

Interview with Jack Bietala

Ski Hall of Fame

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Ishpeming, MI

Interviewer: Susan Hornbogen

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SH: Let's start out by having you tell us your birthdate

JB: I was born on April 28, 1935 here in Ishpeming.

SH: Your dad is...

JB: My Dad is Anselm, who was the oldest of the original flying Bietala's. My dad was the oldest, Leonard was next, followed by Walt, Paul, then Roy, and Ralph was the youngest.

SH: No girls?

JB: There was one girl in the family, Lila. She passed away about 3 years ago now.

SH: So my guess is that Dad had you out on the ski hill quite early?

JB: Yes. We started skiing, not only with my dad, my mom and dad both worked so I spent most of my childhood at my grandmother's. So I grew up with Ralph and Roy and Walt and the whole crew. Many people in town still mistake us for brothers. I don't even bother correcting them anymore. We started skiing early. I was about 4 years old when I started jumping. We had a ski hill in the yard and then as we grew a little older we started going to other hills around the neighborhood. We had 10-12 ski jumps just in the Cleveland location where I grew up alone. Just about every hill that would accommodate a ski jump had one on it. The kids built their own jumps. That's about all we did all winter. We started as soon as the snow came and kept it up until spring. Especially in that neighborhood there, I think every kid that grew up had a pair of skis. That's what we did for entertainment. Many of the neighborhoods had the same thing. They all had their own ski jumps and they varied in size from very tiny ones to little bigger ones. As you progressed you kept moving up the ladder to the bigger and bigger hills.

SH: So did you guys do things like...did you hear about the guys across the way they have a really good jump?

JB: Yes we did. That's right. We would often go to different neighborhoods and try out their jumps. It was a lot of fun. Every jump was different. Today ski jumps are built according to a prescribed design. They're all carefully engineered. All of the ski jumps are practically the same. When we were growing up every hill was different. It was funny because of the contour of the land, we didn't have earth moving equipment like

they do now. Whatever was there we used. Consequently every ski jump was a little different. I think that really made for good skiers too. We learned to ski on just about anything that was there. If you could handle what we had, you could just about handle anything.

SH: For your neighborhood jumps, did you guys build them?

JB: Yes. At that time the kids themselves built all the hills. Nowdays...it's a sign of changing times I guess as we progress here. It seems like even baseball, now everything is set up and there are specific programs. It seems like all the adults do all the planning and organizing. If you don't do that then the kids don't show up. When we were kids the kids just got together and we built the hills. The older kids helped the younger ones. It's a different ballgame nowdays. What I've noticed changing with the sport too, if you're going to pick a sport nowdays, you almost have to stick to one sport because it's a 12 month deal. When we were young we did whatever was in season. In the summer time we played baseball. We did it from morning till night. That's what we did. But now days in order to compete at the top level, if you're going to be the best ski jumper in the country or in the world, you have to just stick to skiing. They do it all year round now. They have plastic jumps so they jump all summer. The training is much more detailed and specific than what we had when we were kids. We just were competing in whatever sport was available at the time. We didn't even think of ski jumping until the snow come.

SH: Do you think the kids today are losing something?

JB: I think they do. Kids now, whether it be basketball or football or tennis or ski jumping, if you're going to compete at the top level you almost have to stick to that one sport because if you don't there's a hundred other kids that are and you just can't compete with them unless you do it on a 12 month basis. So consequently I don't think they have the fun that we had. We competed in whatever was available for that particular time of the year. We played baseball, basketball, football. When ski jumping came around that's what we did at that time in the winter.

SH: So you were born in 1935. So you would only have been 10 when the war ended. You wouldn't have had to worry about that.

JB: No I was not involved in World War II. I remember it very well, well because of all my uncles for instance. Roy and Ralph and my Dad and Leonard were all working in the mines at that time. They were in their 30s already. So they didn't have to go into the Service when the war broke out because the mining was very important to get steel to supply the necessary war materials. They didn't go in, but Walt and Leonard... I mean Walt, and Ralph, and Roy were in World War II. I remember those days very well. I remember when they came back from the war that was in '46. By that time I was like 11 years old and skiing a lot then. When they came back from the Service, that first winter they didn't work, all they did is ski. So I had fun skiing right along with them. Yes, I remember those days very well.

