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Article published Feb 18, 2007

'A legend in the ski world'

Kåre Andersen brought the telemark technique to Vermont, and at 90 he remains its biggest champion

It was 1973, and Dickie Hall had brought his wooden Nordic skis to Killington to try this funky bent-knee turn he had heard about, a turn pioneered in Norway in the 19th century as a way to navigate downhill on cross-country skis so as not to careen headlong into the shrubbery. Dubbed the telemark turn (after a town in Norway), it was largely forgotten during the 20th century as alpine skiing – with feet parallel and firmly affixed to the ski, both heel and toe – became the faster and more glamorous way to stay upright on skis.

Hall, a cross-country skier from Waitsfield, and a few friends decided to resurrect the archaic ski technique. "We thought we were the only telemark skiers on the planet," he remembers.

But then they saw an apparition skiing down the trail, a "handsome Norwegian ski god" gracefully turning, almost dancing — one ski thrust back, the other knee bent, then a fluid slide into the next turn.

"Hello, boys!" the knicker-clad Norwegian said cheerfully as he stopped next to them.

"Where the heck did you come from?" a slack-jawed Hall remembers asking.

"My name is Kåre," said the barrel-chested skier, with a smile and twinkle in his eye. "I'm from Norway."

They skied a run with Kåre (pronounced Corey). "Then he disappeared and left us with our mouths open," Hall says.

But Kåre Andersen did not really disappear. Over the past three decades, he has not only helped revive telemark skiing, but he has been its most ardent promoter, a "televangelist," if you will. The discipline has moved far beyond the early days of skiing downhill on thin wooden cross-country skis. Today, telemark equipment consists of high-tech fiberglass and composite skis that closely resemble their alpine cousins. It includes hefty plastic boots that bend slightly at the toe and hinge at the ankle, and that require sturdy metal cable bindings. The equipment allows skiers to climb uphill in the backcountry – with climbing skins, which are fabric strips that stick with adhesive to a ski bottom and prevent the ski from sliding backwards as the skier moves uphill.

Since retiring from his career as a tailor, Kåre has pursued his home country's sport with such passion and enthusiasm that he has become a legend in the ski world. Among the growing number of telemark skiers, he is known simply as Kåre – a fact underscored by the

credits in the film, "Unparalleled," a 2001 movie produced by a University of Vermont graduate that documents the modern telemark ski movement.

And Kåre hasn't stopped. Now, at age 90, he still teaches telemark skiing by appointment at Bromley Mountain in Peru, and he runs a well-known race at Bromley, which over its 22-year history has become a reunion of freeheel skiers (freeheel is the new hip word to describe telemark skiing).

Standing as upright as ever, Kåre still approaches life with that big grin, his blue eyes twinkling. He's quick to offer a slice of his homemade fyrstekake, a Norwegian almond torte – of which he makes more than 50 each winter – and a shot of aquavit, the potent Scandinavian liquor named after the Latin phrase aqua vitae, or water of life. It's all part of the good life, and he just wants to share.

Kåre was born in Kolbotn, Norway – a small village a few miles southeast of Oslo – on Oct. 1, 1916, the youngest of five children. His father was an upholsterer – among his clients was the king of Norway – and Kåre picked up his father's talent for working with fabrics and patterns. But his father died when Kåre was a baby, leaving Kåre's mother and his sisters to raise him. He credits his mother with passing on "a good dose of common sense" and the inclination to give with an open heart.

"My mother always told me when you walk out in the world, keep your hands open," he says, with a strong Norwegian accent, palms open and facing up. "You can give and receive with open hands. Nothing comes to a closed fist."

Kåre became a well-respected tailor in Oslo, and opened his own shop in 1941, while German forces occupied Norway. He held on during the war years, making a living off regular customers.

"I was lucky. I could carry on with my own business. We just had to be careful. My brother was in the underground. But I'm not a fighter; I'm a lover," he said with a chuckle.

In 1952, one of his sisters, Elna, went to India as a missionary and persuaded Kåre and their mother to join her. Mrs. Andersen died shortly after arriving in India, but Kåre stayed and found a job in New Delhi as a tailor for a Scottish clothier, Ranken & Co., which made military uniforms. Among its customers were Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and his brother, the Duke of Harrar.

