

Emile Allais – ‘father of modern skiing’ – dies at age 100

By Douglas Martin, New York Times

Émile Allais, a daring champion French skier who helped shape his sport by developing and popularizing a new style of skiing in the 1930s – keeping the skis parallel – as well as by coaching Olympic teams and designing ski equipment, died on Wednesday in Sallanches, in the French Alps. He was 100.

The French Skiing Federation announced his death, prompting Jean-Claude Killy, the French skier who dominated the sport in the late 1960s, to hail Allais as “the father of modern skiing.”

For all his many victories on the slopes, Allais failed in perhaps his final challenge: his bet that on his 100th birthday he would beat his cardiologist down Valle Blanche in Chamonix, one of the great Alps ski runs. He stopped skiing a few years ago.

In 1934, Allais became the first French skier to win a major event, placing first in the combined event – a downhill run and two slalom runs – at Hahnenkamm at Kitzbühel in the Austrian Alps.

In the 1937 world championships, he won gold medals in the downhill, slalom and combined, becoming the first man to win both downhill and slalom races in a major championship. That year and the next, he was the world’s all-around champion skier, the first man to hold the title in successive years.

His daring, almost reckless-seeming style of skiing was legend. He once did a somersault in an event and landed on his

skis without losing time. The *New York Times* once described him as “a congenital candidate for the suicide club” and marveled at how he often seemed out of control before miraculously recovering.

He awed competitors. A German skier was quoted by the *Times* in 1937 calling Allais “the greatest all-around skier the world has ever known.” Killy said Allais had taught him to take risks.

His most far-reaching contribution to the sport came in the late 1930s, when he helped develop and popularize the new method of skiing with skis parallel to each other rather than angled inward in a V shape. The French Skiing Federation soon adopted that as its official style.

In the 1940s and '50s, Allais coached the French Olympic team for seven years, and the Canadian and American teams for one year each. He helped found the École Française du Ski, which became one of the world's largest ski schools.

Allais made a business career out of skiing as well, opening a resort in Chile and helping to develop others in France, including Courchevel. He designed skis, goggles, aerodynamic pants and some of the first ski boots to fasten to the skis. His goal, he once said, was to help skiers experience the “sense of speed and the sense of freedom” that had so captivated him as a youth.

He spent considerable time in the United States, as the first ski school instructor at Squaw Valley and a teacher in Sun Valley, Idaho, where one pupil was the movie producer Darryl F. Zanuck. Brigitte Bardot and Cary Grant were also among his pupils.

Émile Allais was born on Feb. 25, 1912, in Megève, in the Mont Blanc region of the French Alps. His father, a baker, was killed in World War I. His mother remarried and went into the hotel business. An uncle who was a mountain guide made skis

for him, and by 8 he was an adept skier. At 17, in 1929, he competed in his first race.

In 1932, Allais's racing career was interrupted by compulsory military service, which he accomplished by serving with the French ski corps. Returning to the slopes, he finished second in the downhill and the combined event in the 1935 world championships.

In 1936, at the Olympics in Germany, Allais won a bronze medal in the slalom with a dramatic run that provoked clamorous cheering. Hitler went to congratulate him personally. "He looked harmless enough," Allais recalled years later.

World War II and a broken ankle ended his ski racing career.

Allais's first wife, Georgette, died in 1970. He is survived by his second wife, Mireille, and his daughters, Karen and Kathleen, both of whom skied for the French national team.

At 90, Allais broke his shoulder in a collision with a snowboarder. But he returned to the slopes after recovering, and kept skiing into his late 90s.