

RON FINNERAN – An Oral History

**Interviewed by Edith Swift,
Durras NSW July 11th, 2016**



Ron Finneran, 1983

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RON FINNERAN OAM– ORAL HISTORY
Interviewed by Edith Swift, Durras, NSW, July 5th, 2016

I am Edie Swift and it is July 11th, 2016. I am interviewing Ron Finneran about his career in skiing and I am doing it for the Thredbo Historical Society.

My parents, Ida and Jim, were third generation French and Irish folk. I was born in Sydney in 1944 and, having contracted polio when I was eighteen months old, I spent the first 5 years of my life in hospital. I was educated in various Marist Brothers schools in Sydney and learnt the rough and tough ways of defending yourself in school. In the mid 60s I spent a couple of years in New Zealand enjoying the delights of the land of the long white cloud before returning to Australia to work as a sales representative for a short period.

In 1973 I was invited to travel down to Thredbo with friends on a ski holiday. They said I could sit on a rock in the Basin, top of Crackenback and watch them ski. Well that went down like a lead balloon so I chose to go down to Fleets Ski Hire in the Valley Terminal where I found a pair of over-sized ski boots that would fit over my callipers and hired a pair of skis and poles. I then headed back up Crackenback chairlift with a pair of poles to give skiing a go!

On the first attempt I went quite a few metres and I thought, "This is easy, let's move on." But then I fell over and got up again, and tried again but I didn't travel as far and after half a dozen falls I could hardly get up. While sitting on a rock in the Basin feeling despondent I met Tommy Tomasi, then a ski patroller who told me of Austrian ex-servicemen who had lost legs in the Second World War. They were skiing on one leg with what were known as outriggers, Canadian type crutches with small skis attached to them. The initial sensation of feeling the wind going through my hair when skiing was something I had never experienced before and so having not lost any enthusiasm, on return to Sydney I started to devise ways and means to return to the Snowys and have another go. I developed a couple of very, very crude outriggers for myself and in 1974 set out once again to master the sport.

By that time I was becoming reasonably well known in the village of Thredbo and the general feeling was that if I was prepared to give skiing a go the residents, on-mountain personnel and lodge owners would give me as much support as they could. As a result and with all that support I managed to ski with some proficiency by the end of the 1974 season. There are many who helped me along the way and I particularly remember the support of Thredbo/Jindabyne residents Geoff and Maureen Goodwin. In those days they travelled to and from Sydney and following one of my many skiing accidents bundled me up and transported me back to Sydney to recover! Very kind people.

Along the way I decided with the support of friends to go to Canada where I worked for a short period at Grouse Mountain, Vancouver. Whilst there I contacted the British Columbian Disabled Skiers Association and it was suggested I travel with them to Sunshine Village in Banff, Alberta where I began to have some instruction. However early on in the trip I fell getting on the chair rupturing my kneecap. So off to Banff Hospital for some remedial work where I spent the night to recover. However once I found out how much it was costing I promptly checked out and went back to Sunshine Village to recover. I met up with my instructor again and after a couple of runs on the gentler slopes I convinced my instructor that we should take the Brewster Chair to more immediate slopes. Being a smoker at the time we *shared* a cigarette on the way up. Offloading we discussed whether we should ski the intermediate run or the bump run. Well rightly or wrongly I decided on the bump run. I have never skied the bumps as well as I did that day – maybe it was the cigarette!

With the help of the Sunshine Ski School director Jerry Johnstone I made important changes to my equipment that improved my ability to ski. Jerry went on to establish the Canadian Disabled Skiers Association and ultimately establish winter sports for people with disabilities at the international level.