Kåre continued working in India until his employment permit expired, returned to Norway, where he found that the building housing his former shop had been demolished, then decided to "check out" North America.

After working briefly in Canada, he was hired by fashionable men's clothier Fenn-Feinstein in New Haven, Conn., in 1958.

He soon became the clothier's top designer and was making suits for the likes of Henry Ford and Sargent Shriver, a Yale alumnus and brother-in-law of John F. Kennedy. One day in early 1961, the newly elected president asked Shriver who had made his well-cut suit.

Shriver offered to introduce Kennedy to Kåre, who fit the president for the first time during "the Cuban fiasco" (the Bay of Pigs). The only thing Kåre remembers was Kennedy's fidgeting.

"I'm telling you, while I was taking his measurements, he was reading a book, pouring tea and talking to that little fat guy – what's his name? (press aide Pierre) Salinger? – all at the same time," Kåre was quoted as saying in a Nov. 15, 1964, article in the New Haven Register. "He kept asking me if I was through, and I kept telling him no. But I figured I better work fast."

On Nov. 22, 1963, Kåre was fitting Shriver for four suits when the phone rang in Shriver's office. "Oh my God, they've shot the president," Kåre recalls Shriver saying after he hung up. "(Shriver) was out the door. He was like a whirlwind."

Asked about his immediate reaction to the assassination, and Kåre pauses and replies: "I thought 'Oh my God, this is terrible.'"

After another pause, he adds, "He was probably shot in one of my suits."

Kåre still has an autographed photo of Kennedy proudly displayed in his living room.

He retired from tailoring in 1973 and moved to Vermont, into a trailer on land in Londonderry that he had purchased with friends he had met in a Scandinavian singing group in Connecticut. (Kåre, a tenor, often breaks out spontaneously into song.) He still lives there, sharing the trailer with his old dog Bubba. He is twice married – once in Norway and once in the United States – and twice divorced, with no children. "They can't live with me; I'm too fussy," he says of women. Bubba, however, doesn't seem to mind.

With Magic Mountain down the road, he started skiing again – a sport he enjoyed as a child back when one pair of skis did it all – cross-country, jumping, downhill. "I went to school on skis," he says. "On the way back, we stopped by the jump. In my village, we had a 50-meter jump. ... It was a big jump in those days."

Like most kids, Kåre also spent his youth exploring the woods on skis. "We bushwhacked. That's all we did. ... That's how you really learn to get balance. You go into the woods. You break trail yourself. Sometimes, you don't even know where you're going. That's what I'd like to see kids do here."

His debut at Magic was met with quizzical stares. With the tips of his skis sticking high above the snow, he linked split-leg, bent-knee telemark turns down the slopes – the same stance he used when he landed off the 50-meter jump in Norway. "People looked at my skis and asked what those things were on my feet," he remembers.

Not that he cared. Soon, he was teaching telemark skiing with such enthusiasm that he gathered a following of converts. "Anyone who meets him is enthralled with his spirit," says Hall, who founded the North American Telemark Organization, or NATO, in the early 1980s. "His view is the more you enjoy skiing, the more you enjoy life."

This is a long held Norwegian attitude. According to ski historian E. John. B. Allen in his book "From Skisport to Skiing," the Norwegians don't consider skiing so much a sport as a

religion. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they used the word "idraet" to describe it. Idraet suggests skiing offers more than physical exercise, explains Allen. It is a way to perfect the soul.

For Kåre, telemark is skiing, and he says as much. "On telemark skis, you can do anything," he says, "cross-country, uphill walking, 'tele' turns, parallel turns."

"You see the mountain top in the distance, and you wonder if you can make it," he says of climbing on skis outside the bounds of lift-served resorts. "You're dying. You're breaking trail. Then you ski down before dark. You eat dinner, go to bed, you sleep like a baby." He sways as he tells this story, as if he wants to get up and dance around the room. And that smile. Always that smile.

