

Sahalie's Connections to the Winter Olympics

By Dave Galvin

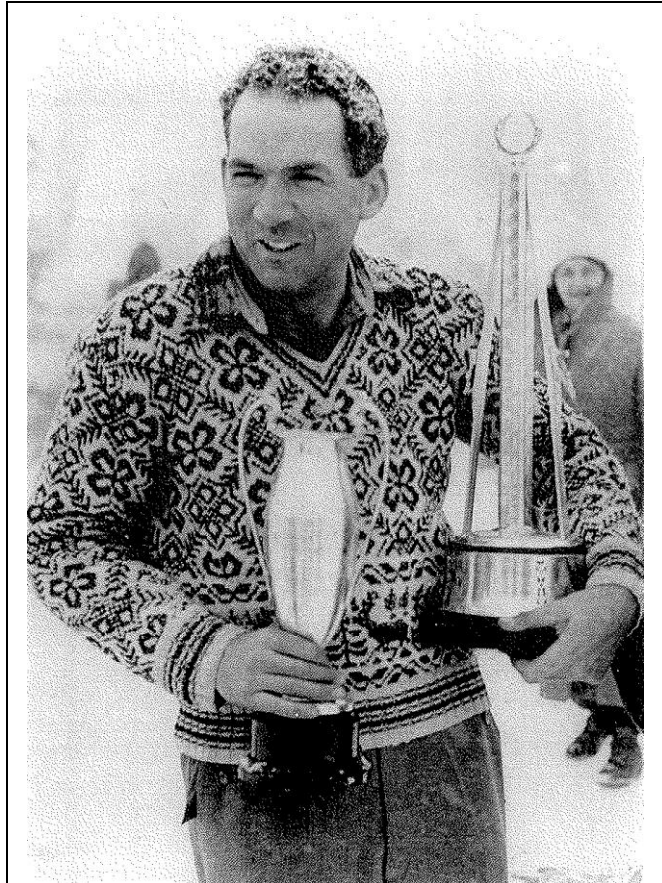
As the XXII (that's 22nd in American) Winter Olympiad gets underway in Sochi, it is worth remembering that Sahalie has at least three Olympic connections, two of them married to each other and the other via marriage, over the club's 83-year history.

In the beginning, there was **Don Fraser** and, later, **Gretchen Kunigk Fraser**.

When Sahalie Ski Club was formed, known at the time as Commonwealth Ski Club, in the 1931/'32 winter season, the main competitive skiing events internationally were in ski jumping and in "langlauf" or cross-country skiing – the historic "Nordic" events. Slalom and downhill were brand new and not yet sanctioned for Olympic competition. The first such "Alpine" events were held at the 1936 Olympics at Garmish-Partenkirchen in Germany.

A local guy by the name of **Don Fraser** was part of those Olympics – named for his alpine prowess but also a strong cross-country potential for the nascent U.S. Olympic Ski Team in 1936. Don grew up in Vancouver, Washington, and was among the very first competitive alpine racers in the Northwest in the 1930s. He was an early member of Commonwealth Ski Club, helping to teach alpine technique to the new club's members and organizing the early Carnivals. He was the "fox" in the third Commonwealth Ski Club Carnival in 1934 (age 21 at the time), chased by the rest of the club's "hounds" through the forest on their combined cross-country/downhill skis of the day; the winner was the hound who could wrest the long-tailed hat from the fox during the chase.¹

Don won the first Silver Skis race on Mt. Rainier in the spring of 1934 (while a student at U.W. as well as a member of the ski club), beating fellow Commonwealth skiers Hans Grage and brothers Ed and Harry Loners; the starting gun at Camp Muir was fired by Commonwealth member Otto Sanford. Don traveled to Europe by ship, working the whole time in order to pay for his passage, to join the U.S. Olympic team in 1936, but hit a tree during practices and ended up unable to race in the Olympic alpine events. He competed for one



Don Fraser accepting a second Silver Skis trophy in 1938.
(Photo from Luanne Pfeifer, 1996.)

of the four spots to represent the U.S. in the Nordic race, but didn't make the cut. Back at Mt. Rainier, Don won the Silver Skis a second time in 1938, and was named to the 1940 U.S. Olympic team. But disappointment again hit as the growing hostilities around the world resulted in cancellation of the 1940 games.

