

Ned Gillette '67

John Lobitz was a Psi U fraternity brother of mine, as were two of the other three seniors on the ski team in 1967. Ned was a Theta Delt. Like me, John went to Keewaydin Canoe Camp and after graduation did a lot of kayaking in the Pacific Northwest. He grew up in Hanover and did lots of sailing on Lake Mascoma. He knew Dick Durrance Sr and Dick Jr. From skiing and canoeing, he knew Chief Chivers. And, growing up, Chick Igaya was one of his idols. John was also a two-year roommate, ski teammate, and close friend of Ned Gillette. At a Dartmouth Ski Reunion in 2014, John wrote the following:

This program was designed to honor members from the Dartmouth Ski Teams from the 1960s, with special emphasis on skiers who had won NCAA titles and who had been members of the 1964 and 1968 Olympic ski teams. Jim Page '63 introduced the teams from the first half of the '60s and I was asked to introduce the skiers from the second half of the '60s. Here is what I said about Ned Gillette.

There were four seniors on the 1967 ski team, John Meck, Jim Speck, myself, and Ned Gillette. Ned sadly is no longer with us. He was the most prominent and well know member of our team. Ned was my friend, my roommate for two years at Dartmouth, and the captain of our ski team. He won the 1967 NCAA cross-country skiing title and was a member of the 1968 Olympic Cross-Country Ski Team in Grenoble.

After college and the Olympics, at the urging of his father, he started Business School. He lasted one day before he decided that this was not his calling and thus started a life of skiing and adventure. Among his contributions to skiing, he helped Chuck Lewis, Dartmouth '58, develop Copper Mountain Ski Area in Colorado and laid out some of the original trails. Though this story may be apocryphal, I was told that Ned would climb up, ski down through the trees until he liked where he went and then tell them to cut a trail there. Ned also established the cross-country skiing program at the Yosemite Mountaineering School. He was later named Head of Ski Touring and laid out the cross-country trails at the Von Trapp Family Lodge at Stowe, Vermont, which is one of the preeminent cross-country resorts and facilities in the country.

But Ned is best known for his escapades as a "Professional Adventurer." He once told me that there weren't many things left that hadn't been climbed or explored, so he had to think up new and different ways to explore places. He made a career of traveling, rowing, skiing, climbing, photographing, and lecturing about his adventures. He had many non-skiing adventures, but a large percentage of his endeavors involved skiing and mountaineering. He traversed, climbed up, skied down and around mountain ranges throughout the world.

One of Ned's most amazing adventures was the circumnavigation/ambulation of Mt. Everest. This was not simple because one could not cross the border between Nepal and Tibet. So to get around this he climbed a 20+ thousand foot peak to the west of Everest on the Nepalese-Tibetan border from the Nepal side, climbed down, and circled the base of Mt. Everest on the Nepal side and then climbed

another 20+thousand foot peak on the border to the east of Everest. He then descended, went out of Nepal through, I think, Thailand, and then entered Tibet. He then re-climbed both peaks from the Tibet side and circled the base of Everest from the Tibet side to complete his circumnavigation/ambulation. He presented this at our Dartmouth, Class of '67, 25th reunion and, in his modesty, said that while he was there he thought he might as well "knock off" Everest itself, which he did.

Sadly, in 1996, Ned was tragically murdered in an attempted robbery while climbing with his wife Susie in the mountains of Northern Pakistan. In 2000 he was posthumously inducted into the US Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame for his contributions to skiing.

I would like to leave you with a quote about Ned that Steve Waterhouse wrote in his book "Passion for Skiing".

"There has probably never been another person who has undertaken this mix of challenging activities in distant, typically hard to reach, locales quite like Ned Gillette did.... It would be rare to encounter another Ned Gillette in one lifetime."

In 2008, Ned Gillette was inducted to the Vermont Ski Hall of Fame. At the induction dinner, Peter Graves noted the following:

At the annual induction dinner for the Class of 2008, at the posh Stowe Mountain Lodge, those awarded this special honor were adventure-skier and former biathlete Jan Reynolds, skiing historian Allen Adler, GMVS's legendary founder Al Hobart, the late founder and visionary of Stowe Mountain skiing Sepp Ruschp, and the late Ned Gillette, a former US Olympic cross-country skier. All inductees are amazing and deserving group of individuals.

