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# THE AMERICAN INFERNO

## Know your roots: American big mountain competitions

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The birthplace of the American big mountain competition, Tuckerman Ravine. PHOTO: Brian Nevins

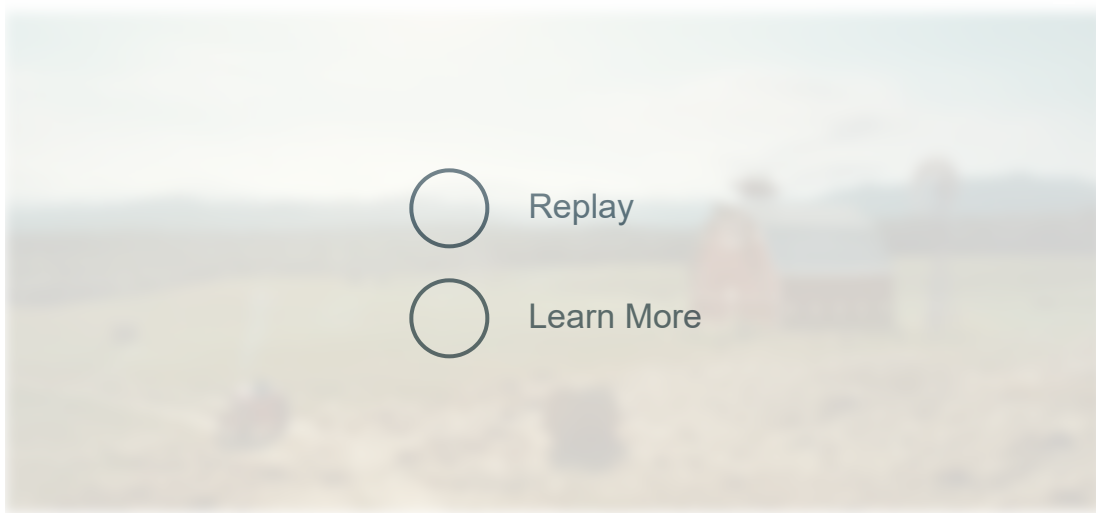
These days, big mountain competitions are a highly organized production. Everything is planned from bib draw ceremonies to where skiers drop off their GoPro footage after their run. It wasn't always like that. Even as recently as a few years ago, venues were loose, organization was minimal, and skiers picked their lines by the seat of their pants. But that's nothing compared to the junkshow of the first American big mountain comp, the American Inferno at Mount Washington's Tuckerman Ravine.

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In the 1930s, when skiing was just starting to gain traction in the U.S., New England was the heart of the ski racing scene. Colleges like Dartmouth and Harvard sent teenage skiers to the Olympics, and European ski instructors came over to teach at mountains like Cranmore.

Tuckerman Ravine, the steeply sloping bowl on the southeastern side of Mount Washington, became a proving ground for eastern skiers. The lower pitches of the bowl were skied in the 19-teens, but no one attempted the nearly vertical headwall until 1931, when two members of the U.S. Ski Team, John Carleton and Charley Proctor, made a first attempt. Carleton fell up high, but Proctor skied all the way down to the base of the bowl successfully. A week later, Robert Livermore, Brad Trafford, and Robert Balch, all Harvard students, made a second descent. According to the Mount Washington Avalanche Center, “This group would go on to found the Hochgebirge Ski Club that would become instrumental in the development of skiing and ski racing in New England.”

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Two years later, the Hochgebirge Ski Club decided to stage an eight-mile summit-to-base race in the Ravine. They called it the American Inferno, after a similar race in Mürren, Switzerland. The first year, 1933, the winner, Hollis Phillips, took nearly 15 minutes to get to the bottom, cherrypicking through sastrugi and rockbands. The following year Dick Durrance—who went on to win 17 national titles, and head up operations at Alta and Aspen—shaved two minutes of his time, but still had a rough go of the run. According to Joe Dodge, who built the New Hampshire hut system, and judged the race, Durrance, “took a line too far to the left when he came over the Headwall, ran into some avalanche tracks, and fell a couple of times. Nevertheless he won the race.”

The Inferno wasn't held again until 1939, and by then, Tucks was getting some buzz outside of New Hampshire. This time, 42 skiers showed up, and most of them had never skied over the headwall before.



One of them was 19-year-old Toni Matt, who had just moved to New Hampshire from St. Anton, Austria, to teach skiing. Matt had never been to the top of the headwall before, and he'd only skied the lower-angle trees of the Sherburne Trail at the bottom once.

Race day was cloudy and socked-in. Matt drew bib number four, behind Dick Durrance, and two skiers who he knew wouldn't be serious contenders. At the last second, Durrance had trouble with his binding, and the course official told Matt run ahead of him.

His plan was to make three big turns over the headwall, then straighten out and point it into the bowl, but because there was no visibility and he'd never skied there before, he miscalculated the lip of the headwall. He got into his ski racer tuck way up high and came mashing over the edge.

As he recalls: "I came over the rim at the point called the lip. Going over the lip is a terrifying experience, especially for the first time. Remember, I had schussed from the very top of the mountain, which is at least a thousand feet higher than the lip, and then made only one turn into the headwall. I was coming into the sudden drop-off at 40–45 miles an hour. That's not at all like coming in from a dead standstill. It's more like jumping into a 600-foot deep hole from a speeding car."

He stayed on his feet, and made it to Pinkham Notch, the end of the trail, in 6:29, less than half the time it took Durrance in the previous race. Because the Inferno hasn't been run the same way since, that record still stands today. It's unconfirmed, but he might have received a Sickbird belt buckle at the Notch.

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