

LEONHARD ERHARTER 1928-2007

THREDBO SKI SCHOOL DIRECTOR 1958-1977

Undoubtedly, memories of the late, great skier Leonhard Erharter have etched into countless lives, here and elsewhere. In retrospect, for this man to have followed any other career would be unthinkable. At age 16, destiny guided his footsteps from a Mechanical Trades School into pilot training, thence to Junior Ski Racing (18 and under). This was cut short, when, with a spectator having stepped into his path, he took evasive action, crashing into a tree at extremely high speed. His severe injuries precluded further ski racing; nevertheless, he entered the prestigious Austrian Federal Ski School, where, under the leadership of the famous Professor Kruchkenhauser he undertook practical tuition and training at St Christoph and theory at the University of Innsbruck. He graduated with the highest level of qualification to become a member of Kruchkenhauser's famed Exhibition Ski Team. From there he became a leading ski instructor at Zurs, meeting with Australian skiers and coaching Australia's 1952 Winter Olympic team.

It was during the 1956 Winter Olympics that Leonhard was highly recommended to Bob Arnott as a 'model' Austrian ski instructor, and best suited to establish the new ski school at Thredbo. Arnott subsequently passed this recommendation to Kosciusko Chairlift and Thredbo Hotel Syndicate member Geoffrey Hughes. A formal approach was made, and accepted. Leonhard Erharter arrived at Thredbo in the autumn of 1958, accompanied by fellow ski instructor Helmut Pfister. Accounts of their first weeks in the emerging village are legendary. In a spirit of friendship echoing true 'Aussie mateship' these two men - the world's leading ski instructors of their day - cheerfully took up hammers and nails to help finish internal carpentry at Bill Bursill's lodge. In that first year, Thredbo's inaugural Ski School comprised Leonhard Erharter (Director), Helmut Pfister and Joe Plangger of Davos, Switzerland, who'd arrived ahead of his colleagues. Tuition fees were mostly paid in coins to individual instructors, who, in turn, placed these into a tin at the old Bottom Station. At the end of each week Leonhard divided this money equally between himself, Pfister and Plangger, regardless of pupil numbers or hours worked. Much of Thredbo's early and long-term success has been credited to Leonhard Erharter, whose experience and advice was highly valued by the first Syndicate, and by G. J. Dusseldorp. Bob Arnott stands by his firmly held belief that, 'in Erharter, the company chose 'a skier of enormous verve and elan'. To back him up he was able to choose, in the northern summer, from many of Austria's best instructors. 'Mrs. Simone Arnott adds: 'For some time, into the 1960s, Thredbo undoubtedly enjoyed the world's highest standard of ski instructing, in that our beginners classes, at Thredbo, were conducted by instructors who taught only the most talented students at Zurs - which itself boasted Europe's top ski school! By 1970 there were fifteen instructors in Thredbo Ski School under his directorship.

He passed away in Austria in 2007. His contribution to Australian Skiing and Thredbo Village will be forever part of our rich alpine history.

Leonhard Erharter directed Thredbo's Ski School from 1958 to 1977. (He was succeeded by Arnold Konrad in 1978, thence Roland Wanner, 1984, and Brad Spalding, 1994.)

(We extend our thanks to Phyllis Mc Key - as this précis is an extract from Leonhard's obituary).