

My Story by Joseph Ernest (Ernie) Lennie

In Sally Manny's book, Guts and Glory: The Arctic Skiers Who Challenged the World, results were not really what mattered when it came to the performance of the Inuvik's Olympic Games skiers, of which Lennie was a crucial member. "Just think: they were the first generation removed from the land," Lennie said. "Their early years were spent hunting, trapping and fishing. Every day was a struggle for survival. To go from that to the Olympics-well to me, was remarkable.'

In the story of the T.E.S.T. (Territorial Experimental Ski Training) Program (1969), Coach Bjorger Petterson wrote, "Ernie is Canada's greatest cross-country potential, Last Easter at the age of 15, Ernie was beating the U.S. National Biathlon Team. He has developed a technique similar to the 'Kelly Express' and a training attitude similar to that of "Ciga Gronningen"! To me this 15 year old has an incomparable personality. He reasons well-good morals-leadership qualities-excellent worker-and a success at everything he tries.

As a former skier of Inuvik's T.E.S.T. Program, it was a long and arduous journey to come from a small isolated community of Tutita (Fort Norman) N.W.T. to the fast paced track world of Cross-Country Ski competition of Canada, United States, Scandinavia, Europe and Russia. It was a combination of cultural and future shocks all happening at once. There was no one breaking trail for us in a new game where we were the experiment to see if Native people could succeed at sports given the right coaching, equipment and incentive. What we did was ground breaking, history making and stuff made for movies but no one really has captured the true stories because you had to be there.

I was asked to share my experience after all these years because our accomplishments should not be forgotten. I have researched other Cross-Country Skiers who had similar results in Canada and they are recognized in there sports hall of fame and invited to share their experiences at special assemblies and special occasions to encourage other to reach for excellence in whatever they try to do, no matter what the circumstance. Our accomplishment were not just about results but about the human spirit to persist when no one believes in you but your stubborn will to keep going when the going gets tough.

I hear to many people complain about the weather now but it was a lot colder then. I grew up in a time when we just had outhouses and we had to walk down to the river to chop a hole in the ice two to three feet thick to get water. There were no organized sports and we skated on ponds. I guess you can say our training started at an early age when we had to pull our toboggan a couple of miles in those days to saw and chop wood for our wood stoves.

I didn't know it at the time but the outside world was already far ahead of us in sports culture, economics and social developments. It is only now that I can begin to comprehend what we were up against to succeed in another culture and world. It was truly an experience of cultural and future shock that we had to overcome while we were trying to compete with the rest of the country and the world.

Our accomplishment and results must be put into perspective to understand what we were up against at such a young age. I was a teenager when I qualified for the 1972 Winter Olympics by

placing third over all in the qualifying point system. They sent me home to Fort Norman (Tulita) because they said I was too young. It was my first blow of disappointment to have worked so hard and not reap the benefits of my accomplishments.

I remember not being able to ski very much because Fort Norman did not have any ski trails. No one new what I was going through and I was thinking of quitting because I was so disappointed because what I was trying to do didn't seem matter to anyone. Somehow after missing over a month of out on high caliber racing and tempo training, I was sent off to Middlebury, Vermont to race against America's best in the U.S. Junior Championships. I came third behind Tim Caldwell and Bill Koch, who two years later won a silver medal in the 1976 Winter Olympics.

When I look at my result in 1972 and 1973, I lost some ground because in order to be at the top of your game you had to compete with the best to be the best. While I was floundering with no competition and no tracks the United States and the Europeans treated their athletes like royalty I was proud of my friend Burt Bullock because when we traveled to Leningrad, Russia in 1973 for the World European Championships, he came in fourth place.

You had to be there to know because no one seems to recognize that we could be the best in the world if we were given the right support, motivation and encouragement.

Champion Profile

Lineage: Shotah Dene (Ross River, Nahanni Butte/Bear lake Area)
Birth: December 20, 1953
Birthplace: Aklavik, N.W.T. (On the Land)
Hometown: Tulita
Sport: Cross-Country Skiing

Career Highlights

1976 Winter Olympic Cross-Country Ski Team, Innsbruck, Austria
1975 Canada Cup, Best overall racer in the Country.
1974 Canadian Senior Champion, 30 kilometer Title
.1973 Member of Canadian Team ,World Junior Championship, Leningrad, Russia
1972 Canadian Winter Olympic Cross-Country Ski Trials Qualifier , Top Three
1972 American Junior Championship, Middlebury, Vermont, 3rd place.
1971 Canadian Senior Champions, 30 kilometer race, 3rd place.
1970 Canadian Junior Champion
1969 Canadian Junior Championships 8th place