Kåre taught me to telemark ski in 1998. Initially reluctant to learn a sport that I associated with wool knickers and bearded-men who bathed irregularly, I took a lesson from Kåre only after my husband said I could not "diss" the sport until I had tried it.

There Kåre and I were on a clammy December day, and he was clearly thrilled to be teaching a newcomer. "I just love to get people on telemark skis," he said glowing with that smile.

There was some initial instruction: "Pretend you are bending down to pick up a sewing needle while wearing a tight skirt," he said; and "It's like dancing." In fact, he really was dancing down a beginner trail, gently curtsying with each turn. Even his old-world chauvinism seemed charming. I couldn't help but smile with him. The rented boots hurt my feet, and I flailed on more than one turn, sometimes unable to remember which leg was thrust backwards (always the uphill ski). But Kåre had warmed my heart.

"You practice three or four times," he said as the lesson ended. "Then you come back for a check-up, so I can yell at you," then a chuckle.

In 2002, the Professional Ski Instructors of America gave Kåre a lifetime award "for all the work he has done for us in the East and across North America," says PSIA Nordic coordinator Mickey Stone, who recently named his infant son after Kåre. "The man constantly motivates men, women, children, older people to do new things and to never be afraid to try," he adds.

In the early 1980s, Kåre became involved in telemark racing as a participant and promoter and had no qualms about approaching manufacturers and distributors for telemark boots, skis and bindings to use as prizes. With his joie de vivre, most businesses found it hard not to jump on Kåre's bandwagon.

"He would show up at Merrell every year with his special cake and aquavit," remembers John Schweizer, who worked for Merrell Footwear of Williston, then a manufacturer of leather telemark boots. The folks at Merrell welcomed and supported him, said Schweizer, who is now president of Garmont USA, the American division of the Italian boot maker.

Schweizer supports Kåre and his endeavors and reports that it was the Norwegian who

persuaded him to start manufacturing telemark boots for children. The company now makes two kids' models.

"Kåre has been one of the instigators in the East," says Schweizer. "He's the only guy interested in skiers beyond selling a product (to them). He is interested in passing on his enthusiasm for the sport. His contribution has been more about the core of the sport, not the business of the sport. I've always admired him for that."

In 1986, Kåre started his own telemark race at Magic, but then moved it to Bromley years ago after Magic closed down. Initially, the race was a long giant slalom course with a jump in the middle. Kåre wanted the race to bear some semblance to the sport of his youth: He had racers flying off the jump and landing in a bent-knee telemark stance.

In recent years, Kåre has shortened the course but kept the jump, and has added a cross-country section where racers fly off the jump, head far across the slope, then ski uphill briefly before continuing down to the finish.

"He's a great example of love of the sport," says Jason Moore, program director for the Bromley Outing Club, which helps run Kåre's race. "He's more enthusiastic every year. Most older people rest on their laurels. His enthusiasm never waivers."

Kåre's old friend Hall, who through NATO has taught more than 40,000 people to telemark ski at regular clinics, refers to Kåre as "Dad" and is deeply moved by the Norwegian's passion for telemark skiing and for life. It's more than enthusiasm.

"It's like sparkle dust," he says. "It's just who he is. ... At a telemark clinic recently, he brought in his special cake and we were sitting in this very busy base lodge. He stood up and sang Silent Night in Norwegian with such pure intention that the whole place fell silent. He's very unabashedly passionate. He's a real gem."

Kåre shows no signs of slowing down yet claims this is the last year he will run his annual race. Asked about his age, he says: "I don't even think about it. I'll probably drop dead here on the slopes one day."

Hall says that Kåre's dream is to win the Publisher's Clearing House sweepstakes and hold a huge telemark festival at Bromley that would be free for everyone, especially children. Asked about this idea, Kåre says – with unusual seriousness – that he wants to write a letter to the sweepstakes company and tell them his plans for the money. He seems convinced they will grant him the money once they know what good will come of it.

It sounds naïve, but it's pure Kåre.

"He has this aura about him," says Stone, who has known Kåre for over 20 years.

"He leaves everyone with a warm feeling. Like the aquavit. You sip it and get a special warm feeling."

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