



Graham Bell's Legends of Snow Sports #6

MIKE WIEGELE



he name Mike Wiegele is synonymous with heliskiing. His eponymous company, founded in 1970, has delivered perfect powder turns to many thousands of customers from across the

world. The Mike Wiegele Heli Village Resort at Blue River in British Columbia sits at the heart of the Cariboo and Monashee mountain ranges and covers 4,532sqkm, encompassing more than 1,000 peaks and runs. But Mike Wiegele the man is more than just a heliski operator. After heading to Canada from his native Austria at the age of 21, Wiegele worked his way up a personal ladder that included jobs as a carpenter, ski instructor, race coach responsible for the development of three Canadian World Cup winners, mountain guide and lodge builder. Wiegele has been inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame and received the Canadian Medal of Bravery for his role in a helicopter rescue in 1990.

Wiegele was born in Feiztritz, Austria in 1938, and grew up on his family's small farm on the Saualpe mountain in Carinthia, with two older brothers and two older sisters. He learnt to ski at two years old. "Being the fifth child meant everything I had was hand-me-down, so I started on skis that were way too long for me, because I never had anything new." A couple of years later, Wiegele thought he had found a foolproof way of getting some new skis all of his own. "I wanted to break my old skis, so I straight-lined towards the house pretending to be out of control, but when I hit it my skis were so flexible that they bent upwards and I smashed my face into the wall. So I broke my nose but not my skis."

By the time he was 13, Wiegele was a junior ski racer, and he built his own downhill run, including some massive jumps, on the family farm. At that time ski racing in Carinthia was not renowned, and it would be a few more years until the Austrian-born Olympic champion Franz

Klammer put the region on the map. The post-war years in Austria were tough and, after completing his national service, Wiegele was desperate to get away. He was fixated with Canada.

"My family always talked about Canada when I was a child, my grandparents worked there logging in the 1890s and my father worked on a farm there from 1928 to 1930. For me it was this dream destination – the land of the free was a very powerful image in my mind." So, in 1959, Wiegele travelled to Vienna to apply for a Canadian visa. "The embassy official asked me where in Canada I wanted to go, but my English was so bad, all I could tell him was – just Canada. He got out an atlas and flicking through I saw the famous picture of Banff Avenue with the Cascade Mountains behind, so I said, there, that's where I want to go – Banff."

In the early days, Wiegele worked as a carpenter during the summers in Calgary, the nearest town to Banff, where he skied and raced in winter. Afterwards he moved to Mont Tremblant, Quebec, as there were more ski employment opportunities there than in the resorts in the west, and qualified

as a ski instructor there in 1961. But it was when he was working in Sugar Bowl, California, after a year in Mont Tremblant, that the seed of an idea was sown by a fellow ex-pat Austrian. "Hannes Scroll, a larger-than-life character, and a real tough customer, had set up Sugar Bowl and managed the ski school. He gave me my orders: 'When you go back to Canada find yourself a mountain with the best snow, and build yourself a resort.' That advice always stuck in my mind."

Wiegele did move back to Canada and finally settled in Banff. By 1965 he had opened a ski school in Lake Louise and in 1966 he was certified as a Level 4 instructor by the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance. He married local girl Bonnie in 1967 and together they coached ski racing at the Lake Louise Ski Club. "Bonnie worked as a gymnastics coach, so I used her knowledge to set the right dry land programmes for the young ski racers." At the time Canada had not had a skier compete at the top level on the World Cup ski racing tour, something that Wiegele was keen to change. "I called the junior programme World Cup Preparation Training and focused on giving my racers plenty of experience of taking air. The one racer that stood out was ▶



FAST FACTS

• **Date of birth**
27/08/1938

• **Place of birth**
Feistritz, Austria

1959 Moves to Canada.

1966 Certified as a top level instructor by the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance

1967 Marries Bonnie and founded the Banff Alpine Racers and Bow Valley Quickies ski clubs

1970 Opens first heliskiing operation in Valemount, British Columbia

1974 Moves operations to Blue River

1990 Founds the Canadian Ski Guide Association and the Blue River Avalanche Research Centre. Awarded Canadian Medal of Bravery

