

Killy: follow the leader

by Karl Wilberg

One of the West's most extensive international sports is alpine ski racing. Countries in Europe and North America and large manufacturing firms compete for World Cups and Olympic medals. Not surprisingly, race results indicate a nation's commitment to ski racing in size and quality.

Good results can be taken as pleasant surprises or the results of a coherent sport program. Perhaps the most visible product of any national program was France's Jean-Claude Killy. Killy has not been surpassed. He was the last to win all three Olympic alpine disciplines, slalom, giant slalom and downhill. After his 1968 triple success in Grenoble, Killy dropped out. However, in 1972-73, he returned to racing and won the world professional ski racing circuit.

Now, Killy is still amazing. His activities include promoting skis, ski boots, ski clothes and even cameras. Could Killy have been the product of a special situation unique to France in the 1960? Could Killy have been the result of a well-rounded and well-administered program? I spoke with Killy this Tuesday at a Sears press conference. The answers to these questions are not complete, but the conditions for Killy's success are clear.

Why should Canada be concerned with those conditions? Simply, those conditions probably still hold true, and if a national sport system is to exist, it may as well be successful.

Killy had been brought into the Sears boardroom to explain the cancellation of a show intended to review the Canadian Olympic team and their uniforms, supplied by Sears. Killy's own line of ski clothing was also involved.

Of course, I wondered if Killy was burned out and living off his name only. Perhaps, I guessed, a public image had replaced a person. However, Killy showed that being washed-up is avoidable and is really more a media image than anything else. At first sight, Killy appears humble. He does not strut or act intimidating. He was also accommodating to my questions, in spite of my persistence.

First, it was clear Killy was involved in a productive way with the ski products he endorsed.

Gateway: Are you working for K-2 and le Trappeur boots as a research and development person or are you for promotion?

Killy: I've been with le Trappeur all my life and have been with K-2 since seven years ago. I help with testing. . . It's hard to keep up with race equipment when races are won by hundredths of seconds, but I'm still close to it.

Killy went on to say equipment development is endless and challenging. He emphasized new products take years to be developed.

Gateway: Could you design the perfect ski? Is it realistic?

Killy: It could be done, but it is far off. *Gateway: What about boots? I hear Salomon has a boot and is planning to integrate boot and binding?*

Killy: Yes. It is not too fantastic. There is a lot of space for improvement. It is endless. There has been a lot of improvement, especially in boots.

Gateway: For example, the use of steel in le Trappeur boots?

Killy: Yes. The steel brace used has a better reaction than polyurethane plastic. . . polyurethane performs differently with temperature.

Killy, unlike many superstars, seems satisfied with his post-competitive career.

Gateway: Do you miss racing now?

Killy: I don't miss it any more. It is exciting to reach the top in ten years but there is only so much you can take. It is difficult to win every week.

Killy raced with a French team that had dominated ski racing in the late 1960s. Killy's own amateur career peaked in Grenoble. I asked Killy about two things in particular. First of all, why

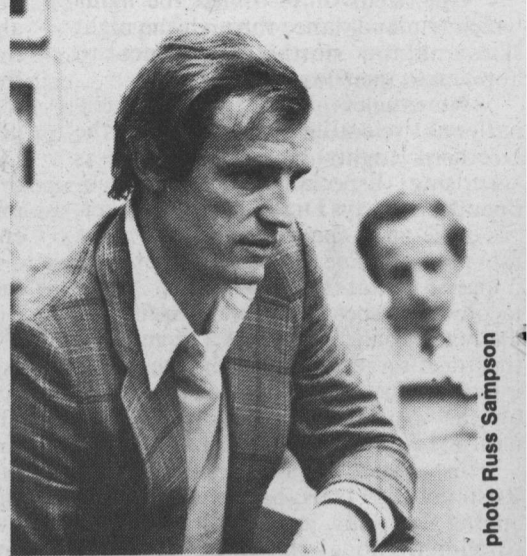


photo Russ Sampson

"It is exciting to reach the top in ten years, but there is only so much you can take."

was the French team so powerful, and secondly, could those conditions exist again? Now the World Cup circuit is dominated by specialists like Ingemar Stenmark or Ken Read. Neither has won all three alpine racing events.

Gateway: Why was the French team so good? What happened? Was it just you, or the trainers and coaches?

Killy: It was different aspects getting together. It was the start of a strong ski industry and the finding of a super coach and manager. Also, there were good skiers at the same time. That was a unique situation. It went in cycles. . . what happened (in France) in the Sixties happened in Austria in the Fifties.

Gateway: Is specialization in racing a good thing?

Killy: In the Seventies, specialization was dominant, and racing has become three sports in one. It is tough to dominate. . . I don't like to see it go this way. Skiing is supposed to be an athlete on the snow.

