

McGill vs. Dartmouth: A Storybook Rivalry

During the early days of skiing at Canada's McGill University, Dartmouth was the school to beat.

By Tom Peacock

McGill Surpasses Dartmouth Skiers," read the title of an article dispatched to the *Montreal Gazette's* editorial offices in early March 1935 from St. Sauveur, Quebec, in the Laurentian Mountains about 50 miles north of Montreal. It was written only two days into a three-day intercollegiate ski competition, but at this point in the much-talked-about rivalry between the two schools, the fact that McGill was on track to beat its American nemesis was big news.

Earlier that day, in blinding snow, on St. Sauveur's Hill 70, McGill had placed four men in the top seven of the downhill, held on Red Birds run, named after the McGill Red Birds Ski Club. McGill skier Jack Houghton tied for first with Dartmouth's Ted Hunter, but most surprising was the fact that Dartmouth's secret weapon, Dick Durrance, had finished third. "Houghton lunged through a haze of blowing snow to defeat the seemingly invincible American," Robert Stewart writes about that day in his book, *The Trail Breakers*, a history of the Red Birds.

McGill held onto a slim lead heading into the final day, but Dick Durrance was far from finished.

The next day, Durrance, who would go on to become one of the most celebrated skiers in American history, added to his earlier win in the slalom by winning the jumping on St. Sauveur's intermediate hill and finishing third in the nordic combined (cross-country and jumping). The Dartmouth team had once again swept past McGill.

"Durrance, the Dartmouth demon, wonder skier, or what have you, proved himself the most outstanding all-round skier on the continent in last week's meet," proclaimed the *McGill Daily*, the student newspaper, with a hint of bitterness.

Relay Beginnings

In 1914 the McGill Outing Club invited skiers from the Dartmouth Outing Club to a meet featuring a four-mile relay ski race in the Laurentians. The more experienced Canadian skiers dominated the event. A year later, Dartmouth held its own meet at its annual Winter Carnival, the first international intercollegiate ski competition in the U.S., inviting both McGill and the University of New Hampshire to compete.

The Dartmouth men were well prepared, handily winning the ski events, which included a 10-mile cross-country relay, 100-yard and 220-yard cross-country dashes, and jumping. "Their success was assured when they out-pointed McGill



McGill's Jim Houghton cranks it up in slalom at St. Sauveur, Quebec, in 1932, winning over the "seemingly invincible American," Dartmouth's Dick Durrance.

in jumping on style points using rules from the Montreal Ski Club," writes Douglas C. Leitch in *Passion for Skiing*, a book about the history of skiing at Dartmouth. Thus was born the fierce rivalry between two great skiing universities.

Throughout the 1920s, the overall carnival titles included points earned in skiing events, skating and snowshoe races, but as far as the carnival goers were concerned, ski jumping, the final competition, was the main event. The jumping portion at the 1922 McGill Carnival was particularly exciting, as it featured a tandem somersault demonstration by two jumpers from Dartmouth, Richard Bowler and Harold Bishop. "The two shot over the jump side by side, turned over in a mid-air somersault simultaneously, whirling their heavy skis through a complete circle, and landed on their skis 60 or 70 feet down the slope," reported the *McGill Daily*.

Later, during the actual jumping contest, a small black spaniel planted itself in the track just before the take-off when McGill skier Art Gravel was just about to soar into the air. "His ski hit the dog, but luckily he did not swerve far off the track," the *McGill Daily* reported. Another McGill skier, Eddie Sherrard, won the jumping event, but the Dartmouth skiers won the overall championship.

In 1924, points for the annual inter-collegiate championships were spread over the Dartmouth and McGill carnivals. Dartmouth was first. In the final contest at McGill, Dartmouth came into the weekend with a 19-point lead. But during the first three events of the meet, held in gale-force winds, McGill reduced the lead to just two points.

The final day of the meet was the ski proficiency contest. First introduced at the Dartmouth Carnival in 1916, it was a chance for skiers to demonstrate their ability to perform turns. McGill

skiers bested their opponents, demonstrating exceptional left and right Christiana turns and telemark turns. Dartmouth held onto a slim half-point lead with only the jumping contest, held on Montreal's Côte-des-Neiges Hill, remaining.