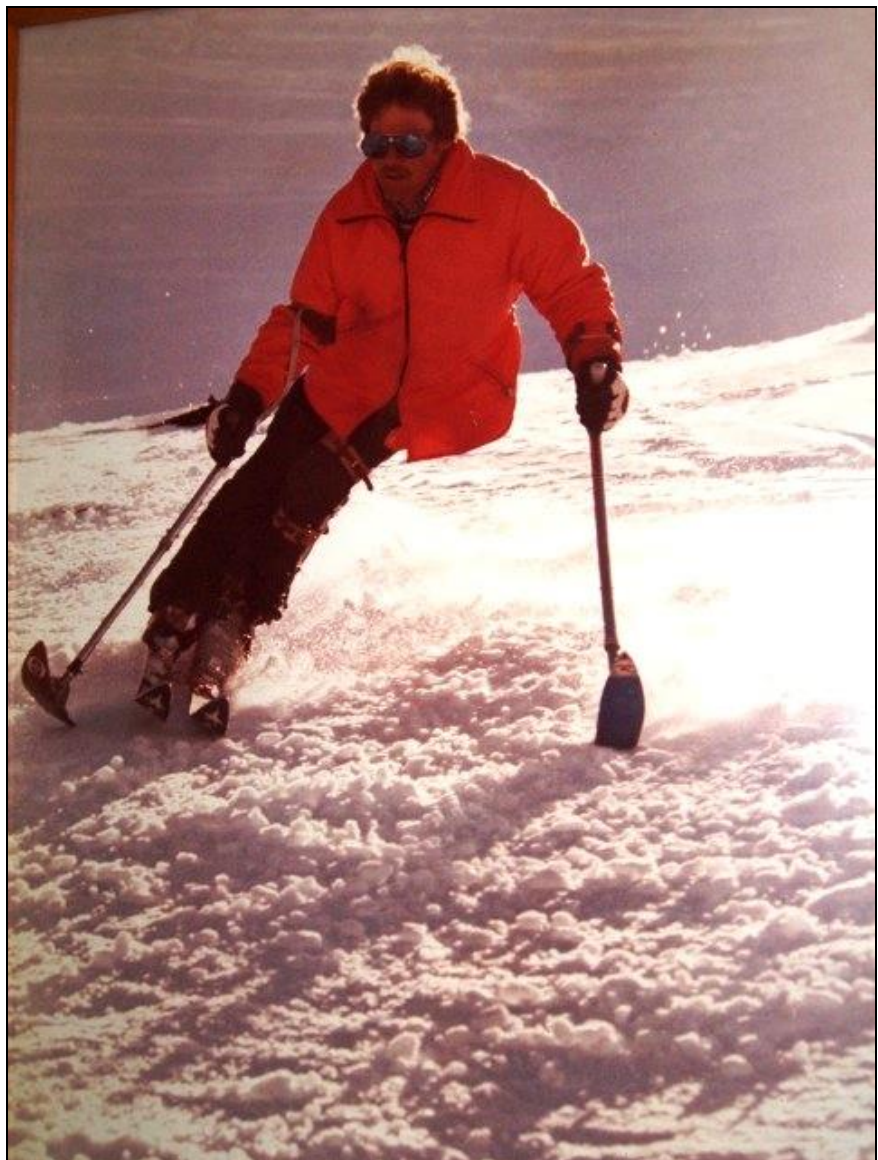
He had an enormous influence on the establishment of the Australian Disabled Skiers Federation and this, together with his work in Canada and internationally, saw him admitted to the Canadian Skiing Hall of Fame.

Back to Thredbo, I heard that the first Winter Paralympic Games were to be staged in Örnsköldsvik, Sweden in 1976. In those days there were two other disabled skiers in Australia at the time. Amputee Joe Beaumont skied out of Thredbo and polio affected Max Baldwin from Perisher. Both were a little older than I and after expressing my wish to compete it was proposed we three should have a ski-off. Both declined due to business and family commitments so with a little support from the Rotary Club of Cabramatta I was your man and off I went via Germany to visit my sister then to Sweden ending up in Örnsköldsvik, in late January to acclimatise, train and then compete in March.

