

How skiing went from the Alps to the masses

By Andrew Denning, Atlantic

Triple gold-medalist Alpine skier Jean-Claude Killy of France, O.J. Simpson, and Chevrolet executive John Z. DeLorean sit at a table, while Hunter S. Thompson takes notes from the side of the stage. This might read as the tortuous setup to a particularly hackneyed joke, but it's the punchline. Such was the scene at the 1969 Chicago Auto Show, where this trio touted the virtues of the all-American Chevy Camaro.

But one of these things was not like the other. Simpson, fresh off his Heisman Trophy-winning campaign at the University of Southern California, was known for his charm and affability, making him an ideal pitchman. DeLorean, widely regarded as a brilliant engineer, had a non-conformist, counter-cultural public persona that positioned him as the future of Chevrolet. So what was a 25-year-old from the French Alps doing with these two American icons, hawking a special edition “Killy Z-28 Camaro”?

The answer lies in the changing role of downhill skiing in the postwar decades, which transformed Killy from a relative unknown into a celebrity with lucrative global endorsements for Chevy, Schwinn Bicycles, and Head Skis, among others. To Thompson, Killy was emblematic of the changing fortunes of the global middle class.

Concerted efforts by public officials and private businessmen intersected with broad economic trends in the decades after World War II to transform skiing into a mark of middle-class status and a motor of economic development – first in the European Alps, and then in mountain ranges around the world.

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This transformation proved shocking to those who popularized the sport of skiing at the turn of the century. Archaeological evidence of skiing dates back to 6,000 B.C., and for the vast majority of their history, skis were a utilitarian means of locomotion in snowy environments. Norwegians pioneered leisure skiing in the mid-19th century, and the sport rapidly became a marker of national identity that distinguished them from their Swedish overlords. Socially elite skiers first took to the Alps in the last decades of the 19th century, seeking diversion during prolonged winter stays at Alpine resorts. Skiing was one winter leisure option among many, and early skiers were mocked as “plank-hoppers” by their fellow tourists, who favored activities such as ice skating and tobogganing. Many preferred to ski at night to escape the derision of Alpine inhabitants. And yet, by the dawn of the 20th century, skiing had emerged as a popular leisure option, marked by its unique blend of speed and appreciation of nature.