

Squaw's Heuga dies at 66

By USSA

LOUISVILLE, Colo. – Olympic medalist Jimmie Heuga, a star of the 1964 Olympic Winter Games and one of the U.S. Ski Team's greatest ski racers, died Feb. 8.

His death came on the eve of the Olympics in Vancouver and 46 years to the day after his medal. Heuga, who was bronze behind Billy Kidd's silver in the 1964 Olympic slalom, was 66.

"Jimmie Heuga was a champion in every sense of the word," said U.S. Ski Team President and CEO Bill Marolt, who skied with Heuga on the 1964 Olympic Team. "He was a champion as an athlete, as a person and any way you want to measure him.



Billy Kidd with teammate and bronze medalist Jimmy Heuga.

Photo/U.S. Ski Team/Tom Kelly

"We always talk about toughness – you heard about it in the Super Bowl this weekend," added Marolt. "When I look back at all the athletes I've known, pound for pound, Jimmie Heuga was the toughest I've ever met. He was a 5-foot-6, 140 pound guy who didn't back down from anybody. That's the kind of toughness you need to be a champion."

Heuga gained worldwide acclaim for his 1964 Olympic medal. But his real mark on society came after he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and dedicated his life to research and innovative treatment of the disease.

“Jimmie Heuga was one of our greatest Olympians and one of our greatest Americans,” said U.S. Olympic Committee CEO Scott Blackmun from Vancouver. “As a skier he was among the best in the world. But, as a human being later in his life, he made a difference for those suffering from a terrible disease. He will be sorely missed by our Olympic family and by everyone he touched in his life.”

Heuga grew up skiing in Squaw Valley and became a U.S. champion in 1960 at the age of 16. He came in the 1964 Games as one of the favorites at just 20 years old.

As a 13-year old, Heuga moved to Colorado to train in the Aspen Ski Club program. He later became a star at the University of Colorado under Coach Bob Beattie, winning an NCAA title in 1963. Heading into the 1964 Games, Heuga was part of a powerhouse team that included Kidd, Bill Marolt, Chuck Ferries, Buddy Werner and more with hopes of the first U.S. men’s alpine skiing medal in history.

Going into the final event, the slalom, the men were still without a medal. Heuga and Kidd combined to make history, with Heuga taking bronze and Kidd silver. The two became lifelong friends.

After a pair of top-six finishes at the 1966 World Championships in Portillo, Chile, Heuga went on to become the first American to win the prestigious Arlberg-Kandahar in 1967 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. That same year he began to notice symptoms of what would later be diagnosed as MS. A year later he was named to his second Olympic Team, gracing the cover of Sports Illustrated together with Kidd.

At only 26, at the peak of his ski racing career, Heuga’s MS

diagnosis was confirmed. While the conventional medical wisdom of the time was for MS victims to avoid physical or emotional stress, Heuga went about his life differently. He found that his physical health greatly improve with his own program of exercise, nutrition and mental motivation.

In 1984, the Olympic medalist took what he had learned personally to the world, founding The Heuga Center in Edwards, Colo. For over a quarter century, Heuga spread his "can do" philosophy with others. Today the Center, renamed Can Do Multiple Sclerosis, continues the legacy he established as a passionate advocate for other MS patients and for new treatment therapies which are now the medical standard for MS care.

"He was the personification of determination and never giving up – he inspired so many people," said Kidd. "Jimmie's accomplishments on the race course will forever be remembered. But it's his accomplishments and drive in the fight against MS that will continue to help so many people live their lives. His life is an inspiration."

Born to Lucille and Pascal Heuga, a Basque immigrant who ran the cable car at Squaw Valley, Heuga began skiing at 2 and three years later, he was competing on the junior circuit. He appeared in a Warren Miller film at age 9. In 1958, at 15, he was named to the U.S. Ski Team. He remains the youngest man ever on its roster.

He has been honored by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and is an awardee of the U.S. Ski Team's Texaco Star Award. He has been on the President's Council on Physical Fitness, and was inducted into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame two years ago. He is an honored member of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame, inducted in 1976, and the Colorado Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in 1987. He was named to the Colorado Athletic Hall of Fame in 2000.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to the Jimmie Heuga Endowment Fund, 27 Main Street East, Suite 303, Edwards, CO 81632. Details on services are pending.