The unfortunate story behind this event was that I was disqualified from competing because the Games had been scheduled and promoted as being the first Winter Paralympic Games for amputees and the blind. The blind were to compete in the ski cross country events and amputees to ski in the alpine category. As a polio sufferer I was ineligible. This fate also befell a Polish skier who had suffered the effects of polio. However the great outcome from this sad non-event was that I met my wife Lisa! The local townsfolk having heard of my disqualification offered me a stipend to stay and study at the local teachers college and it was here that I met Lisa and it was she who committed many hours teaching me the Swedish I would need to learn.

On return to Thredbo in June 1978 the ski school director Arnold Konrad invited me to work on the NASTAR recreational race program. I gratefully accepted however at the same time, with Canadian ski instructor Bruce Abel, began organising winter sport programs for people with disabilities. In September of '78, Arnold Konrad, Nick Dean, Rod Dunning, Maurice Flutey, Graeme Morris, Bruce Abel and our very first secretary Maureen Rupcic, met in Thredbo Alpine Hotel Piano Bar to establish what was to become the Australian Disabled Skiers Federation. Many good things come from animated conversation over a beer or two after a good day's skiing!

Following on from that meeting the Australian Disabled Skiers Federation was formed which in later years was to be rebranded as Disabled WinterSport Australia (DWA). With me



as chair, we started
organising groups of
disabled kids from

Ron Finneran - NASTAR Thredbo 1978

Sydney to come down to Thredbo to spend time skiing.

Participants would stay at the House of Ullr and we would co-ordinate with the Thredbo Ski School for instruction. In addition we worked with the lift operators to make sure we had the safest and best methods to load and offload our skiers. Being a Thredbo resident at that time, it was easy to co-ordinate all these aspects to get programs up and running.

As the fledgling organisation developed in 1979/1980 it attracted the interest of a visiting ABC-TV camera crew. The ABC interviewer Paul Griffiths noticed our activities and aired a segment on 'This Day Tonight'. Such was Paul's passion for our sport that he subsequently went on to become media director at the Australian Disabled Skiers Federation. He along with wine entrepreneur Len Evans returned to Thredbo the following summer and with the support of Lend Lease Corporation conducted various fund raising activities. These gave us the financial capacity to acquire the specialist equipment necessary for the disabled people to ski e.g. outriggers and sit skis. It was on a trip to Winter Park, USA, where we were put in touch with manufacturers of the equipment we needed and we brought it back into the country.

Once people saw the disabled in sit skis and with outriggers the popularity grew and enquiries came from the Perisher and Falls Creek resorts. So after developing the Thredbo program a couple of seasons later we established programs in Perisher, Falls Creek, Mt Hotham and, a little later, at Mt Buller. But it was Thredbo that turned out to be the largest area for winter sport for people with disabilities in this country. Having begun there it just evolved that way and as a result disabled skiers sought development programs to improve their technical skills. Led by Perisher amputee skier, Kyrra Grunnsund, we built a development team which in time evolved into our elite squad.

Australia re-emerged on the international scene in 1980 when it sent a team of two competitors to the 2nd winter Paralympic Games in Geilo, Norway. The team consisted of an alpine skier *below knee amputee* Kyrra Grunnsund and blind cross country skier Peter Rickards. Our representatives performed well and we came away determined that we could use this as a basis for more success. Back in Australia programs continued to grow and evolve particularly in Thredbo, Perisher, Falls Creek and Mt Hotham.

Because of the nature of the terrain in Thredbo it was very hard for people with disabilities, particularly in wheel chairs, to get in and out of their accommodation on the mountain. During that time we developed a close relationship with the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation that had a complex in Jindabyne designed to accommodate children and young adults. However there was no suitable accommodation for the disabled in that camp so we commenced negotiations with the Department. We were granted some land on which to build a lodge and with the able assistance of managers Steve Gibb and later John Kean we managed to build two three-bedroom apartments fully kitted out for people with disabilities. It was called Finsko's Lodge where skiers could stay for a week and travel to Thredbo and Perisher for skiing. Such was the popularity of Finsko's that in 1990 we sought and gained permission to expand it with four bed sitter apartments and a three bedroom apartment.