"The fine day brought out a large crowd of spectators, who gave unstinted applause to the fine performances made," the *McGill Daily* reported. "McGill's Leonard Lehan was by far the best performer among the collegians, giving three fine exhibitions of grace and long-distance jumping in his three trials." Lehan and McGill's Art Gravel finished first and second in the jumps, and McGill, in an amazing comeback, won the championship.

The McGill winter sports carnival, held in February 1932, saw a record 40 entrants in the slalom. One of McGill's strongest skiers of the time, Frank Campbell, took first place, followed by another McGill racer, George Jost, who the following year would become the first Canadian to win a major race in Europe when he captured the famous Arlberg-Kandahar downhill. McGill's Bill Ball finished third in the jumping, and another Canadian skier from Ottawa University, Jacques Landry, finished first. Dartmouth won the event, thanks in large part to the performances of Tommy Mann, who finished second in the cross-country event, fourth in the slalom, and third in the downhill.

The 1932 McGill Winter Carnival, most carnivals agreed, was the best yet. "The decisions were popular throughout the meeting and resulted in an air of good sportsmanship being maintained throughout," wrote *Montreal Gazette* reporter W. J. Morrison. Credit for organizing the Montreal event went to Bill Thompson, a McGill graduate who was then governor of the Canadian division of the Intercollegiate Winter Sports Union. Thompson was also a founding member of the Red Birds Ski Club, established in 1928 by a group of McGill graduates to support the development of competitive skiing at the university.

Quebec Kandahar Launched

By the 1930s, the Red Birds had established a base of operations in the Laurentians, a short distance from Hill 70. In 1931, as alpine events were proving more popular, the club organized the first running of the Quebec Kandahar, a combined slalom and downhill event, which included an exceptionally challenging race down the face of Mont Tremblant. It was the first race organized outside of Europe modeled on the Arlberg-Kandahar, the brainchild of Britain's Sir Arnold Lunn and Austria's Hannes Schneider. George Jost came in third, but he finished first in the slalom and was declared combined winner.

By the mid-1930s, advances in equipment and the arrival of ski lifts brought downhill and slalom to the fore. Rope tows may have angered purists, but they allowed college skiers to

hone their technique for slalom and downhill faster than they could when they had to climb for their turns. McGill skiers were running the gates beside the rope tow on the famous Hill 70 in St. Sauveur dozens of times a day, working on their slalom technique.

The Red Birds' enthusiasm for skiing and their competitive spirit was turning McGill into a skiing powerhouse. Meanwhile, the Dartmouth Outing Club was developing a program that was attracting some of the best young skiers in North America. In 1934, due to the growing popularity of the sport, the two schools decided to do away with the existing winter sports tournament format, which included points for snowshoeing and skating events, and replace it with an intercollegiate ski union devoted to alpine skiing, cross-country, and jumping. Twenty-one Canadian and American teams joined, including



The start in 1914. McGill had invited Dartmouth's skiers to compete in a four-mile relay race in the Laurentians. The more experienced Canadians dominated the event. A year later—and in years to follow—the story would be different.

the University of Montreal, University of Ottawa, Williams College, University of New Hampshire, Middlebury College, and 14 other northeastern American colleges. Bolstered by their recent trip to Europe, the McGill skiers looked forward to a new era of college dominance.

Unfortunately, events would not unfold as they hoped. McGill skiers finished fourth in the Dartmouth meet that year, and third in an all-Canadian college meet. University skiers from Ottawa, including Edwin Connolly, who skied for Queens University, Ted Burpee from the University of Toronto, and Bud Clark, who skied for the now-defunct St. Patrick's College, trounced the stunned McGill skiers. For McGill's skiers, though, the threat from the intrepid new arrivals on the ski scene from Ontario paled in comparison to the appearance of Dartmouth's latest superstar, Dick Durrance.

Durrance's stunning overall performance in the Intercollegiate Ski Union meet of 1935 at St. Sauveur earned Dartmouth first place over McGill, which finished second. The next year,



Dick Durrance—Dartmouth's "secret weapon." His incredible talents, developed while living and racing in Europe, continued to earn Dartmouth top honors.

