

Interview with Don Hurst

November 12, 2001

Harvey, MI

Ishpeming Ski Club

Interviewer:

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INT: I'm sorry to do an interview on such a short notice.

DH: No problem. I'm always happy to talk about skiing.

INT: Can you state your birthdate please?

DH: June 12, 1931. A long time ago.

INT: Your address up here is 100 Forest Road Marquette. Your birth day?

DH: I was born in St. Luke's Hospital in Marquette. The building is still there on Hubbard Court and College. The oldest part of the hospital, it's still there.

INT: Before we get to skiing, I'd like to ask you about your years at University of Michigan. Why did you pick that particular university and your major?

DH: I guess the main reason I went there is because I got an alumni scholarship to go to college and it was to the University of Michigan. Since then I've been very grateful that I went because I have tremendous admiration for the University of Michigan. It's evident by my ??? down there.

INT: What years did you go to the university?

DH: First I graduated from John D. Pierce High School here in Marquette in 1949. Then that fall I went to the University of Michigan. I got my first degree in 1953, 4 years later. That was in physical education. The reason I was interested in physical education is I grew up with sports my whole life. My dad was a coach at Northern Michigan University and John D. Pierce High School for 36 years. My mother did some coaching when she got out of college. My sister was a physical education major. She married a coach. I guess it was in my blood. My senior year I had enough credits to get my degree in physical education but changed my minor. I thought maybe I'd like to try dentistry because I always like doing things with my hands. Wood carving, soap carving, things like that as a kid. So I applied to dental school. Everything you took for physical education as far as courses didn't apply because it was anatomy and physiology and biochemistry and all that. Except English, chemistry, and physics. I took another year and got two courses of chemistry and two courses of physics. I still didn't go to dental school because I got drafted into the army at that time for two years. That was toward the end of the Korean War. After two years in the army I came back and they held my application to dental school for two years and let me go to dental school when I got back

in '56. From '56 to '60 I went to dental school at the University of Michigan. Then when I graduated I stayed another year as an instructor in dental school for one year. After which time I decided I couldn't afford to be a teacher. So I decided I better go out on my own and set up my own practice. I came back home to Marquette and set up my practice in 1961. I practiced until 1992. 33 years total in dentistry before I retired.

INT: You only practiced here?

DH: In Marquette.

INT: How did you get involved in the Ishpeming Ski Club, or even skiing in general?

DH: Well, at age 3 is when I started skiing. We lived on College Avenue, just a couple blocks from the campus of Northern. We lived very close to the hospital. It is no longer there. It was by the blood donor center, across from the parking lot, but they moved our house and our neighbor's house side by side out to the street and to north Marquette. The hospital bought the house, then somebody else bought the house and the hospital moved it. They picked them up and moved them by truck, down College Avenue and out Presque Isle, it was quite a thing. We lived at the end of the street. College Avenue ended at our house. In fact the snow plow turned around in our drive way. But we were almost out in the country. I just started skiing because we had all that open space beside us. Mom and Dad encouraged it. My dad was born and raised in Tennessee before he came up here. I just loved to be out skiing. It's a wonderful thing to do as a kid. In those days we found lots of things to do. We didn't need to have computers and television and all that stuff. We found things to do that were very enjoyable and healthy. By age 6 I was ski jumping. At age 6 I jumped in my first ski jumping tournament in South Marquette at a place called Chipmunk Bluff.

INT: Was that actually normal to start ski jumping at age 6?

DH: I was one of the youngest, but there were other kids between 6 and 10 jumping that day. In those days there were little ski jumps. Any neighborhood that had a hill of any kind had a ski jump on it. Chipmunk Bluff happened to be one of the popular ones. It was down close to an area called Superior Hills, which is now all houses. That was a very popular skiing area in Marquette in those days. We had ski areas and we would climb to the top of them. It was where the big water tower is by south Marquette, and ski down the other side of it. Of course there were no ski tows or ??? or anything. We were just skiing in deep snow all the time. Finally when my dad became City Recreational Director in addition to being a coach at Northern, while he was Recreation Director they put in a ski tow. We'd get down there and instead of taking two or three rides down the hill because it would take all afternoon to climb up the hill 3 times. We'd just get on the ski tow and ride up to the top and ride down the trail. It worked it's way into a track and down to the ski jump. We'd jump off and coast down to the bottom of the ski jump. You could get 25 rides in a day instead of 2 or 3. That was really a project. I took on ski jumping more and more actively as I got in high school. I continued to improve to the point that in my senior year I won the Junior Class at Suicide Hill, which was my first big