Having a permanent accommodation site meant that we would regularly participate in races in conjunction with able-bodied skiers held by the Thredbo Ski Racing Club. The club and the resort set these courses and our guys were permitted to ski the same courses, which I believe, fast tracked the development of our elite program. That was evidenced in Albertville in 1992 when Michael Milton won Australia's first ever gold medal in either Olympic or Paralympic Games alpine skiing.

This and success in later years meant that Australia went on to be placed fifth best nation in alpine disabled skiing in the world behind Germany, Austria, the United States and Canada. This would not have been possible without the efforts of winter Paralympians the like of Kyrra Grunnsund, Michael

Norton, Michael Milton, David Munk, Rod Hacon, James Patterson, Bart Bunting and Toby Kane. These great people, with others, went on to build Australia's reputation as a top disabled winter alpine nation. For such a small country we 'punch above our weight'!

I was honoured to act as Chef de Mission on several occasions when the Australian team were sent teams overseas - these included Geilo (1980), Mutters (1984), Innsbruck (1988), Albertville (1992), Lillehammer (1994). I also managed our World Cup teams.



Friday Flat Thredbo 2008

As the seasons ticked by we formed an association with the Combined Services Ski Association (Army, Navy and Air Force), which in turn helped our racers as well. We continued to evolve our recreational, development and elite programs and these were the cornerstone of everything that we did. Those foundations formed in those early days continue to this very day.

My memories of Thredbo experiences are both the fondest and of the hard yards. I can remember some nights when I finished work and turned up at the Schuss Bar. A whole mob of lift-personnel and ski instructors would kindly help me get out of the bar and up Sasha's Hill to my accommodation where my lovely wife would be patiently waiting.

When working on the mountain I would be up early at 6.30 or 7 am, get dressed, have breakfast and walk from the village across the bridge to Valley Terminal. Occasionally the road would be iced up and I would walk along

Bobuck Lane and then down Sasha's Hill. Snowman's Lodge that was owned by Fleets in those days and the Fleets workers were all accommodated there. A few of them would lean out over the balcony sipping their tea or coffee and noting the way I was picking my way would take bets on which parts of Sasha's Hill I would slip and fall. That was the life of Thredbo in those days – **great fun times, absolutely great times.**

DWA was heavily involved in fund raising principally to raise money for the specialised equipment needed by disabled skiers. One thing I didn't mention was that when we first formed the organisation at Thredbo, I approached the then marketing director of Thredbo, a chap by the name of Mike Matthews and I said "Look, this is what we are doing, what can you do to help us?" He said "Yes, you have the support of Thredbo, but better still come with me next week where we have a meeting of the Australian Ski Resorts Association at which all the principals of the ski resorts will be there, address them and get a consensus across all the ski resorts in the country." I duly presented at that meeting,

and without fail all the resort heads said free of charge lifts and lessons for as long as you want.” I responded, “It is appreciated, but no thank you. A 50% reduction on lifts and lessons would be much appreciated, thank you very much.” The reason I sought that concession (rather than the full concession) was because that product should not be given away. It should be valued! I wanted our members to work for and appreciate a ski holiday. The resort directors agreed and that agreement, established in 1979, still stands to this day.

I am proud of how the ski industry continues to embrace winter sport for people with a disability.

In later years I sat on the board of the Australian Paralympic Committee and, in particular, worked on the winter side of things. In 1996 I became its President for a short period and it was during that period that Sydney submitted its bid to stage the Year 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. However the International Olympic Committee required a combined bid to include a Paralympic Games bid which would then dovetail in with bids submitted by rival cities Manchester, Berlin and Beijing. In order to comply, the Sydney Year 2000 Bid Committee contacted us with an offer to provide \$US10 million to help stage the Australian Paralympic Games providing we develop a Bid. Well I said that they could kiss the Paralympic Bid good bye for the amount offered, I believed, was petty cash when staging an event of that magnitude. However over the following months both organisations worked together, overcoming the financial constraints and formulating the bid that was well received and ultimately evolved into what was a magnificent Year 2000 Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games.