Durrance's incredible skiing continued to earn his school top honors, frustrating the McGill skiers. But the Canadian school's new crop of skiers finished the season with some impressive results. Bob Johannsen, the son of the legendary "Jackrabbit" Johannsen, was proving himself as one to watch. He finished first in the jumping, second in the combined and second in the downhill and cross-country races at the Dartmouth Carnival meet. Selden Hannah, former captain of the Dartmouth team, had transferred to McGill for medical school. He finished first in cross-country. But the Red Birds' triumph in cross-country was not enough to earn them the coveted carnival title. Dartmouth won again, despite the fact that Durrance didn't even compete; he had already left for the Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

Ball Named Red Birds Coach

McGill grad Bill Ball also competed in the Olympics and FIS World Championships in 1936. Upon his return, he was pressed into service as McGill's coach. Something had to be done about the Americans' stranglehold on college skiing. The hope was that Ball's European and Olympic experience, and his understanding of the latest alpine techniques, would give the school a chance of beating its longtime rivals.

At Dartmouth's annual carnival in 1937, Johannsen came in first in jumping for the second year in a row, but again it wasn't enough to defeat the reigning champions. The Dartmouth team, aided by the Chivers brothers, Warren and Howard, put in a stellar performance overall. But it was Durrance who was the talk of Hanover. He handily won both the downhill and the slalom.

"Durrance, skiing beautifully, came twisting down the course on his first run, swaying and swinging under such control that the spectators forgot the packed quality of the snow he was skiing on," gushed the *New York Times*.

The young McGill skiers soldiered on. Ball increased the ski team's training, and helped the racers learn the "tempo"

turn—a nascent parallel turn perfected by Durrance during his early years skiing in Europe. Ball devoted whatever time he could around his regular job as a chemical engineer to coaching the McGill team. Meanwhile, Dartmouth's full-time European coach, Walter Prager, who was also the first world champion in downhill skiing, was dedicating all of his time and energy to putting Dartmouth skiers at the top of the rankings.

Ski Clubs Catch On

In 1937, skiing was enjoying unprecedented popularity. Rope tows were popping up everywhere, clubs were forming, and young people were joining the skiing ranks in droves. The annual Dartmouth Carnival in 1937 attracted 15,000 people to watch the slalom race. As a result of all the attention surrounding the sport, ski racing was becoming a lot more competitive. "The old

devil-may-care approach to skiing was gone," wrote Robert Stewart in *Trail Breakers*. That said, the Canadian skiers and their American hosts continued to live it up on their long weekends at the riotous Winter Carnivals in New England.

By 1939, Ball had left Montreal, and Jost had replaced him as McGill's coach. That year, McGill finally triumphed over Dartmouth, winning the coveted Harding trophy at the annual college meet in Lake Placid, New York. As tradition dictated, jumping was the final event on the calendar, and McGill's Bob Johannsen dominated the field.

It was the first time in 18 years that McGill had won the New Year's College Week meet in Lake Placid. Was the performance of Johannsen and his teammates a harbinger of things to come? Not exactly. A month later, Dartmouth regained first place in Eastern college skiing at its own carnival meet.

The traditional rivalry persisted throughout World War II, but the official McGill Ski Team had been transformed into the McGill Reserve Training Battalion Team. The question that had been bandied about, of whether the ski team should have a full-time coach if it ever wanted to beat Dartmouth, was put on the back burner. The results of ski races were not a priority. Nevertheless, the skiers at McGill continued to compete for their school as individuals, and after the war the team quickly reformed.

Wartime Vets Return

The crack team of McGill skiers that showed up for the 1946 Dartmouth Winter Carnival was coached by none other than former Red Bird Harry Pangman. Hope that McGill would finally triumph over its rivals was thin, but the skiers themselves were optimistic. Many on the team were returning from active duty overseas. Flying planes and piloting ships doesn't leave much time for skiing, but what could be more fun than heading down to Dartmouth to face their traditional rivals and live it up among the throngs of revelers? Ten schools showed up to compete, including a team from Denver University.

The 36th edition of the Dartmouth Winter Carnival was every bit as exciting as those held before the war, with thousands of visitors pouring into Hanover to watch the competition, marvel at the ice sculptures, and revel in the festive atmosphere.

Among the most anticipated visitors to the college, which was not co-ed at the time, were hundreds of girls from New York, Boston, and elsewhere in New England who traveled to Hanover to meet up with boyfriends or blind dates.