2000 Elected into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame and inducted into the Honour Roll of Canadian Skiing

2006 Inducted into the Banff Sports Hall of Fame

2012 presented with a Golden Buckle award by friends for skiing over 84 million vertical feet, which inspired the Mike Wiegele Silver Buckle award for guests attaining one million vertical feet

◀ Mike Wiegele today, still guiding at 78. Opposite: Off piste in Sugar Bowl, California, in 1963

THE NORTH

a 14 year old called Ken Read. My coaching team and I used to let the racers hit a gap jump over a cat-track at the foot of the mountain, monitoring their start point. One day Ken straight-lined it from the top, he hit the jump and flew really high, way up above the trees. To show he was in control he turned his head and grinned at us while in the air, then landed the jump perfectly. I said to the other coaches, we have to stop this. But sure enough, Ken was jumping it again the next weekend. We knew he'd go far."

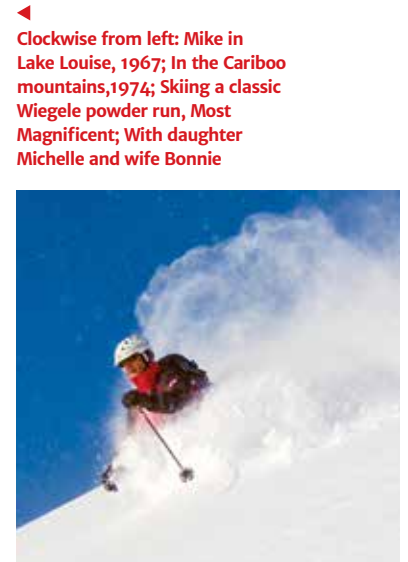
Ken Read went on to become the first North American to win a World Cup downhill, in Val d'Isère in 1975, aged 20. In 1980 he became the first non-European to win the two most famous downhill races – Wengen's Lauberhorn and Kitzbühel's Hahnenkamm. "Ken was without a doubt the most talented racer I ever coached, he could read a course and anticipate danger so well that it looked like he was never scared."

When he wasn't coaching and instructing, Wiegele loved taking ski tours into the backcountry between Alberta and British Columbia. His expedition buddy, mentor and best man at his wedding to Bonnie was the acclaimed mountain guide Hans Gmoser. "In those days we couldn't afford a helicopter or plane, so we would walk in and camp out on the mountains. You get a better idea of the area on foot, and over the years we learnt the secrets of the Caribos, Monashees and Selkirks."

Six years Wiegele's senior, Gmoser was a founding member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG). In 1957 he had founded Rocky Mountain Guides, and in 1965 was the first person to run heliskiing trips. His company eventually became heliski operator Canadian Mountain Holidays – CMH. A rift between the two developed when Wiegele announced he would start taking his Banff clients heliskiing. "I thought at first we could work together, but as soon as I started taking clients out, our friendship ended right then and there."

To say Mike Wiegele Heliskiing started small is something of an understatement. "In 1971, Ernie Moncrieff, one of my clients from the Banff ski school, wanted to go heliskiing, I said, if you pay for the helicopter, I will guide for free. I got to explore the area on his ticket and by the next season I was ready for my first paying customer. I'm still in touch with him, a dentist ▶

WIEGELE LOVED TAKING SKI TOURS INTO THE BACKCOUNTRY



◀ Clockwise from left: Mike in Lake Louise, 1967; In the Cariboo mountains, 1974; Skiing a classic Wiegele powder run, Most Magnificent; With daughter Michelle and wife Bonnie



CERTAIN IMAGES

called Dr Howard Ironstone, from Sudbury, Ontario – he’s the one that started us off.”

In those early days there were no regulations or permits, but Wiegele knew that to establish a base he would need to explore the area, draw out some boundaries and then apply for exclusive rights of use over the British Columbia Crown land. “The first time I went to the BC capital, Victoria, to see the minister in the early Seventies, I only got as far as his secretary, but verbal approval was given. ‘The minister says to keep skiing,’ is what she said. It took until 1976 for us to get a tenure of operation though, and as of 2013, we now have the rights until 2058.”

