in Chamonix and attending a ski instructor’s course in Davos. The first Canadian to attend a European course, Louis had made sure to pack the manual, and once home translated it for the Alliance’s use. For his trouble, he was appointed the new director and chief examiner of the Canadian Ski School. It looked like the problem with diverging techniques might finally be solved for good.

All Quiet on the Northern Front

And then almost every instructor left the country. With war in Europe, skiing and instruction took a back seat to more vicious arguments. Louis Cochand went to fly with the Royal Canadian Air Force, and Luggi Foeger joined the 10th Moun-



Canada's first female instructor, Pat Paré, demonstrates the snowplow in February 1945.



Hannes Schneider and the "glamour pros" in the 1930s.

tain Division in 1942, leaving Benno Rybizka to take his position at Mont Tremblant. Many of the newly certified instructors joined the army or air force as well, including Victor Cousineau, Guy Normandin, Johnny Fripp and Chris Gribbin. Hermann Gadner, slightly older than the cadre of young professionals, stayed behind in Canada to act as director of the Canadian Ski School till 1945.

Yet by 1943 the Canadian Ski School and the Alliance, now re-christened the Canadian Ski Instructors Association (CSIA), still had the time and manpower to put together the first true instructor manual. It included all the latest European ski instruction, and its first aim was to "spread a suitable, uniform ski technique across Canada," CSIA president Louis dePassillé wrote in his introduction, wherein the instructor could use his "imagination and experience" to help him interpret the manual. Chief examiner Cochand urged all instructors to follow the manual as closely as possible, from which "there should develop a distinct technique adaptable not only to Downhill and Slalom, Cross Country Racing and Jumping but also to Touring, the type of skiing which gives the maximum of pleasure to the greatest amount of people."

While in many other areas during the war women took over what had previously been men's work, ski instruction remained stubbornly male. There was no Class A racing for women and no training programs, and they were completely barred from ski instruction. It took Quebec skier Pat Paré's spectacular wins at the Canadian Ski Championships in Banff in 1938, then her gold at Mont Tremblant in 1940, to catch the eye and imagination of Joe Ryan, who knew a good thing when he saw it; he promptly asked her to teach at his Lodge. Quebec women had only won the right to vote that year, and Ryan had to use his considerable influence to drag the Alliance kicking and screaming into the modern world. The Wurtele twins followed in her footsteps, and aced the Registered Ski Instructor course. But when they stepped up to get their RSI pins in 1943, they were

told by an official, "You realize we can never give this pin to ladies." The Wurteles went on to open their own ski school for young women in St. Sauveur more than a decade later, and were given honorary Level IV pins by the CSIA in 2008.

The Great Ski Debate

Like so many peacetime pursuits, the quest to create and put into effect a cohesive Canadian style was put on hold during the war. And the situation just got worse. Each year hostilities increased, just as they did overseas in the real war. As the battle progressed, two camps emerged in Canada: Gadner and Loosli, or Arlberg and Parallel.

By February of 1945, the editors of *Canadian Sport Monthly* had heard enough: "During the past four winters, skiers of this continent have heard a good deal about the Arlberg and Parallel ski teaching." Gadner's techniques, they summed up, dwelt on fundamentals good for any snow conditions, using time-honored Austrian techniques. Loosli claimed he could train anyone to ski in three days; the Canadian Ski School thought his methods a "poor imitation" of France's great FIS Champion, Emile Allais.

Western Skiing magazine encapsulated parallel skiing: "Emile Allais is here and all you Arlberg technicians beware. Allais' French Ski Method keeps your skis constantly parallel and no longer does your ski act as a steering wheel but the shifting of the body weight from one ski to another, while both skis remain parallel, is the answer to all your problems."

"*Canadian Sport Monthly* (like a lot of people) is still mildly curious," the editors wrote, "but a little tired of the whole squabble which should have run its course by now. To clear it up, once and for all, this magazine throws out a challenge to the two champions of these respective views." They offered a \$250 reward to the winner of a race between Gadner and Loosli down Mont Tremblant, a tremendous amount of money at the time. Loosli wasn't interested, but when the magazine reworked the invitation to simply demonstrate their styles, he sent his assistant Jack Miller in his stead.

In the ski lodge full of reporters, Miller "found himself waving a wildcat by the tail in the person of aggressive Hermann Gadner." Each shoved the other to prove their stance was no good, "and for a moment the air was charged with potential fisticuffs," but Gadner diffused arguments by bringing along his protégés: the dark-eyed Ethel Beauvais and child prodigy Lucille Wheeler showed their stuff on the slopes. Gadner was not averse to publicity stunts himself.

"Nothing was decided at all," the *Montreal Gazette* reported, "but the hottest debate session on the sport's highly controversial 'parallel system' provided the winter's heartiest laughter for Laurentian experts and news writers alike..." In the end, everyone turned out to be good sports after all. Eventually, the result of the ski-technique controversy was that "the stuffed shirt attitude held by so many ski officials in the past is to be abandoned in favor of a more elastic policy."



Ski instructors, including the Würtele twins, arrive at the Mont Tremblant ski shop for training in 1941.

The Birth of the Elastic Ski Technique

Gadner never saw the resolution of the skiing war, nor World War II. The legendary chief examiner of the Canadian Ski School died in an avalanche in the Rockies only weeks later.

But with instructors back from the war, in December 1945 examiners Luggi Foeger, Benno Rybizka, Mario Gabriel, André Badeau, Clint Melville, Victor Cousineau and Hans Falkner met and stayed up all night hashing out what would be the basis for a Canadian technique. Their conclusion: the eighth Canadian Ski School would use a streamlined Arlberg technique, incorporating some of Emile Allais' parallel methods with some Swiss techniques as well. Technical Director Harvey Clifford summed up the resolution: "If a ski teaching organization comes up with a better idea than ours, we'll steal it."

It may not have sounded like a resounding decision, but what was most important was the elasticity promised earlier: no longer would style mavens stubbornly bash heads. They would keep open to new developments. We all know the end of the story: the logical method was Emile Allais' parallel skiing—with some tweaking, of course.

While Allais himself eventually came to Quebec to teach at Valcartier Ski Lodge near Quebec City, and instructed the 1948 Canadian Olympic team, he soon moved on to Sun Valley in

Idaho, then California. But by then Canadian ski instruction, and skiing itself, had moved on as well, towards a unity and popularity never before imagined. The Ski School would travel to other centers outside of Quebec, and eventually in 1950 the first western ski school would open in Banff. The CSIA was incorporated in 1948 (by 2009, its membership had swelled to 23,500 members). The influx of returning soldiers tripled the number of applications for the Ski School. But the biggest shake-up was that, although respectful of the immense contribution the European "glamour pros" made setting up ski instruction in Canada, now "home-grown products" were anxious to take charge of their own affairs. It was hardly coincidence, since Canada had come into its own after proving its mettle in the war.

Réal Charette (who'd been a winter warfare instructor) became the first Canadian appointed director of a ski school, at Gadner's Snow Eagle School in Gray Rocks; RCAF hero Johnny Fripp landed the job at Mont Tremblant (eventually to be replaced by Ernie McCulloch, who years later would also be the first Canadian delegate to Interski in 1962). Louis Cochand headed the CSIA for the next eleven years. Montrealer Harvey Clifford snagged the pro job at Banff, and Roger Trottier and Clint Melville took director jobs as well. Finally, *Sport Monthly* assured skiers, "there would be More Skiing, Less Talk." *