Ned had been a good friend to me and to his huge network of amigos around the planet. He had done everything on skis, he was a renaissance man of the sport if there ever was one. Gillette was killed in Pakistan in 1998 while trekking, along with his wife and former US Ski Team member Susie Patterson, who survived the unimaginable.

Gillette, a native of Barre, Vermont, was a man of infinite interests. He started out as a crackerjack cross-country racer, was Dartmouth's top xc skier, and won the NCCA Championships his senior year for the Big Green.

In 1968 Ned was named to the US Olympic XC Ski Team. His sense of humor and his easy going style were Gillette trademarks. We hiked together for two days during the US Ski Team's hike on Vermont's Long Trail and laughed a lot. I felt so accepted by him as a freshman at Fort Lewis College in Colorado.

Following his racing days he explored other ways to stretch his wings. He became a gifted and enthusiastic climber, and began another chapter of his life full of expeditions and adventures, with a large dose of creativity and daring. While doing that Ned and I worked together with the annual Norwegian Ski Council seminars that were conducted around the US promoting Norwegian ski gear,

while I was working for NorTur promoting the brands of Epoke and Landsem skis. What fun we had. His favorite ski for many of his trips was the indestructible Epoke 900 – to my knowledge no longer in production.

Ned accomplished many things during that era – trips to circumnavigate Ellesmere Island, Everest, and Denali. Among these was a daring adventure he made with his friend Galen Rowell to climb Dennli in one day, or when he skied the tallest mountain in China, or trekked the Silk Route, or rowed the infamous “sea tomato.” It was vintage Ned. His pictures and text began appearing on the pages of National Geographic and Outside magazine, to mention but a few of his credits.

It’s now been over ten years since Ned was taken from us, but his memory and legacy live on inspiring those ready to challenge a new route or daring climb, another mountain top to summit, to ski off-piste or on groomed tracks, snap another photo on a bluebird day, and another day to laugh with friends.

Ned did it all and accomplished much while serving as a beacon to many who dream big dreams. I’m glad he was my friend.

Though not a classmate, Ned was as well-known as he allowed himself to be by many of us. He clearly followed the advice of William James that "the strenuous life tastes better." I have been struck, however, by how many of his close friends who have said that "I really didn't know Ned that well." Was there a distance? Or was there just a relentless drive?

I do remember talking with Ned in the seventies when he was leading the ski touring program at the Trapp family Lodge (and writing books on skiing) and I thought to myself, what is he doing there? Well, it didn't take long to find out! Having been a member of the 1968 US Olympic team and having skied some 300 miles across the Brooks Range in Alaska, Ned got back to work and kicked it into high gear. From 1978 to 1982, he circumnavigated Mount McKinley (now Denali) on skis - and then did the first-ever one-day ascent of the mountain, he became the first American to climb 24,757-foot Muztaghata - and then skied down it, he completed the first winter traverse of the Karakorams, he circumnavigated the 300 miles over 120 days around Mount Everest with then girlfriend Jan Reynolds and a changing support team, and he completed the first-ever telemark descent of Aconcagua in Argentina with Pete Patterson of Sun Valley (brother of Ruff, Dartmouth men’s nordic coach for 27 years, and Susie, Ned's widow). He climbed, explored, and gamboled on all seven continents, while sampling liberally from a colorful smorgasbord of long-distance ski trips to places such as Alaska's Brooks Range (1972), New Zealand's Southern Alps (1979), and the Karakoram Range (1980).

Perhaps his most audacious undertaking occurred in 1988, when Gillette and three partners spent 13 days crossing the Drake Passage to Antarctica, some of the roughest seas on earth, in a bright red rowboat called the Sea Tomato. "We capsized three different times," he later recalled, "and one of us went overboard each time." It was after that trip that he first met Susie Patterson, then 33. A "ski queen" for the first 25 years of her life, she had distinguished herself as the U.S. women's champion in the slalom in 1974 and in the downhill in 1976. She had also, by her own admission, spent a total of one night of her life in a tent before she and Ned were married in 1990.

