

Squaw Valley Olympics – a first in many ways

By Kathryn Reed

The 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley set the stage for future Games in ways that organizers could not have foreseen. It was the first to have the athletes housed in a contained area close to the action, the first for a downhill racer to use a composite ski, the first to have a computer to tabulate scores, the first to have a theatrical opening and closing ceremony, the first for biathlon and the first to be broadcast live throughout the country.

David Antonucci spoke Jan. 7 to a crowd of more than 60 people at the South Lake Tahoe Library about how the Olympics came to the Tahoe area 54 years ago and what they were like.

Antonucci is the author of “Snowball’s Chance: The Story of the 1960 Winter Olympic Games Squaw Valley & Lake Tahoe” and “The 1960 Winter Olympics” – the latter being more photos than words.

His interest in the Games occurred somewhat accidentally. The Tahoma resident began investigating the trails he could see around his house. They turned out to be cross country trails used during the Games.



David Antonucci talks Jan. 8 about how Alex Cushing secured the 1960 Winter Games at Squaw Valley. Photo/Kathryn Reed

At the time they were all on private property so all the structures were torn down. But now much of the land is part of Sugar Pine Point State Park, trails have been resurrected, and cross country and biathlon events are staged there.

Antonucci recognized Martin Hollay, who was in the audience. Now in his 90s, Hollay helped build the 20-kilometer trail system.

With all the construction, the cross country events had to be moved 15 miles south near Tahoma.

Much has been written about how Alex Cushing, then owner of Squaw Valley ski resort, didn't expect the U.S. Olympic Committee, let alone the international folks to award his one lift, two-rope tow resort the Olympics. But they did. And in the intervening four years a destination for the world to embrace was created.

Antonucci explained why Highway 89 between Truckee and Tahoe City is so wide. It was so three lanes of traffic could get to Squaw in the morning and three lanes could leave when the day's competition came to a close.

Plans for Interstate 80 were on the drawing board. Construction between Sacramento and Truckee was put on the fast track to get people to the Games.

Blythe Arena was built so the heat extracted from the ice-making unit would melt the snow on the roof. Someone forgot about that fact and in 1983 the roof collapsed because of a heavy snowload.

Two A-frame structures allowed spectators to watch multiple events at once. Only the men's downhill finished mid-mountain.

The Seabees were brought in to make a temporary parking lot out of snow and sawdust.

"Originally they wanted to pave the meadow," Antonucci said.

IBM needed an entire building for its one computer that was used for scoring. This was the first Olympics where athletes didn't have to wait hours to know the results. Twenty-six people were needed to operate the 5 megabyte machine.

Antonucci had many stories to tell of athletes in various sports for different countries, including the original hockey team that beat the Russians and took home gold after beating the Czechs.

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Notes:

David Antonucci will speak and give a slideshow presentation at the Museum of Sierra Ski History in Tahoe City on Jan. 16. The Olympic Museum Mixer is from 5:30-7:30pm and is part of the Olympic Heritage Celebration.