

Probing Question: What are the origins of skiing?

December 22 2009, By Traci Thomas



Swoosh...Undeniably, this is the sound of skiing. As winter approaches, legions of avid skiers are preparing their equipment. Skis are being waxed, boots are being pulled out of storage and people are yearning to get out on the frozen slopes and trails for a rush of speed. But did you ever wonder who were the ingenious people who first strapped planks onto their feet to glide over the snow?

Old Norse myths and stories suggest that Scandinavians have been [skiing](#) since ancient times, said Benjamin Hudson, professor of history and medieval studies at Penn State.

“The Norse god of winter named Ulf was said to travel on skis that were shaped like ships, so that he went over the ground as if he were going over the waves.”

However, making a definitive statement about the sport's origins is a slippery slope, Hudson said.

“The organic materials used for skiing equipment tended to decay rapidly,” he said, making it difficult to nail down the exact historical timeline of skiing's evolution. Without an abundance of organic evidence, historians must search for other clues in order to decipher where and when skiing began.

“The Byzantine writer Procopius (500 to 565 AD) makes the first historical reference to skiers and he claims that these were the Lapps,” Hudson said.

These aboriginal people of Northern [Europe](#), also called the Sami, are distinct from other early Norse peoples, and skiing may be part of that difference. “Procopius called the Lapps 'Skrid-Finns' which seems to mean 'slider' in archaic Old Norse and they seemed to have used skis made of wooden frames with leather coverings into which they put their feet,” he said, adding that present-day Lapps still rely on skiing for herding deer.

Other evidence provides additional glimpses into the origins of skiing. The earliest picture of a ski comes from a runic stone in Sweden, at Uppsala, and it dates to the 11th century, Hudson notes. Furthermore, in Icelandic sagas, ships are sometimes called the "skis of the sea."

Despite some remaining confusion about its exact origins, at some point skiing began the transition into the sport we know and love today.

“Skiing as sport began in the 19th century in Norway where races were organized in addition to ski jumping,” said Hudson. “The races were cross-country events, of which the principal was about 20 miles in distance. The ski jumping originally was simply using a steep hill with a

take-off platform. The sport soon traveled to other countries and was in Germany and Switzerland by the last quarter of the 19th century; it became popular in the U.S. by the 1920s.”

As you stand at the top of that next double black diamond, pondering your sanity, it may not matter much whether skiing was invented by the Norse or by the Lapps; but you may want to pray to Ulf - perhaps he can help you ski “over the ground as if you were going over the waves.”

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Probing Question: What are the origins of skiing? (2009, December 22) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-probing.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.