

Nordic legends glide back in time to 1960

By Susan Wood and Kathryn Reed

TAHOE CITY – Medals won decades ago, patches that show little wear despite being 50 years old, ski bibs from the eighth Winter Olympiad – they were all in vogue Friday night at the Nordic Legends Dinner.

Some of these athletes, groomers, patrollers and other participants from the 1960 Squaw Valley Games seemed to have the bravado that would allow them to compete next month in Canada if they wanted to.



Nordic Legends
Dinner at
Granlibakken
in Tahoe City
on Jan. 15.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

But on this particular night it was all about Squaw – what it meant to these men and women.

Granlibakken, which had a rich history before these nearly 250 people came together, was full of chatter as people recalled what it was like to bring the Games to the North Shore. The dinner was just one of many events during Olympic Heritage

Week, which ends today, in honor of Squaw Valley's 50th anniversary of hosting the Games.

The dinner featured various stations dishing out international food and a heavy-hitter lineup of skiers, competitive athletes, groomers, coaches and volunteers sharing stories about an event steeped in history, unity and goodwill.

Three large screens depicted still photos and film shot at the VIII Winter Olympics as well as crews making it all a reality.

Here are a just a few of the people from the dinner and their stories:

Chummy Broomhall

It's hard to believe Chummy Broomhall was born in 1919. His enthusiasm for Nordic



Chummy
Broomhall

events is practically contagious. He didn't compete in the 1960 Games, instead, he is credited with designing the cross country trails for those Games and 20 years later in Lake Placid.

But he knows a thing or two about the sport. He competed in the 1948 and 1952 Games, and was in the 10th Mountain Division during World War II.

Squaw's owner, the late Alex Cushing, brought Broomhall out to determine where best to put the cross country course.

Broomhall had it all figured out – the valley between Squaw and what is now Alpine.

“I told the Olympic Committee they used up all my terrain,” Broomhall said after he came back to Squaw and saw the development in preparation for the Games. He came up with Plan B – near McKinney Creek in what is now Sugar Pine Point State Park.

Broomhall told *Lake Tahoe News* after the dinner he’s excited to see the Olympics return to the West.

“I’ve heard they have nice facilities, but bad weather can jinx the Games,” he warned.

He should know. Broomhall is known for his uncanny ability to battle the weather and move snow around with one of the earliest grooming machines.

Broomhall is a saint of sorts among the sports competitors. He was considered the “chief of the course” of the 1960 Olympic Games.

Mother Nature aside, Broomhall beamed when he spoke of how skiing and working at the Olympics changed his life forever. That’s why he admitted to feeling so connected to the people in the room – even if he didn’t know everyone. Dinner attendees swarmed him like they do a rock star.

He put the attendees in stitches with his colorful stories and his rendition of a cautionary ode to skiers.

Although cross country skiing doesn’t receive the attention in the United States as it does in Europe, Broomhall isn’t convinced it’s a dying sport. He’s comforted by the youth taking it up. A group tried out the course he originally groomed for the Squaw Games, the first to test the restored tracks near Tahoe City.

Hart Axley

Hart Axley, a member of the 1960 Winter Games ski patrol, launched the dinner with a toast, wearing his original ski patrol jacket and distinctive hat.



Hart Axley

Its 105 pins on one side are dedicated to Rocky Mountain destinations, with one noting he's a member of the Colorado Ski Hall of Fame. The Coloradan rarely misses the tight-knit National Ski Patrol reunions in Winter Park, Colo. On the other side of the hat, a row of Olympic pins made it obvious why the evening was important to him. The rest mark ski resorts from everywhere beyond Colorado, including one of Heavenly Valley.

In addition to working on the ski patrol of the Tahoe Olympics, Axley managed the flag detail.

He's also a heck of a singer – he led the audience in a rousing rendition of “God Bless America.”

Joe Pete Wilson

Joe Pete Wilson competed on the U.S. Nordic team in 1960 and says Squaw is still special to him.

“The Olympic Field House was awesome. It provided part of the mystique of Squaw Valley,” Wilson said. “Squaw Valley set the standard for all future Winter Olympic sites.”



He remembers Walt Disney choreographing entertainment every night. Disney also created the Opening Ceremonies.

He said the media was great, joking that, “Even the *New York Times* could locate California.”

Camaraderie was a huge part of his experience in 1960 and later as a coach.

After Wilson laid out a beautifully crafted story of the experience of the 1960 Winter Games at Squaw, he told *Lake Tahoe News* the event and subsequently this dinner were “the high point of my life.”

Laszlo Fono

At age 81, competitive skier Laszlo Fono recalled escaping war-torn Hungary with



Laszlo Fono

wife Paulette and two pairs of cross country skis in pursuit of a better life in the United States. He won the National Nordic Championships in 1959. He wore that medal Friday night.

“It’s my love. It’s in my blood,” he said of skiing, as images from 1960 flashed behind him.

Fono donated those 210cm wooden Nordic skis for the Olympic

museum that will be built near the Ehrman Mansion on the West Shore.

“It’s the memory of this,” he said of why he came.

He remembers going to the gold medal hockey game and losing his voice as he cheered for the U.S.

The Fonos ended up in Atherton, south of San Francisco. They have maintained a 69-year friendship with fellow skier and Hungarian Martin Hollay of South Lake Tahoe.

A cast of hundreds

Hollay, who helped design the Nordic trail, was at the dinner, saying he enjoyed seeing his old friends.

U.S. Olympic hockey team right wing Weldon Olson agreed.

“We always like to see each other,” he said.

It was the 1960 hockey team that is the true Dream Team – having beat Russia at a time when it was only amateurs on the ice.

Olson came to the dinner wearing his Olympic team jacket.

Paul Johnson, another member of the gold medal hockey team, remembered the stadium was almost empty by the time the final game was over because it was played so late at night.

People affiliated with Sierra Nevada College got many of the jobs in 1960. One dinner attendee talked about being responsible for keeping the women from using the sauna that was on the men’s side and the funny stories associated with that.



Candace Cable,
Chummy
Broomhall,
Martin Hollay

Candace Cable, a well decorated Paralympian, has a wealth of praise for Broomhall. She reminded the crowd that it was 1960 that the Paralympics started to be staged in the same city as the Olympics, though that didn't happen until the 1970s for winter sports.

She made sure sit skis were on the Nordic trail the next day when many from this gathering re-enacted the biathlon race (with lasers, not guns) at Sugar Pine Point.

Peter Lahdenpera, who was on the Nordic relay and competed in biathlon, talked about having two left skis waxed just before he was to ski the anchor lap. A screwdriver was found at the last minute so bindings could be changed.

Mac Miller, a fellow teammate, said it was incredible to walk into the stadium, just being there to represent your country.

Bill Lindemann, interpretive specialist with the Sierra District of the California State Parks, emceed the event.

He said the tiller Broomhall used to groom the Nordic tracks should be restored by this summer. It was the state parks system that inherited much of what was built for the Olympics.

That evening it was mentioned that only 1 in 500,000 U.S. residents will become an Olympian. That makes Lake Tahoe all that more special with the contingent that is likely to

descend upon Vancouver, British Columbia, next month.

Thirty flags hung in the dining hall to honor each country that had been at Squaw. Lindemann reminded the audience that the five rings making up the symbol of the Olympics represent the continents coming together in peace for peaceful competition.

Publisher's note: *On Jan. 20 read about the memories one South Lake Tahoe resident has from running the Olympic torch in 2002.*