

OLYMPIC HISTORY » CANADA'S SKIING PIONEERS



Rhona Wurtele Gillis, left, and Rhoda Wurtele Eaves made their first ski jump at age 11, on a dare from their older brother. IAN BARRETT FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Twin trailblazers faced an uphill battle

Skiing sisters paved the way for female athletes in a man's world

BY PATRICK BRETHOUR

It was a blustery Montreal winter day three-quarters of a century ago when Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele's older brother made the mistake of challenging his twin kid sisters to jump down the side of Mont Royal.

Just 11 years old, the twins didn't hesitate for a second; girls could do anything boys could do. "We said, we're going off right now, and we did," Rhoda (now Rhoda Wurtele Eaves) recalled in an interview this week, her sister Rhona Wurtele Gillis by her side.

The pair climbed up a rickety scaffolding, swaying in the wind, their skis strapped to their back. "You could hear it creaking as you went up," Mrs. Gillis said. As they waited at the top, they peered down — and could see the headstones of Mont Royal cemetery, adding to the chill of the day.

There were no mishaps that day, only the thrill of the rush down the slope, and the knowledge that an older brother's feat had been matched. There was also a scolding from their mother. "She said, 'Ladies don't do this,'" Mrs. Eaves said.

The girls didn't heed that advice, going on to jump for years, as well as excel at downhill skiing, slalom and a slew of other outdoor sports, competing in the 1948 and 1952 Winter Olympics. Their exploits are catalogued in the newly released *No Limits: The Amazing Life Story of Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele, Canada's Olympian*

Skiing Pioneers.

But never in ski jumping. Olympic ski jumping was just nine years old when the girls made their debut, and women weren't allowed to compete in the event at the Games. They still aren't, an exclusion that has become the spark for an increasingly public debate between the International Olympic Committee and a small group of teenaged female athletes from Calgary.

That windy day in Montreal came flooding back this week, as the 85-year-old sisters watched the TV coverage of the latest generation of women ski jumpers zooming down the slopes, this time at the newly constructed Olympic venue in British Columbia's Callaghan Valley. "It sort of brought back the memories of how you go down this big chute and then way up in the air," said Mrs. Gillis.

But other memories returned as well, memories of the casual sexism that permeated the sports world. By 1943, the twins, then in their early 20s, had worked hard to rise within the Ski Instructors Alliance, and were on the cusp of achieving the fourth and top level, which would allow them to work as professional instructors — symbolized by an official pin.

Days before the final exam, a male friend took them aside and gave them some advice. "Well, girls," he said. "You did well, but we will never give one of those pins to a woman."

The 65-year-old memory clearly still rankles Mrs. Eaves, although her sister shrugs off the slight. "I didn't mind too much," Mrs. Gillis said.

There is an equally mixed verdict on the plight of today's women ski jumpers. Neither Mrs. Gillis nor Mrs. Eaves believes that the human-rights lawsuit launched by the athletes is the proper route into the Games, but they feel just as strongly that the women should get more funding to hone their skills. And they are delighted to be able to see a new generation ski down the path they carved.

Neither talk about their careers in political terms, but it's clear that they were trailblazers, both on and off mountain slopes. In the early 1960s, they founded the Twinski Club, aimed at introducing women in the Montreal area to skiing. The twins had been teaching basic skiing lessons to children in Montreal parks, and noticed that the mothers didn't join in the fun.

"The mothers were waiting in the cars, and we thought, 'Why aren't they skiing?'" Mrs. Eaves said.

"We thought we should get them away from the sink, and out into the fresh air," Mrs. Gillis said.

That they did, with trips to slopes in Western Canada and Europe. The club, now entering its fifth decade, meets next Wednesday. The twins, now in their ninth decade, will be there.