accomplishment in ski jumping. I won the Junior Class. I had a little bit of a complication because my dad was the basketball coach and I was on the basketball team at John D. Pierce. Ski jumping and basketball were in the same season. When it came down to the tournament, he didn't actually say I couldn't ski jump, but he said if I won anything I couldn't take any prizes. If I won I had to turn down what then I thought was a wonderful prize, an alligator skin portable radio.

INT: They put the skin on the radio?

DH: Probably. Like alligator shoes or hand bags or something. So I had to give that up, but I did get a medal at that show. That was 1949. By that fall I was in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan because I had to make a big decision. Do I want to continue to be a ski jumper and stick to all my ski jumping friends, some of whom were on the Olympic Team, or a college education was more important to me at this time. I had a confrontation with my parents. Education was more important, you go to school. So I gave up ski jumping in 1949, although I did come back for Christmas vacation in 1950 and at that time we had the Marquette Ski Club that ran ski jumping tournaments on a hill in south Marquette on the way to Marquette Mountain called Kirlan Hill. So I got my skis out. I hadn't jumped for a year. The day before the tournament I was practicing and I was trying a new style, putting my hands back along my sides. One of the young ski jumpers was doing it very successfully at the time. The only problem is I went right between my skis and landed right on my face. I knocked myself unconscious. Beat up my face. All I remember is somebody walking me off the side of the landing, putting me in a car and driving me home, getting sick on the way home. I walked in the front door and looked at my mom and she said you're going to the hospital. So we went to the hospital and they kept me there overnight because I had a severe concussion and I dislocated a cervical vertebrae in my neck. My doctor had done a little ski jumping in the past and I convinced him that I was okay to get out the next day and jump in the tournament. So I did. I jumped in the tournament and had a couple good jumps. But I was so weak I couldn't even stand up after the landing. I went back to Ann Arbor to school. Looking for something to do I went to the gymnasium and decided I wanted to be a gymnast. My coach looked at me with my face all beat up and I had a severe headache for 6 weeks. He said alright either you're going to be a ski jumper or a gymnast. Which one is it. I said again I guess education is more important, I will be a gymnast. That started my gymnastics career at the University of Michigan under my beloved coach Duke Loken. I was a gymnast for 4 years. A varsity gymnast. For 3 years I lettered. My senior year I was the captain of the gymnastics team. I was also a cheerleader for 4 years. Head cheerleader my senior year. All this time I was in the major field of physical education. Everything fit right in really well. I told you about giving up ski jumping for 16 years because I went to school and I went to the army and then I went back to dental school. Then I taught a year and then I came home.

INT: That was in...

DH: 1961. I started practicing in July of 1961 in Marquette. I got my practice going pretty well and still didn't do any ski jumping. Then I had a break up in a marriage in

1965. So in 1966 I started ski jumping again. By then I was over 32 years old. That put me in Veterans Class. 32 and over was Veterans Class at that time. They have a C class, B class, when you get to a certain age you have to be in the B class. If you get really good in B class you go to A class. Those are the ones that end up going to the Olympics and things. Then there's Veterans. I went from C class, I skipped B and A and went right to Veterans with a 16 year hiatus. 1966 was my first year of jumping so I had to learn everything all over again. The equipment had changed, style had changed, coaching had changed. By I was still as eager to learn as when I was 18 years old when I quit. But I was much smarter. I knew how to listen. So I learned pretty fast. By 1967 the next year, I jumped in the National Championships at Pine Mountain in Iron Mountain. I had the longest jump but I lost out a little bit on style. Billy Olsen, a guy from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, was National Veterans Champion for several years in a row. I out jumped him, but he got me in style and I lost by .4 of a point.