SH: So you went to school in Ishpeming.

JB: Yes I went to Ishpeming. I graduated from Ishpeming High School in 1953. Then I went to Northern for 2 years. While I was in college I ski jumped during the winter. I eventually transferred down to the University of Michigan where I went to dental school. I skied while I was in dental school too. I would come home during Christmas vacation and train as much as I could during that 2 or 3 week period. Then also between semesters, in January we got about 2 weeks off so I came home to train. In the meantime I would try to keep in shape just doing dry land training at school on the weekends. I was lucky because I had...Paul Jacobs was from Iron Mountain and he was a ski jumper and one of the Hill brothers, Earl lived in Detroit and he ski jumped. So on weekends they would pick me up in Ann Arbor and take me wherever the tournament was that weekend. So I got to ski quite a bit competitively while I was at the University of Michigan.

SH: So...I was doing some research and found an old one from 1955. Class B and you hit the record of 205 feet for this one.

JB: Let's see. This particular winner here, I was in Class B. Coy Hill was in Class A. I think we won 5 or 6 tournaments that particular year. I won Class B and Coy won Class A.

SH: So did you ever hit longer than 205 feet?

JB: Oh yes. I jumped about 305 feet. The ski flying hills, we didn't have ski flying hills where you can jump up to 500 until...that was right after I quit skiing. Like in Ironwood, they have a big ski flying hill in Ironwood down at Bessemer there. The biggest hills where I skied were like Pine Mountain, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Leavenworth, Washington were some of the bigger hills in the US at that time. You could jump just over 300 feet. That's about as far as I jumped.

SH: Did you make it to any of the Olympics?

JB: I was an alternate on the 1960 team in Squaw Valley. I was out there that winter. Then I made it to the 1980 Olympics as a marker during the ski jump. Distance markers. Ralph was out there at the time. He was working on the hill, keeping the hill in shape. Coy Hill was also. Rudy Maki and myself were distance markers for the landing.

SH: So does that mean you set the pace? Did you fly off and they mark you?

JB: When the skiers came over and landed we told them how far they went. They had distance markers about every meter up the hill so that you can look straight across. When the skier lands you pick out the spot where he landed and give the distance to the scorers.

SH: So all the flying Bietala's are your uncle's...were there any other generations that skied?

JB: I had a cousin, this would be Leonard's boy, Len, he skied some. Walt had a son who was younger than me, about 10 years younger than skied. I had two sons myself that skied. In fact my youngest boy made the US Team at the Junior World Championships in Europe two years in a row. He competed in the World Championships in Austria one year and then the following year he jumped in Norway.

SH: How old is he?

JB: Right now he's 31 and he's an airlines pilot for Continental Airlines. He flies out of Houston, Texas.

SH: So he's flying in another sense. Were there any other kids, like your boys ages that ski jumped? Cousins?

JB: No. Not in our family anyway. My two boys were the only ones in their age bracket.

SH: I was reading through some of the stuff and there was two little ones, Jay and...

JB: Those are my boys.

SH: Okay those were the two names I saw. So when you were ski flying, what kind of equipment did you use?

JB: Well the equipment has changed an awful lot since we quit skiing...in the last 20 or 30 years. The skis are designed differently and the suits themselves. We had lose clothing and special ski pants and sweaters. We would wear a shirt and sweater. Now days they have special suits that are made of special materials that are very aerodynamic. Just the suits enables them to jump or fly through the air a lot further than we were able to because of the way they're designed and the material used. We had very loose clothing that would flap in the breeze. Now days they are skin tight so the air doesn't penetrate the suit and slow you down. Our equipment slowed us down in the air whereas the new material prevents that from happening. Skis are much wider now days. Ours were narrow. In fact when we were kids we used about any type of ski we could find. I don't think we had two kids with the same type of skis. We just used whatever we had. Many of them weren't very good. Now days skis are designed specifically for jumping. They are very wide skis which gives you more lift. Also they're made out of plastics and fiber glass so they are much faster than our old wooden skis were.

SH: Did you ski on hickory?

