

# *Father Mouchet's remarkable*

## INUVIK SKIERS

By GINNY HILL WOOD



*David Cook of Inuvik displays the technique that has resulted from the vigorous TEST program for Native skiers at Inuvik.*

Alaska Sportsman

Scandinavians may have to look to their laurels in cross-country ski competition in the future if junior skiers from the Canadian Arctic keep up their improvement in training and technique. And winners of Nordic events in the next winter Olympics could well be Indians and Eskimos.

Skiers and spectators who watched the U.S. Junior National Ski Championship cross-country events last March at Alyeska near Anchorage were treated to a display of superb style and technique spiced with a determined will-to-win by a group of Native youths, who flew out of the north to capture first place in individual competition for both boys and girls. The girls' team also won the relays with the boys losing out by twenty-nine seconds over four laps of a five kilometer course to the Alaska team.

Fred Kelly, a seventeen-year-old Indian lad from Ft. Good Hope on the Mackenzie River, took first place in the ten kilometer race and posted the fastest time of any competitor in his lap of the relays.

Shirley Firth, a shy, slightly-built Eskimo girl of fifteen from Inuvik, lived up to her record (she won the U.S. Junior





Ginny Wood

*Roseann Allen and Shirley Firth take off on the start of a five kilometer race at Fairbanks. These two with Shirley's twin sister, Sharon, won the relay event for Canada at this year's U.S. Junior National Championships at Alyeska.*

Nationals at Montana last year and the Canadian title this year) by winning the five kilometer girls' individual event. Her twin sister, Sharon, was right behind her in second place, with Roseann Allen from Aklavik taking fourth. The three of them won the relay event for Canada, beating a strong Alaskan team, while the Canadian second team from Inuvik placed third—ahead of number one teams from the U.S. Rocky Mountain, Eastern, Central, and Northwest divisions.

In mid-April, in a relay race in Top of the World Ski Meet, Inuvik, the cross-country relay team of Fred Kelly, Dave Cook and John Turo beat the U. S. Army biathlon ski team. Shirley Firth won in the women's competition.

How can remote villages in a land of sub-zero temperatures and few winter daylight hours produce cross-country ski champions? One reason is Father J. M. Mouchet, an Oblate priest, who first introduced cross-country skiing to the village of Old Crow on the upper Porcupine River a decade ago. Father Mouchet had been a top drawer skier and an instructor in his native France before coming to Canada. He saw skiing as a natural for native youths of the north.



Ginny Wood

*Father J.M. Mouchet (right) introduced cross-country skiing to the village of Old Crow, then went on to start the Inuvik training program. With him on the porch of the Inuvik ski lodge is James Mahaffey, coach of the Alaska Methodist University ski team.*

The physical endurance of Indians and Eskimos combined with an environment where snow lies on the ground for half the year would give them an advantage in competition if they could master the techniques of the sport and maintain the will to stick with long hours of grueling training.

During the years that Father Mouchet was at Old Crow, skiing became a way of life for the whole village. Starting with castoff equipment donated by ski clubs in the United States, the whole village became involved. Those too old to actively participate became officers of the Old Crow Ski Club which, in effect, became the village council. Youngsters without equipment took part in training exercises that would help them when they did get skis.

The people of Fairbanks, Alaska, were amazed one March in the early '60's to see a hitherto unknown group of native skiers from a remote Canadian Athabaskan Indian village come down to the Winter Carnival to take top honors in skiing events.

Then Father Mouchet went to Inuvik, the new town built by the Canadian government to replace Aklavik, thirty





Ginny Wood

*Eskimo and Indian skiers from Old Crow and Inuvik were more excited about seeing their first horse than winning the races at Fairbanks last winter.*

miles away, which was sinking in the mud of the Mackenzie River delta. Most of the people of Aklavik remained there after the new town was built, but others moved into the new model community less than fifty miles from the Arctic Ocean.

Besides becoming a center for government agencies, Inuvik was chosen as the location of the consolidated boarding school for primary and secondary students from villages all over the District of Mackenzie from Banks Island to Ft. Norman. It was among students at the Alexander Mackenzie school, 100 miles above the Arctic Circle, that the Territorial Experimental Ski Training (TEST) program was developed.

The object of TEST was to determine if the Indian and Eskimo youths of the Yukon and Northwest Territories could be motivated to higher general personal achievement through competitive athletics; and to investigate the potential of northern youths to make the best of their environment by excelling in

competitive cross-country ski racing at the national and international level. It was felt that many native youths lacked the pride and motivation necessary for success in the modern competitive world in which they were being forced to live.

In the fall of 1968, Bjorger Pettersen, former Canadian cross-country ski champion, was brought back from his native Norway to act as coach of the racing team while Father Mouchet continued as chief investigator of the TEST program. Last year, financed by the Canadian government, Pettersen took his team of native youths to cross-country ski meets all over Canada, Alaska, and to the U.S. Junior Nationals in Montana. This year he also took them to Norway and Sweden for competition.

Despite the extreme cold, the Inuvik skiers train all winter, even at temperatures of forty below. Over two miles of their extensive ski trail system in the hills adjacent to their school is lighted, for darkness is a major problem

at this latitude. Training starts in the fall with cross-country running over the tundra. Last year over 250 Indian and Eskimo youths turned out for the sport. After completing 125 miles of trail practice on surplus army skis after the snow falls, a skier is outfitted with regular narrow racing skis and special cross-country boots. He (or she) is then eligible to try for the racing team. By Christmas racers have logged over 300 miles on the trails, mostly skiing in temperatures below zero. When the almost continuous sunlight of May has melted the last of the snow on the trails, some have skied over 1,000 miles during the season.

Inuvik skiers have set an example for the Natives of Alaska to emulate. This year, Lathrop High School in Fairbanks has two Eskimo girls on the varsity team. One of them, Louisa Stine, from Point Barrow, started skiing for the first time last fall, yet she qualified as an alternate on the Alaska team for the Junior



*Two Eskimo girls from Banks Island, 350 miles northeast of Inuvik, were guests of a Fairbanks skier when they came south to compete for the Inuvik Ski team in a cross-country ski meet with Alaskan junior racers.*

Nationals. Fort Yukon has taken up the sport, sending a team of Indian youths to compete at Fairbanks races this year.

The trophies that the Inuvik skiers have taken home with them from both Canadian and American meets attest to the success of the TEST program and give promise of a Native world cross-country ski champion. But more important than the trophies has been the change in the Native youths themselves. Said their coach, Bjorger Pettersen:

"I am indescribably proud of the team and the victories they have won, but even more, I am impressed with the changes occurring in the team members. They have changed from timid youngsters to self-confident young adults. Through cross-country racing and training they have learned sportsmanship—that one cannot always win and that life is full of defeats. They learn that defeat means only another chance to try harder. They learn, as in real life, work input equals work output. Most important of all, from this program they learn to work with determination for the things they want to procure in life."



Ginny Wood

*Shirley Firth and Fred Kelly after winning first place in individual competition at the U.S. Junior National Ski Championships at Alyeska.*

Alaska Sportsman



*Bjorger Pettersen, present coach of the Inuvik ski team, poses with a group of his racers who have been taking top honors in competition in Canada and the United States. Left to right back row: John Turo, Roger Allen, Maurice Lennie, Harold Cook, Anita Allen, Fred Kelly. Front row: Sharon Firth, Janet Tourangeau, Pettersen, Shirley Firth, Roseann Allen.*

Courtesy of Bjorger Pettersen