INT: Was it a shock?

DH: It was a shock that I did that well. But I was disappointed that I lost by .4 of a point. If I had jumped 2 feet further I might have picked up more distance points and I'd have beaten him. I think really what it was is he had such a big name that he tended to be a favorite of the judges, which later on worked the same way for me. I was the favorite of the judges after I was winning a lot. They kind of expect you to be good and they hate to give you a bad score unless you fall or something. That was 1967. I got second place that year. 1968 the National Championships were in Westby, Wisconsin. I didn't jump very well and I ended up getting 3rd place. 1969 the National Championships were in Bradelborough, Vermont. I was skiing the best that I ever skied and I won the National Championships. I jumped very well that day. I stood in the parking lot waiting for them to announce the National Championship results and when they announced my name the tears just flowed down my cheeks. I was so thrilled to be a national champion.

INT: Were you involved with the Ishpeming Ski Club at this time?

DH: I was jumping as a member of the Ishpeming Ski Club. When I came back in Veterans Class, now it's called Masters Class...and they lowered the age so they can get more people in that class. But when I started jumping again is when I became active in the Ishpeming Ski Club. I was the secretary for a while. I was the tournament chairman for a while, and I was jumping for them at that time. 1970 the National Championships were at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and 2 days before the National Championship I was practicing at Suicide Bowl and crashed and separated my shoulder. I wanted the National Championship so bad because I had been practicing for it. I went to Eau Claire anyway and took my number and went up and took a practice. I was on pain pills so heavy that I couldn't hardly function. I took one practice ride and it hurt so bad I knew I couldn't do it. I turned in my number. Chances are I could have one the National Championship that year too because of the way I was jumping compared to the other guys in the class. But that was alright because Coy Hill from Ishpeming won that year. Coy has always been a very good friend, good buddy. 1971 we went out to Durango, Colorado for the National Championship. I was fortunate enough to come home with my second National

Championship. That was an interesting tournament because the start was right next to a rock mountain wall and it was so warm that day everything was melting and rocks were falling off that wall when you were waiting for your turn. You were just happy to get on the trail and start down because then you wouldn't be hit by a rock. The landing was so soft that some guys took some awful falls. When they fell they just dug right in to that soft snow. But I was lucky. I managed to stay on my feet. So I won it. 1972 the National Championships were in Burlington, New Hampshire and we were jumping in a snow storm. One of my fellow competitors who was an Olympian from Canada beat me that day because he out jumped me on the second jump. So I took second that year.

INT: What was the distance you jumped that year?

DH: I think he beat me by 5 or 6 feet maybe. So that was kind of a disappointment, but that's the way it goes. Then in 1973, the National Championships were back here at Suicide Hill in Ishpeming. I didn't have any problems there. I won that. It was my third and last National Championship. The next weekend at Pine Mountain, I announced my retirement from ski jumping. I figured I had skied in 12 competitions that year. I had 9 first places, 2 seconds and a third, including a National Championship. I didn't think I could do any better so I might as well quit while I'm ahead. So that was my last competitive ski jumping on Suicide Hill. However 10 years later when I was 52 I was into cross country ski racing by then. Later in my ski jumping career I started cross country skiing to get into good physical condition for aerobic fitness so I could climb up the hill you're not out of breath and you have something left to jump with. I started cross country skiing and I was headed for Minneapolis for the Central Division Championship. That would have been 1983. I knew there was a ski jumping tournament over in St. Paul the same weekend. It wasn't a real big hill. I had jumped it before. So I thought I'd throw my ski jumping skis in there just for the fun of it. So I got down there on a Friday night. Went over to the hill with my skis. Some of my former ski jumping buddies were dressing the hill under the lights because they had just finished a junior tournament. Walt Cherry was there and I asked him if I could take a few jumps. He said no you can't because we're just finishing up getting ready for the North American Championships tomorrow. So, Walt can I jump on one of the little hills, because there were 3 or 4 different sized hills. He said yes go ahead. So I started for the first time in 10 years. They felt like railroad ties tied to my feet compared to my other skis because they were so heavy. But I started on the little jump and went 15 or 20 feet. I did that a half dozen times and then went to the next one and jumped 30 feet, then the next one 85 feet. I said well I guess I'm ready. The next morning I got up real early and went all the way across the city of Minneapolis from the cross country race trail, skied around that just to see what it looked like so I'd know for the next day. Then I drove all the way back to St. Paul, got my number and had a chance to take two practice jumps down the bigger hill. Each one got better than the one before. I got into the tournament competition and each one got better than the one before. I got second place in the 40 and over North American Championships that day. The next morning I got up and raced across the city of Minneapolis again. Raced in the cross country ski race in the rain, drove as fast as I could and I got there too late to take any practice run. I was just in time to put my number on and go up the scaffold. My next two jumps were better than any of the others.