JB: Hickory, that's right. When I finished skiing the plastics were just coming out. I did use plastic skis for about the last year or two. But until then it was all strictly wooden skis. We used to spend hours preparing the bottom of those skis. We would steel wool them and sand paper them to get them very smooth. Then we had shellac and lacquers

that we would apply. That was something that would be a little faster to put on. Now with the new plastic bottoms they are very fast. About the only thing you have to put on them is a little bit of wax. They do use different types of wax to make them faster. But we didn't have anything like that.

SH: The ritual of waxing helps you when you ski?

JB: I suppose. It was something you learned from the time you were very young. We were only 4 or 5 years old when we started to ski. The skiers I grew up with were the top skiers of the country. We were very fortunate in Ishpeming. Half the Olympic Team was from Ishpeming or our neighborhood. So I grew up with all these fellows. You learn from a real young age exactly how to fix skis and wax them and it was just something we kind of took for granted, but I suppose it was a science when it comes down to it. We just learned it as we grew up there.

SH: I'm trying to think, here when they practice, do they still walk up the hill?

JB: Yes. We always...here we do because we don't have chair lifts. All of the modern hills now have chair lifts to take you up. They can take a number of jumps in a day. We had to trek up the hill and carry our skis and head up the steps. So if we got 15 or 20 jumps in a day that was an awful lot, especially on the big hills. On the small hills we could do it more rapidly. On the big hills even 10 jumps a day is a lot of jumps if you have to walk up on all of them. But that kept us in shape. We didn't have any specific training sessions to go through. Just climbing the hills kept us in shape.

SH: So you were a cohort of Dr. Hurst too. The flying dentists?

JB: Right. Yes. He also ended up in dentistry. He was a year or two ahead of me in school down there. We were around about the same time.

SH: I was reading in here, there's a description of a day at the hill and there are two kinds of jumps. One was called the long jump or the longest jump. Then the longest standing jump. Are those the same or different?

JB: During the actual competition there are usually two jumps. The jumps are scored, you get distance points for how far you jump and you also get style points. Before...just about every tournament we went to, they used to have a special long standing after the original competition jumps. That was not scored for style at all. The only thing that counted was who went furthest. They would usually give a special prize for the longest standing jump. We'd go up and try to jump as far as we could. The longest ride would get a special prize. That was called the longest standing jump.

SH: Okay. What kind of prizes did you win? I don't see a lot of silver cups in here.

JB: A lot of places gave trophies but there used to be a lot of merchandise prizes when we were skiing. In fact when I got married, my mother saved all the things I had won and it was kind of funny because I had a waffle iron and a toaster...

SH: You had a hope chest.

JB: Yes. That was the sort of thing they gave. Sometimes they gave skis. In Iron Mountain I won a new pair of jumping skis. Other places gave wrist watches. It varied. A lot of the tournaments would go to merchants and ask for donations to help with prizes and a lot of the stores in town would donate various things. This is how a lot of the prizes were handled. Sometimes you might win a merchandise slip. They give you X number of dollars that you could use at a certain store. That's how a lot of it was handled years back. Now it's just strictly trophies. Lately now they've been going to cash prizes. There's money involved now on the World Cup Circuit.

SH: I'm curious, would you say that the old way of winning merchandise...I'm picturing in my mind that it was really a community effort when you had that kind of prize versus the cash prize which has no connection to anything except your bank account. So would you say that has changed the sport somewhat?

JB: I don't know if it's changed it a lot. Years back as far as the Ishpeming Ski Club is concerned, just about ever business person in town was a member of the Ski Club. It was really a community club when it came right down to it. There were very few business people in town that weren't members of the Ski Club. It was a real going club back in the early days. Of course that was one of the only things going on in the winter time here. When you mention skiing, it was ski jumping. There was very little down hill or cross country skiing. It was primarily jumping.

SH: When you would go to Steamboat, was their prize giving similar?

JB: It was similar. We skied all over the country. It started about the first of January that the tournament competitions began. There was one scheduled for every weekend right through March. The National Championships, these would be held in other parts of the country. So we skied from the west coast to the east coast. But the central part of the country had the most tournaments around.

SH: Did you have a particular style that you used?