In the mid to late 1930s, Don was often accompanied on the trophy platform by a young skier named **Gretchen Kunigk**. Beginning in 1936 when she won her first ski race at Paradise at age 17, she quickly moved to the front of the competitive Northwest women's line. Gretchen was born in 1919 and grew up in Tacoma. Her Norwegian-born mother bought her skis when she was 13 and brought her to Paradise on Mt. Rainier, THE place to ski and be skeen during the 1930s. She was dazzled by the top racers of the day who skied there, names such as Ben Thompson, Alf Moystad, Hans Otto Geise and Don Fraser. She studied under Otto Lang, started winning races in 1936 and never stopped, often sharing the winner's platform with this guy, Fraser, including the 1938 Silver Skis. Otto asked her to sub for Sonja Henie in his ski films of this era, since Sonja of Olympic figure skating fame (three gold medals) couldn't progress past a snowplow at the time. *Thin Ice* and, most notably, *Sun Valley Serenade*

cemented her fame, even though Sonja got the Hollywood credits.

Lured by Averill Harriman to Sun Valley, Fraser and Kunigk continued to mingle in the competitive skier groups as well as among the Hollywood stars. Don finally proposed and they were married in Seattle in 1939.

During the Second World War, many of the best male skiers enlisted in the Mountain Troops that eventually coalesced into the 10th Mountain Division; the women mostly stayed home, volunteering at hospitals, filling in at war production and keeping the home fires burning. Don Fraser served as a gunnery officer for the Navy in the Pacific. After the war, skiing resumed with a passion, but Gretchen was rusty after the long layoff and almost didn't try out for the 1948 Olympic team. Encouraged by her husband, she traveled to Sun Valley and, at age 27, she won both the slalom on Ruud Mountain and the downhill on Baldy's Warm Springs, thus securing her place on the U.S. Women's Olympic Ski



Gretchen Kunigk Fraser with her soon-to-be-famous pig-tails, around the time of the Olympic tryouts in 1947. (Photo from Luanne Pfeifer, 1996.)

Team. She traveled by train across country and by ship to Europe to join athletes at St. Moritz, host of the V (5th) winter games in 1948. She was an unknown. All the best skiers of the day were European. Few had heard of Sun Valley let alone Paradise on Mt. Rainier in that pioneer outpost known as Washington State.

Gretchen proceeded to let her pig-tails fly, winning a **silver** in the Combined races (slalom and downhill), the first ever Olympic skiing medal for an American. The next day she bested the field to win **gold** in the Special Slalom race. Two American ski medals, by a pig-tailed, fresh-faced young woman from the American West! Nobody outside the Northwest had ever heard of Gretchen Fraser before St. Moritz, but within days she was all over the international news, feted to a tickertape parade upon her return to the States, and featured on the front of *Wheaties* boxes from 1948 to 1953.

In the 1970s, when the Seattle Ridge part of Baldy was developed at Sun Valley, a special run there was dedicated as "Gretchen's Gold," similar to Alpentals "Debbie's Gold" closer to home and commemorating a later (1984) Olympic connection.

Gretchen and Don lived in Vancouver, WA, for many years before eventually retiring to Sun Valley, where they both were considered local royalty; where they both were selected to the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame; and where they both passed away within a month of each other in 1994.²

Sahalie Ski Club's other Olympic connection happens by way of Aaron Blaker, who grew up in the club, son of Arnie and Mary Blaker. Aaron married **Sondra Van Ert** (pronounced "van Air"), of Sun Valley fame. People in the know claim that Sondra is part of the same Sun Valley royalty as Picabo Street, Christin Cooper and, yes, Gretchen Fraser: a true celebrity, with snow cred, not like those Hollywood Sun Valley types.