Gateway: Is it still possible to win all three? How? Is greater desire or motivation needed?

Killy: It's still possible and a bigger desire is needed from the racers.

I asked Killy himself why he was able to ski well in all events and what would be needed now. He replied that basically, a lot of practice and work was the key.

Killy: I had bad times in downhill. I worked on it. When my G.S. (Giant Slalom) had gone bad, I went back and worked on it. I also had equipment problems and tried too hard. There is a fine line in skiing: you can try too hard.

Killy commented on specialization:

Killy: One discipline is good for the other. Downhill teaches you to handle the high speeds in G.S. better. I'm not sure how to do it now with over-specialization and the number of races. . . I would have to select the races better.

It became apparent Killy's success was not innate but a slow process.

Gateway: Your training was a slow process? Killy: Yes. It was a long process, especially in the downhill. It took many years to win the first one. My best times were in the G.S. then the downhill. . . Only in the last four years could I be consistent.

Gateway: Why were you consistent? Was it experience, or coaching?

Killy: Mainly experience. Skiing miles and gates. The more gates you ski, the more consistent you are. . . Free skiing is very important. Fast free skiing develops instinct. It has been forgotten by the French team. Too many gates and you lose your touch.

At this point, after 15 minutes, I realized none of the other press had spoken. I muttered that I didn't want to monopolize the press conference. After the titters died down, there was silence. Finally, someone asked Killy if Calgary was a good place for the 1984 winter Olympics. Little came of this question.

Silence resumed until I continued with the central question: what set of conditions can create a world-class team of athletes? It is easy to reason that there must be some characteristics of Killy and the French team that can be applied here in Canada.

Gateway: In Canada sport for example,

the Olympics and ski racing are treated differently. Good athletes go unrecognized. It's different in Europe.

Killy: It's not only the way the Olympics are treated, it is the way sport is treated in Europe. We have had competitions for so many years and a lot of results. It is the same here (in Canada) for hockey. Take a team like the French team. They are not doing so well and are not getting TV coverage like ten years ago. It is hard to get back to prime-time TV. The ski industry is suffering for it.

On the other hand, Killy used the Canadian racers to explain the slow process of recognition and the time it takes.

Killy: Read, Podborski and Irwin have now put skiing into a nice place in the press. Canada has not given it a hard try yet, only the last four or five years.

The process of developing athletes precedes publicity and I wanted to know what would have to be done in Canada.

Gateway: What would you do for a racing program?

Killy: Skiers should be recognized as athletes; it is needed for the sport. Development must be a team effort. Nancy Greene was one of a kind, not a team effort.

Gateway: Youth development in any sport is important. How was it in Europe?

Killy: We had youth coming down from different structures: local clubs, clubs in resorts. . . They were run by the ski federation. It is the same throughout Europe. You need it for consistency — to be on top. You can't rely on one-of-a-kind racers.

With the question still unsatisfied, the conference broke up. Killy went downstairs for a TV interview. I followed him and his assistants and waited. After the cameras were off, I buttonholed Killy once more and asked him if Canada was on the right track with their successful downhill team. His answer was intense.

Killy: You must integrate all things, equipment, finances, coaching. You must have the power and control to do this. You must be ready for three racers (Ken Read, Steve Podborski, Dave

Murray) that can win golds.

Killy may be right. The French team, with commercial support, good coaches, strong development programs and dedicated athletes like Killy, became unbeatable. These conditions could probably exist in Canada. Some of them do: Sears has been involved with the national ski team for years. We have good athletes and solid national organizations. However, there is a lack of interest in lower levels of development in ski racing, or any sport, for that matter. Also, university research facilities and information are under-used. In addition, government commitment to amateur sport is uncertain, but is certainly not expanding.

I had most of my answers, so I asked Killy if the rest of the media's cadaver-like demeanor was irritating. He replied, "Oh, no" and agreed he was used to it. Just after he left, I remembered something important.

Gateway: Jean-Claude, excuse me, can I have your autograph?

Killy: (Nods, smiles)

Gateway: Karl, with a "K".

Killy: Like my friend Karl (Karl Schranz, an Austrian who was Killy's arch-rival in most competitions).

Gateway: Did you have any problems with Schranz?

Killy: No! No problems!

For every Killy, there are many skiers who try to reach his level. The benefits of one or three world-class athletes reach thousands of people. However, as Killy emphasizes, consistent success is a slow process.

Consequently, long-term benefits of sport are easily short-circuited by symbolic political reactions to financial climate. Canada does not have to spend more money to be internationally successful. Instead, priorities must change and stronger national sport programs must be created. Our national image is important: ask anyone about the Commonwealth games or our recent international hockey defeats.

However, a more important stake is our lives' fullness and the quality of opportunity open to us. Killy is part of an example, but are we ambitious enough to follow it?



photo Russ Sampson

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