

# Remembering a Canadian skiing legend



**DAVE BROWN**  
OUTDOOR LIFE

*"I am a man who must see the other side of everything, of mountains, of oceans, of life!"*

— Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen, 1875-1987

Legendary. It's perhaps the first word that comes to mind when thinking about the beloved Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen, a man who almost single-handedly did more for cross-country skiing around Eastern Canada and the United States than anyone else.

Now, depending when you were born, you may never have heard of him. But it's for certain we have his pioneering efforts to thank every time we strap on our Nordic boots and head out on a trail. And depending where you ski, you may even be gliding on trails he blazed many years ago.

On "skis" (they were actually barrel staves in his early days) since the tender age of two, Jackrabbit

Johannsen attributed his long life to skiing and bushwhacking in the forests of Norway. He spent much of his youth skiing in the Telemark region of Norway, where skiing was a reliable means of transport, and long distances and winter camping were part of the experience.

With a background in mechanical engineering, he came to North America and settled in Cleveland selling heavy machinery. In 1922, he went into business for himself as a manufacturer's sales agent, and opened an office in Montreal. On weekends, he would travel 200 kilometres home to his family in Lake Placid.

Often seeking the harshest territories to sell his various machinery items, he would head into the Canadian bush with a dog pulling his supplies on a sled as he charged along on skis. He would impress new customers with his warm personality, sharp salesmanship and his remarkable ability to speak eight languages: Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, English, German, Spanish, French and Cree.

"I loved the combination of making money and enjoying adventure at the same time," he once said. "I couldn't believe my good luck. I had the woods practically to myself. Nobody wanted to go to Canada. Americans had funny ideas about Canada. They thought it was full of

bears walking in the streets."

In the 1920s, he often played a skiing game called Hare and Hound with friends around St. Sauveur in the Laurentians. He was always the hare, and so the nickname Jackrabbit was born. It was during his time in the Canadian wilderness, when playing the same game with his Cree friends, that he was bestowed the title of Okamacum-Wapoos — Chief Jackrabbit.

In 1932, he and his family moved permanently to Canada, settling in Piedmont in the Laurentians. The Depression forced Jackrabbit into unemployment, and while hunting to provide for his family, he began to see the benefits of this new lifestyle.

Jackrabbit began a new life in the wilderness. In 1932 he designed and oversaw the construction of the Montebello ski jump, a 100-metre-high run from a tower built on the top of a slope. He blazed trails at Mont Tremblant, Ste. Agathe, Ste. Marguerite, St. Sauveur, and elsewhere around the Laurentians.

Always available to promote skiing, he set race courses, awarded prizes and drew maps. But the project most dear to him was to design a ski trail to run from Labelle to Shawbridge.

Jackrabbit believed ski sports would generate significant revenue, and after failing to get the govern-



THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Herman 'Jackrabbit' Smith-Johannsen was always eager to blaze new skiing trails.**

ment onside, set out on his own. The Maple Leaf Trail, as it would be known, became a touring trail connecting inns over 128 kilometres through the mountains.

His love of skiing extended to downhill as well, and his knowledge and trail-blazing attitude helped develop downhill racing at Mont Tremblant and other locations.

Perhaps Jackrabbit's most important gift to skiing was his infectious enthusiasm for the Canadian wilderness. He encouraged anyone to spend a day outdoors in the fresh air. Often sought as a ski guide for visitors to the region, he happily complied, declining fees. "Why should I take money for something I love to do?" he'd say.

Many people can tell the story of

## Jackrabbit Johannsen career highlights

**1929:** Designed first Dominion Slalom Course in Shawbridge, Que.  
**1932:** Coach, Canadian Olympic Ski Team  
**1935:** Completed Maple Leaf ski trail  
**1950:** Competed in last official race at age 75  
**1967:** Established the Canadian Ski Marathon  
**1973:** Named to the Order of Canada, and Norway's Order of Olav  
**1980:** Jackrabbit League established as Canada's National Youth cross-country ski program

how Jackrabbit, two or three times their age, sped by them during the Canadian Ski Marathon: a race he helped build, and whose 45th anniversary wraps up today.

It was his passion for life, skiing and the outdoors that Jackrabbit became known as one of Canada's great skiing pioneers. He remained dedicated to the sport throughout his 111-year life, before he passed away peacefully shortly after returning to his native Norway. Jackrabbit Johannsen gave more than 60 years of his life to developing skiing in Canada. We are happier and healthier for it.

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