Sondra won many races, first as an alpine skier and later as a snowboarder. As far as I can determine she is the only American Olympian who raced in both Alpine events and Snowboard events on the world stage. She has been called



Sondra Van Ert and Aaron Blaker at Baldy Sports in Hailey, ID. (Photo from *Sun Valley Magazine*.)

“one of the most accomplished winter athletes in America.”³

An Alpine racer in the 1980s, Sondra finished sixth in the 1986 NCAA giant slalom while skiing for the University of Utah, and she added a downhill silver medal in the 1987 World University Games.

Later Sondra took to snowboarding and picked up four national titles and four World Championship medals.

At the 1998 Olympic games in Nagano, Japan, Sondra was the only woman snowboarder on the U.S. team who managed to finish the tough course conditions, ending up 12th in the final standings. In a moving story published at the time, she was caught overcome by emotion at the finish line: “The 33-year-old former Utah resident was overcome by her own Olympic moment. On a day when conditions were far from the best and the 1997 world champion admittedly didn't ski her best, she still enjoyed her Olympic experience. ‘This is the greatest thing I've ever done in my life,’ said Van Ert as tears tracked down her cheek.”⁴

She was a member of the 2002 U.S. Olympic Team for the games in Salt Lake City, Utah, after racking up a half dozen gold medals at the U.S. Snowboarding Championships. She ended up finishing 17th in the 2002 games. At the end of the 2003/04 season she finished her last Snowboard World Cup race at the age of 40 years.

A neat documentary video of Sondra's competitive career is available at: <http://vimeo.com/5808633> . You need to watch this five-minute clip.

Sondra and Aaron now live in Hailey, Idaho, where they run Baldy Sports. See the article about them in Sun Valley Magazine, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=9&ved=0CF4QFjAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sunvalleymag.com%2FSun-Valley-Home-and-Design%2FFall-2013%2FGet-Out-There%2Findex.php%3Fcparticle%3D3%26siarticle%3D2&ei=l8_cUpPoL5SxoQTC-4CYDQ&usq=AFQjCNGRq5jMiG7O09bYaOb82jmlePMYIA&sig2=bycCZ1uEu4fs36m5Lt8Cag .

Celebrate Olympic skiers and snowboarders in the upcoming Sochi Olympiad. Remember the connection Sahalie Ski Club has to the very first American Olympic ski medals and to recent triumphs by our snowboarding friend Van Ert. Keep the torch burning – who knows what kids riding Sahalie's rope tow today might be tomorrow's medalists.

- Dave Galvin, Sahalie Ski Club (© Copyright 2014, Dave Galvin, galvind53@gmail.com) (Updated 2/9/2014)

For a lovely summary of Gretchen Fraser's life, read *Gretchen's Gold: The Story of Gretchen Fraser, America's First Gold Medalist in Olympic Skiing* by Luanne Pfeifer, published in 1996. I have a copy of the book if you'd like to borrow it.

Google “Sondra Van Ert” to find lots of coverage of this amazing athlete. Or talk to Arnie and Mary – they will be happy to enthuse about their daughter-in-law.

¹ “Ski Programs on Tap Today,” *Seattle Sunday Times*, March 18, 1934, pp. 23, 25.

² Luanne Pfeifer (1996), *Gretchen’s Gold: The Story of Gretchen Fraser, America’s First Gold Medalist in Olympic Skiing*, Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing.

³ Quote is from Jen Grace Productions’ film about Sondra Van Ert, found at: <http://vimeo.com/5808633> .

⁴ Scott Taylor (1998), “Tears of joy end Van Ert’s Olympic dream,” *Desert News*, February 10, 1998.