Before Wiegele settled on Blue River in 1974, he did his homework studying snowfall patterns across the Cariboo and Monashees. “I spoke to a lot of old-timers, railroad workers and loggers, but my real gold-mine of information was an old lady called Molly Nelson. She was of Norwegian descent and had kept detailed weather and snow records in Blue River. Everyone in the area said, ‘When it snows here the snowflakes are big and they fall straight’, and that meant there was very little wind to affect the snowpack.”

Wiegele steered the business through good and bad times, researching every outcome before making decisions. “When the recession hit in 1979 I delayed building the lodge, even though we had the foundations in the ground, and when

WIEGELE STEERED THE BUSINESS THROUGH GOOD AND BAD TIMES

the helicopter companies were struggling we bought our own helicopters, which we sold off again a couple of years later.

In the Seventies Wiegele had an idea to make skis shorter and wider to give better floatation in powder snow – little knowing that eventually this would totally revolutionise skiing. He pitched the idea to Fischer, which produced a prototype ski but the company wasn’t convinced of its marketability. Wiegele didn’t give up on the idea and in the early Nineties he tried again, this time with Atomic. “I went to see Rupert Huber, the race department boss, who was also a world-class racer and engineer, but the owner, Alois Rohrmoser, wasn’t interested. So Huber made a test pair to my specifications in the race department at night. I brought them back to Canada, but I didn’t use them straight away. Then one day I tried them on the last run, and what got my attention was how easy they were to ski. I skied them solidly for the

Mike Wiegele heli-guiding for the company in 2014



next three days and when I went back to my skinny skis, it was like my body had forgotten how to make a turn. I paid for 36 pairs of skis to be made, and when they turned up people were literally fighting over them.”

Off-piste skiing and flying helicopters in the mountains does not come without risk and Wiegele has not always been able to avoid tragedy. In 1990 at a powder-8s contest a helicopter Wiegele had chartered for transportation crash landed and burst into flames. “I sprinted up to the helicopter and started ripping the doors open and knocking in the windows. My legs were burning as I was pulling people out – my wife Bonnie was in the helicopter and I only just got her out in time.” Wiegele was awarded the Medal of Bravery by the Governor General of Canada for his actions, but four people lost their lives in the tragedy. “It was without doubt the saddest day of my life.”

Wiegele is extremely safety conscious and has developed a five-step avalanche safety programme, initially for his own operation but, seeing a gap in the industry, he has now shared it with others. The system is based upon a scientific method of forecasting avalanches that includes the study of a natural phenomena called cosmic solar radiation, and snowpack analysis, combined with a precise guiding procedure. “We study cosmic solar radiation because it can have a massive effect on

the snowpack,” Wiegele explains. “It’s the missing link for accurate forecasting. We haven’t had a single guest or guide caught in an avalanche in the past 13 years. I believe that we can make our operation 100 per cent safe, because I wouldn’t want to take a risk with anything less.”

Wiegele’s daughter Michelle has run the business since 2000 and, using local company Yellowhead Helicopters, the Mike Wiegele operation now has the capacity to take 120 people heliskiing per week. Wiegele himself enjoys spending more time with his “energetic” grandchild Charlie but is still, “of course”, skiing. Indeed, at 78 he’s still heli-guiding.

Over the years he has skied with world-class alpine skiers – including Austrians Marcel Hirscher and Anna Fenninger, and American Travis Ganong – as well as royalty (Princess Caroline of Monaco and King Juan Carlos of Spain), celebrities such as actor Kiefer Sutherland and Russian oligarchs, some of whom invested in the operation. Many repeat guests have been presented with the Mike Wiegele Silver Buckle, the badge of honour he devised for those hitting one million vertical feet with the company. And everyone who goes heliskiing with him can be sure that each day still starts with his legendary shout of “Let’s go skiing!”*

For more information about Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing visit wiegele.com.