

Training Camp

I'm writing today from my training camp near Westby, Wisconsin. It's a quiet place set among woods and meadows. It's the kind of place where an athlete like me can focus on the challenge ahead. In a place like this you can set aside all the petty cares and distractions, the sort of stuff that takes your edge and dulls it. And at my level of competition any little piece of straw that takes me off task might just be the last straw.

Those of you old enough to remember the glory days of Muhammad Ali, the great heavyweight champion, will no doubt remember scenes from his wonderful training camp in the woods of Pennsylvania. The champ would be jogging along or skipping rope or working on the speed bag with those lightning hands of his and all the while the ever noisy and always in frame Howard Cosell would be peppering him with questions. Talk about distractions. That's one thing I learned from watching Ali. There would be no press, no TV, not in my camp, especially not this close to the day of the big event.

This will probably be the last time I talk to you before the competition. Oh, it's still two weeks away but from here on out it's me and my trainers, me and my dietician, me and my mantra. I know what you're thinking and the answer is 'no', Veronica is not here. That's how serious I am. You know that if the love of my life, the person for whom I jump every jump can't be here, then this is the real deal. This is as big as it gets.

I'm talking of course about the International Ski Jump Competition over at the Snowflake Ski and Golf Club, just outside of wonderful Westby. Every year around this time people come from all over world to meet and compete on this single biggest day of ski jumping that America has to offer. Everyone will be there. Last year's winner, Thor Underall, from Norway is coming. So is three time champ Bengt Bangbinder, the Swede. All the top American jumpers will be on hand except of course for poor old Toni Tapiola, the great (formerly) Finnish-American from Iron Mountain, MI. You might recall that Toni met his untimely end on the hill in Foster Park on the north side of Chicago last year. No, he didn't die jumping, it seems he owed a large sum of money to some shady types (Toni liked to bet on himself) and he never made it to the registration table. The Coroner said it was natural causes. Owing a lot of money is about as natural as it gets. Anyway, everyone else is coming and I'll be ready for them.

You might be wondering what goes on here in camp. Let me tell you a little bit about my training. Oh, one thing I should tell you is that I have never actually completed an actual ski jump, that is, actually made it through the landing part. That area of the game is still a bit dicey for me. So a lot of my work centers on nailing that landing. I do a lot of squats and weight work so that I will have the strength to keep those legs soft at the bottom of the hill. You want to finish your jump (so I'm told) with your knees bent and your hamstrings lightly sprung, like golf, sort of. So I'm working hard on that.

I have had a lot of experience with, how can I say it, shorter than expected and in some cases, completely terminated "jumps". Unfortunately my first acquaintance with the sport of ski-jumping was in the opening of the weekly "Wide World of Sports" TV show. Do you remember when Jim McKay got to the words "...and the agony of defeat" there was this footage of a guy coming down the run on some monster hill in Norway and tumbling like a rag doll, head over broken skis, right off the side of the track and into the horrified crowd. Well, that image kind of stuck with me, stuck with me to the extent that all of my efforts thus far have ended, abruptly, in some variation of that awkward finish.

So a lot of my focus has necessarily been on equipment, that is to say, my helmet. I have a great helmet. I have a lot of great helmets. Any ski-jumper will tell you that it's really bad luck to jump wearing a helmet that you have already crashed in. It's just not done. Ergo, I have a lot of helmets.

The training for properly using a helmet is simple albeit jarring. Over in one corner of the gym stands the massive trunk of a great maple that used to shade the camp. It's about four feet in diameter and virtually indestructible. If you know your maples you'll know what I'm talking about. I have taped a starting line on the floor about twelve feet from this arbor-brutus at which point I strap on my helmet, tip my head at precisely 45 degrees, take three powerful steps to reach top speed and hurl myself, arms stretched out like an airplane, into the stump. The ending to this exercise is abrupt.

But it works for me. When you've seen the bottoms of as many ski jumps from the outrageously inappropriate angles that I have, you learn to adjust your training methods accordingly. I don't think I'd be writing for you now except for my attention to detail and nuance and those excellent helmets. When you're in the game I'm in, on the level at which I compete, you leave nothing to chance. And besides, the prize money in ski jumping is not all that great. If it weren't for my crash-hat endorsements and Aflac I'd probably be doing something else.

Do yourself and the kids a favor and come on out to Snowflake Lodge and Golf Club on the 6th and 7th of February and watch the greatest jumpers in the game go for the gold. One word of advice though; when they announce that Eddie, Rag Doll, Holahan is ready to jump you might want to have the kids cover their eyes until it's over.