JB: That's another thing that has changed. Back when we were skiing everybody had their own particular style on it. When I was standing at the bottom of the hill watching somebody coming down, as soon as they got up in the air you knew who it was immediately because everybody had their own distinct style. Now days again, it's so scientific they knew exactly which is the best position to be in to fly the furthest so most of the skiers look identical. They have some differences, but primarily everybody looks almost the same. That didn't happen when we were first starting.

SH: Do you remember anyone having a really unusual style?

JB: Yes. There were some real interesting styles to say the least. There were so many skiers back then that we would have 50-60 skiers just from Ishpeming alone here. Now days you have only so few skiers that they are quite proficient at it. That's all they do generally. Back then the only time they took their skis out was maybe for a tournament. It was quite an experience just to watch some of these characters that did ski.

SH: That would take a lot of daring. You could do it once a weekend.

JB: Some of the big hills there, especially Ishpeming and Iron Mountain, with the poor equipment that we had compared to what we have now days, there were some skiers that didn't practice hardly at all. They came out one or two weekends a winter and some of these were pretty interesting to watch. You saw a lot more falls back then than you do now. Again, the equipment is so much better that you see very few falls. When we skied there you would see some dandy's. There were some terrific spills.

SH: One of the pictures I was looking at in this huge book in the National Archives is an older one. The guy is coming off the jump and it looks like he has safety bindings. Like some strings attached to his boots? Did they used to do that?

JB: Yes. You seen a little bit of everything. When we first started skiing as kids all we had for our skis was a toe strap. We would place our toe through the loop there and then we would cut from a rubber inner tube, cut strips about that wide, loops or something. An inch wide. We would put it on around with our toe right here. That would hold....

SH: That's like those snow shoes.

JB: Right. You had so little support you had to be pretty good just to land on those skis and keep your feet in the bindings. The next best thing was to put a leather strap, a toe strap back around here where there was a buckle on it. Just like on a snow shoe, you've seen snowshoe bindings. That's what we started with.

SH: With old bindings that went over the back of your boots and over the top of your toe, the tires, you cut up the inner tube...you guys must have had incredible balance, not to kill yourself.

JB: Yes we did have good balance. And we skied every day. We never missed a day. It was 7 days a week. As soon as we got home from school at night we would head for the ski hill and ski til dark. We even had some jumps under the streetlights at night. After supper we would go out and take a few more jumps. We skied a lot. Even though the equipment wasn't good, we skied so much that we got pretty proficient. I think it made us better skiers with the training we had.

SH: I would agree. Was it just a male thing, or were there girls that jumped with you?

JB: It was primarily a male thing. Back then I remember a girl came to this country from Norway by the name of Johanna Colsted. She was here one winter making the circuit of various tournaments. But there were very few girls. Now days you have a few. There were a few that tried a jump or two, but it was primarily boys.

SH: I'm going to go back to your grandmother. You said when you were little your parents both worked and you spent a lot of time at her house. I was reading in several articles that she was the one that checked all the equipment and made sure things were good to go.

JB: It was funny because her house it was 259 Jasper Street in the Cleveland location. It was like the meeting place for the neighborhood. It was not only all of her family there, but half the neighbor kids were there too. When I think back she had to be a saint. The kitchen is where everything took place. The kitchen table, you had skis laying on the table and we'd be steel wooling and sand papering right on the kitchen table. So she was in the middle of it all the time. Never seemed to mind. Always happy, had the coffee pot on. Half the neighbor kids were there as well as her own. It was quite a place.

SH: So when your family came over, was it your grandmother that came over?

JB: My grandmother was born in this country in Ishpeming. Her dad and mother both came from the old country. Her husband, my grandfather, came from Finland.

SH Did they bring skiing with them?

JB: I'm not so sure that they did. I don't know just how...I guess my dad was the first, he was the oldest in the family and he got started in skiing. All the other boys followed right along. I don't know just how it actually started. It just happened I guess.

SH: But your grandpa didn't ski?

JB: Not that I'm aware of. I was pretty young when he died. Back then just making a living was a tough thing. You worked in the mines and it was long hours. I'm not sure that he skied. I'm not aware of it anyway.