'Mardi Gras of the North'

"Throughout this otherwise quiet little New England town, the Mardi Gras of the North was off to a flying start," wrote *Montreal Gazette* reporter Bill Weintraub. It certainly was for the McGill skiers, who captured the first event of the weekend, the downhill, putting them in second place behind Denver. McGill's Don Staniforth finished second behind Dartmouth's Malcolm McLane, but with Staniforth's teammate Art Bruneau finishing in fifth, McGill won the event.

Unfortunately, the Canadians didn't fare so well in the slalom. Staniforth was the top McGill skier, finishing in eighth place. That left McGill well behind Dartmouth and Denver in the standings heading into the final day of the meet. Things did not look good for the Canadians.

On Sunday, February 10, 1946, McGill skier Kaare Olsen, fresh out of the Canadian Navy, got his team off to a good start with a first-place finish in the eight-mile cross-country event. Staniforth and Bob Tilden finished fourth and fifth, and suddenly McGill was back in the running. McGill was favored in jumping; would they be able to pull off an upset win?

Frank Elkins, reporting for the *New York Times*, wrote that the jumping on the final day of the 1946 Dartmouth Winter Carnival was "the best seen in college circles for some time." McGill skier John Foster, who was one of the top schoolboy skiers in Eastern Canada before joining the U.S. Army, led the pack with two steady flights of 115 feet. His weren't the longest jumps of the day, but he was the most consistent over two jumps. Olsen finished fourth and Tilden fifth. At the end of the day, in front of a crowd of 3,500, it was announced that the Canadian skiers had won the Dartmouth Winter Carnival meet for the first time since 1921.

"Little short of astounded at McGill's victory, observers attribute it to the steady, teamwork brand of skiing developed by coach Pangman," Bill Weintraub wrote in the *Montreal Gazette*. Indeed, though they achieved individual victories on the final day of competition, it was the consistent overall performance of the six-man team—Bob Tilden, Don Staniforth, Art Bruneau, John Foster, Kaare Olsen, Bob Walby, and team manager Bob Everson—that won it for McGill.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Canadian college skiing became more organized. McGill began competing in regular meets against Quebec City's Laval University, the University of New Brunswick, Queens University, the University

of Montreal, and Loyola University. McGill's new intermediate team won the first-ever Canadian Interuniversity Athletics Union (CIAU) ski meet in 1947. Meanwhile, the American teams, working under top-flight professional coaches, were only getting stronger.

"Dartmouth and Middlebury, and to a degree the University of New Hampshire, were a step above by that time," remembers Red Bird Keith Ham, who joined the McGill ski team in 1951. "We'd place favorably, but by that time they had people who'd come particularly to Dartmouth to ski, some Europeans even."

Dartmouth had also managed to attract some of the best skiers from the Montreal area, including Keith Ham's friend Peter Kirby, who would later serve on the gold medal winning Canadian bobsled team at the 1964 Winter Olympics. Another Canadian, Tom Corcoran, from Ste. Jovite, Quebec, won the slalom for Dartmouth at the Hanover school's winter carnival in 1954.

"It was a quantum leap from the CIAU to the Eastern (Inter-collegiate) Ski Association," remembers Ham, a frequent winner of the Ski Meister events, awarded to the top finisher in all four events: slalom, downhill, cross-country, and jumping.

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Middlebury had begun to replace McGill as Dartmouth's main rival in skiing. In 1958, Dartmouth skiers won their carnival for the seventh straight year. Over the next three years, Middlebury won the Dartmouth Carnival title. McGill nevertheless did manage to take the skiing crown at its own winter carnival in 1960, besting Dartmouth for the last time. The previous year, the McGill women's team had also swept the skiing events at the school's winter carnival.

The traditional rivalry was winding down. Two schools that had pushed each other to achieve skiing excellence, that had hosted each other for half a century as opponents and friends, had now begun focusing their energy on winning domestic competitions in both the CIAU in Canada and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the States.

While Dartmouth continued to give its competitive skiers major support, the same couldn't be said for McGill, even though with support from the Red Birds, McGill dominated the CIAU during the 1950s.

For more than five decades, the competition between McGill and Dartmouth created memories that would last a lifetime, and nurtured a passion for skiing that would spark the sport's development over generations. And, says Ham, it was a lot of fun for those involved.

"If you were doing that circuit, I don't think your studies were one of your prime concerns," Ham remembers. "People liked to win, but it wasn't no-holds barred, winning at all costs. Everyone enjoyed a grand old time." *