I was North American Champion over 50. And I put my skis away and haven't jumped since.

INT: That was the top of the world.

DH: I said I was going to jump once every ten years. But I missed 1993 so I guess I'm not. I think I'm done.

INT: So do you continue cross country skiing?

DH: I've skied 3 times already this year. October 7th I was skiing when we had that first snowfall. Then I skied again at the end of October when we had a nice snowfall for two days. And now it's gone so I'm keeping my fingers crossed hoping in the next couple weeks we'll have some snow. Certainly by Thanksgiving I hope we do.

INT: What is your involvement in the Ishpeming Ski Club today?

DH: I don't have any involvement with them anymore. I got so involved with cross country skiing that there just wasn't enough time to do the cross country skiing things and the ski jumping things too. So I kind of backed away with my responsibilities and picked up more responsibilities with cross country skiing. I became real interested in racing cross country. So I skied 3,4 or 5 races every year competitively. I also was on the charter committee that started what is known as the Red Roof ??? Cross Country Ski Marathon. It started out going from Suicide Bowl in Ishpeming to Marquette at several different places over the years. Then it finally ended up at Blueberry Ridge out at the Crossroads. We'd take 1 or 2 laps around the 7 loops out there. I became the race director of that for about 7 or 8 years, and the sponsorship chairman for another 4 or 5 years. That kept me very busy. Doing that and skiing at the same time. Also, I became interested in Northern Michigan University's Ski Team. At that time they only had an Alpine Ski Team. They didn't have a Nordic Ski Team, which is cross country and jumping. So I talked to the athletic director and the alpine ski coach and convinced them that I should be a volunteer ski coach and start a Nordic ski team, the one that Sten Feldheim and is doing wonderfully well nation wide. That was my baby back in 1969 I started that. I became the assistant coach and then the co-head coach, and then the head coach for both Nordic and Alpine for about a year or so. So I'm very pleased that the program has done so well. There was a Nordic Ski Team way back in the 1950s because my wife Georgie was on it and she was a student at Northern. Then it dropped off and nothing came of the Nordic side for 15 or 20 years. It was time to get it started again because this location in upper Michigan is nice for cross country skiing. It's very popular with cross country skiers from all over the country. They know this area has the right kind of snow and the right kind of hills and so on. That now, no longer exists. We've turned it over to a group of younger people who are now the Superiorland Cross Country Ski Club. They're the ones responsible for the Noquemenon Ski Race, that has become so popular. It's in it's 4th year so far. They're expecting over 1200 skiers. The most we ever had in the Red Roof ??? is about 700, which is still a lot. We were a popular race, but now the Noquemenon group, the Superiorland Ski Club is a marvelous group of

people. Family oriented, youth oriented, and have all kinds of energy and doing all kinds of wonderful things for the skiing lifestyle. It's been a real great thing. I'm glad our Red Roof ??? philosophy, they've expanded on it exceedingly well.

INT: What is your happiest memory skiing in general that you cherish? Just one memory. I know there's several.