SH: So on the backdrop of the mines and the skiing, how did you ever choose to be a dentist?

JB: That's a good question? I guess I was always interested in science in school. My dad mentioned to me a few times...I don't know how, I just picked it. When I started college I started in that direction. I didn't know if I would get into dental school or not. They only took 100 students a year so I didn't know if I would get in or not. I applied at any rate. If I didn't get in I was ready to transfer into something else. As it turned out I was accepted into dental school and continued on. I was never sorry. I enjoyed it very much. I really can't give you a good answer on how I went into dentistry.

SH: Did you plan on coming back to Ishpeming?

JB: Yes I did. I would say from the time I started, that was another reason I was glad I started. I was able to come back up here and I never really thought about it, going into some other area. I always had it in mind that I was going to come back to this area, which I did.

SH: Is your wife from here too?

JB: My wife is from the copper country. She's from Tapiola, which is not too far from Chassell, in that area. The way I met her, she was up here, when she started college she had a babysitting job in town during the summer time and so I met her in this area at that time.

SH: Did you have anything to do with putting together the Ski Hall of Fame?

JB: Well yes, I was on the Ski Hall of Fame Committee. The original one was built, Burt Boyum was very instrumental in that. He did a tremendous amount of work and I would say if it wasn't for Burt that we would have this hall of fame in Ishpeming. He did a tremendous amount of work. I was on the Ski Hall of Fame Committee for several years and did some work for them too, but nothing like Burt.

SH: So do you have anything you want to add about skiing or random thoughts? I'm truly amazed.

JB: Looking back, we have a unique situation here in Ishpeming because many of our older skiers, and I know you've talked to a few of them already, we meet for coffee every morning. There's usually 12-15 of us every morning down in the coffee shop at 7:30. It's kind of fun. We have more fun heckling one another every day. You can talk about things that happened 50, 60 years ago and everybody there knows exactly what you're talking about. These old ski stories get better year after year. The same crew, we've played baseball together in the summer. We always competed in baseball and softball, we had teams, and bowling. We deer hunt. The whole crew just about, we deer hunted together. We all skied and we're all still together here. You don't see that much any more because everybody is so mobile and you end up in all parts of the world. But here skiing was a way of life for us from childhood right up til now. So we have a nucleus of skiers here. That's all we knew was ski jumping and we're still together now days. It's a lot of fun.

SH: I bet your wife likes not having to cook breakfast. 12 of them.

JB: We have fun there every morning. Other people come into the restaurant there, the noise level is pretty high, they must wonder what's going on.

SH: Which deer camp do you go to?

JB: I have my own camp now. I used to hunt, Leonard had a camp south of Ishpeming here. Ralph and Coy and Roxie Lawson, and a re of the others all hunt out of there now. I originally hunted deer from there too. Since then I bought a camp myself in the Gwinn area. I've been hunting down there now. I have my two sons and my two sons-in-laws. We hunt together down there for the past several years.

SH: So you have two daughters to.

JB: Yes, I have two daughters also. The youngest one is an ex-ray gal specializing in mammograms. They just moved to Watertown, Wisconsin. My oldest daughter lives in Ishpeming here and she's a dental hygienist. She's here in town and her husband, that's where we were this morning. He's got the rest of the month off and he always saves about 3 weeks for deer season. We were out to camp this morning getting things all ready.

SH: Like your bait pile.

JB: We use some bait. I've got about 400 acres so we have permanent blinds set up in some of the best areas. Just getting those all ready and getting everything hauled out to the camp, it's usually about a month's project to get everything out there.

SH: So you go out there the whole two weeks?

JB: Yes, I spend the whole season...I've done a lot of hunting. The whole ski crew, they're all hunters and fishermen. We got started in that real young too. I've hunted all over North America just about. I got into that. I hunted in Canada, Northwest Territories, all over the west. I enjoy it. I made a trip to Montana in September fishing with my wife. I like the outdoors. It's the way we were brought up, being out all the time. I still have a hard time staying in the house for very long.

SH: I heard on the news that three elk from the Upper Peninsula that have come over from Ontario. So keep a look at what you're shooting before you shoot it. I don't have anything else for you. We're finished.