It goes without saying that the formation of Disabled WinterSport Australia would have been impossible had it not been for many people. The list of ski Instructors, lift operators, volunteer ski guides, the residents of Thredbo, Perisher and Jindabyne is far too long to mention them all and who played vital parts in its continuing success.



Mittagong – 2000 Paralympic Torch Relay-Run start

However there is one very special lady, no longer with us, who played an invaluable part in not only formulating the development of skiing in this country but in ensuring that skiing for those with disabilities would remain an integral component of the sport in the Snowy Mountains. That lady was Adrienne Smith OAM, former CEO of the Australian Ski Federation, Executive Director of the Australian Paralympic Committee and Australian Bi Centennial Authority and President of Disabled WinterSport Australia. Adrienne was a lady without peer with an enthusiasm and determination to ensure the ski industry evolved on sensible pathways and that skiing for people with disabilities would be recognised. This was her *raison d'être*.

Another very special person in my life who contributed in her silent but equally important way was the lovely lady I met in Sweden following the 1st winter Paralympic Games and who chose to join back here in the Thredbo and who became my wife in 1980. Throughout the thirty plus years in often-tremulous times she supported me as well as raising our children Timothy and Carina. Her contribution to this Disabled WinterSport Australia cannot be overstated.

Now in retirement in Merimbula on the Sapphire Coast I work closely with the local shire council and other organisations on access issues to make things a little bit easier, not just for people with disabilities, but for grey nomads, mums with prams to be able to get around shopping centres and the like. In addition I continue to keep my finger on the pulse of issues surrounding skiing for people with disabilities. Life remains busy and I suppose I would not have it any other way.

Finally I would like to cover off on a couple of issues that I strongly believe in with regard to winter sport.



In Australia there is an enormous amount of support for the elite and competitive side of sport. I think that maybe the balance is wrong. It is the recreational and development side of our sports that allows for increasing numbers of people with disabilities to become involved in the sport. So, along with accommodation at Finsko's Lodge in Jindabyne, the relationship with ski patrollers, the lift people, and the ski school, combines together to make an all encapsulating skiing experience for people with disabilities. This was my ultimate goal of giving the individual disabled person the opportunity to enjoy the natural environment that is the Snowy Mountains and enjoying it with their fellow skiers. That is the true crux of skiing, as we all know.

Another special plus that comes from skiing is that it affords a person with a disability the opportunity to ski all over the mountain and in particular from the top of Crackenback down to the Village. From those positive achievements, they go back to where they live and with that positive 'can do' state of mind they contribute more positivity and confidently to their lives back in the city or town. DWA has been providing this opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem and I hope it continues to 'kick those goals'.

Merimbula – 2000 Olympic Torch Relay

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

Ron Finneran
Merimbula, September 1st, 2016

Footnote:

Retired as CEO of Disabled WinterSport Australia in 2010.

Honours include:-

- Australia Sports Medal
- Confederation of Australian Sport - Fellow
- Australian Paralympic Medal
- Order of Australia Medal

- Sport Australia Hall of Fame – General Member
- Disabled WinterSport Australia- Life Member

Oral History Interview Agreement

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This is an agreement between the **INTERVIEWEE** and the **Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated** (please fill in your details):

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I have been asked and have agreed to be interviewed by Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated, subject to this agreement and as part of the Museum's programs. The Museum has advised me that it wishes to preserve the Interview as part of Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated's collection. Once the Interview is preserved at Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated, I understand that it can be used by the Museum for a variety of purposes including, but not limited to, exhibition, research, education material, public presentations, publication, website, broadcast and transmission unless I place restrictions hereunder on any of those uses.

Name: Ronald James Finnegan And **Thredbo Historical Society Inc** trading as
Thredbo Historical Society
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