DH: There are individual personal incidents in my skiing career that have been outstanding like awards and things. But I think superceding all that is the fact that it epitomizes my philosophy of life, that people who are involved in cross country skiing and ski jumping, running, cross country running, are doing the kind of lifestyle that is absolutely the healthiest that it can be. So I'm a true believer in the benefits of exercise and I've always believed in it from the time I was a little kid. My Dad instilled that in me. If you want to be an athlete you can't drink, you can't smoke. You have to stay in shape. Never get out of shape. Those who believe in that basic philosophy turn out to be very healthy people. For the most part they're not self centered and egotistical. They're just out to have a good time and stay healthy. A healthy body breeds a healthy mind. Hopefully at age 70 I have 10 years to stay in competitive skiing. Now we ski in age groups so you don't have to ski against 30 year olds. You ski against other guys that are 70. That makes it fun. That's the beauty of cross country skiing, not so much ski jumping because there's not too many 70 year olds jumping, at least not in this country. In Europe some do. But in cross country skiing when I skied 58 race in Sweden a few years ago, I counted in the results at least 15 guys over 80 years old that skied 58 miles that day. So what I've been lately with my wife is going to Europe and skiing in a marathon race series called the World Loppit. So we ski in Sweden, Switzerland, Finland, Germany, Austria, those are wonderful experiences because there are thousands...15,000 people in that 58 mile, which is called a 90 kilometer race. 15,000 people started that race. So skiing over there is a different animal than it is here. People just love it. So that's why we go over there to ski. As long as we can keep doing that we'll keep doing it and hope for the best.

INT: I had a few other questions, but we've covered most of it during conversation.

DH: One thing I didn't talk about, when I was coaching the Nordic Ski Team at Northern, it's kind of a sad memory, but my wife and I were traveling in Norway in the summer of 1972 and stopped to visit a Norwegian ski jumper who used to come over here and jump in what was called the Foreign Skier Tour. So we stopped to visit him in Oslo. We had dinner there and he said would you like to go to a party. There was a party of ski jumpers and soccer players and so on. So we went to the party and sitting in a wheel chair was one of my American ski jumping friends, Randy Garrettson. He was a very good ski jumper, probably flirting with the Olympic Team at some time in his career. But he had some serious injuries. He injured his neck once and they told him never to ski jump again. So he was walking around doing okay. But I think it was at Levenworth, Washington when we were skiing in the National Championships he fell again and broke his neck again and ended up in a wheel chair. So I walk in to this party in Norway and there was Randy sitting there. I got talking to him and some of the other Norwegians and

I was coaching Northern's ski team at that time. We didn't have that many good cross country skiers and they said we know a kid that lives here in Norway that would like to go to the US for his education. His name is Bernn Ronstead. He stayed at my house here, ate at this table for a week before school started. He became my first foreign skier at Northern, the first of many over the next several years. Some from Norway and some from Finland. The same year I heard of a Finnish boy named Perrti Rehalla from Lati, Finland. He came over and started his career. He became an All American. He was a scholar. He got a special Master's Degree Study Scholarship. But Bernn was more of a ski jumper than a cross country skier. Perrti was a little of both. One day I had him down at the football field knowing he was a soccer player. I said you know what a football is. He said no so I went into the coach and asked to borrow a football. I got a Norwegian kid here that's an excellent soccer player. I want to introduce him to football. So I took him out and held the ball for him and he kicked it a mile through the goal post. He was kicking from 50 yards. The coach saw that and said I want him on our football team. So he got recruited and ended up setting some records on the football team here. He went to a National Championship and got beat out in the last minute or so. He came home and went to the North End Tavern with some of his buddies and got a little inebriated. He stepped out in front of a car and got killed. That was a sad day in my life. I still feel bad about it every time I think about it. But he was the beginning. Perrti followed along with several other Norwegians. I ran into Perrti last February. I went to Lati, Finland to ski in one of the world marathon races and to watch the world championships at the same time. I was watching the ski jumping and my friend that I was watching it with said did you see Perrti? I said no is he here? He said yes he's right down there, he left. Maybe he'll come back at night. They had postponed the ski jumping because it was too windy. So we went back to the same place at night and sure enough there he was. I hadn't seen Perrti in 30 years. It was so nice to see him again. You hang on to those relationships. That's one wonderful thing about skiing. You build such good and lasting friends. They're the same kind of people. They appreciate being healthy and able to keep the body moving.

INT: I like your interview. It's quite interesting. I learned a lot about skiing.