For their honeymoon, Gillette came up with a madcap scheme to sneak across the Chinese border and illegally climb Gurla Mandhata, Tibet's "Mountain of Black Herbal Medicine." The pair then barnstormed their way through a litany of exotically conceived journeys that included skiing in Iran in 1992 and tracing 5,000 miles of the Silk Road by camel caravan in 1993. The Silk Road journey, however, produced something of a sea change in Gillette: Afterward, he turned to smaller adventures that demanded far less emphasis on publicity and financing. "Some people were disappointed that he didn't write more and pursue the sponsorships," says Patterson. "But he made an evolution back to why he started doing this stuff in the first place: the purity, the simplicity, the honesty. The lifestyle made him happy. I met Susie at an Allen & Company conference in 1989. She was an active and vivacious person. Although no longer competing internationally, she was a perfect match for Ned.

But, who exactly was Ned Gillette?

Jeff Hinman suggested that I contact Terry Morse, Holderness '64 and Middlebury '68 as someone who probably knew Ned as well as any of us. A year behind Ned, he met him in 1961 at Holderness and they spent a lot of time together on the slopes and skied together all four events (downhill, slalom, cross country, and ski jumping). Terry found Ned to be serious but light-hearted. He was uniquely well-rounded and thought critically. Ned's senior year, he was Class President and began to get increasingly serious. The reason had been formed early - he had an agenda: The Olympics in 1968 in Grenoble. Terry broke his back freshman year in college, but skied against Ned his Sophomore and Junior years. He kept skiing after college and competed in two Worlds and the 1972 Olympics at Sapporo. At Middlebury, he skied with John Morton who later became the Ski Coach at Dartmouth and is a dedicated member of FOM (Friends of Monk Williams).

Before Susie Patterson, there was Jan Reynolds. Although Ned had been married before (for six months), reminiscent of his one-day business school foray, Jan was for years his girlfriend, travel companion, and life partner. Apparently, their break-up followed the row-boat to Antarctica trip, which she opposed and considered to be somewhat of a folly. But, there was also a famous interview in England where she spoke fondly of a balloon-ride trip and Ned couldn't contain himself. Jan circumnavigated Everest with Ned and they co-wrote a book, liberally quoting from their diary notes. My favorite is when they were at very high altitude and Ned decided to go to sleep with his proud new one-piece climbing costume, along with all of his climbing gear. Every time Ned shifted at all in his sleep, there was a loud clanging of all of his equipment. I'm guessing this was not their happiest moment together.

Jan Reynolds had this to say about the Everest trip: "It was Ned's signature trip - it featured all of the elements that would turn Gillette into an Adventuring Legend: it was a first, it was a creative new take on an old story, it drew press attention, and sponsors lined up for it. More than a trip, it was an event."

She also noted that "There were always two sides to Ned. There was the part of him that loved to disappear into the back country and ski with best friends. But there was another part that loved the rush of putting together what I called the 'Wow' Trip. You know, the Whole Ride."

Whatever and however, Ned clearly showed the Outdoor Industry how to market itself. He was self-branding. And, as Adventure Journal observed: Gillette was a badass, cut down in an act of caprice and malice.

So, what happened in the mountains of Pakistan? Only a few people know, and "they ain't talking." It is really hard for Susie to conclude anything other than Ned was killed by some whack job who was committing a robbery. But, a friend of mine once observed that people above 10,000 feet are always honest. And, during the assault, there was no effort to take anything - and money probably would have been quickly offered up. My view, and I apologize for what I think is stating the obvious, is that there are two most likely explanations for the attack. The first is that in that mountain region, there are well-known guides - and their noses might get a little out of joint whenever they are not invited to guide, and of course to be paid. The second is that, in that region, there could easily be people who don't take kindly to a woman parading about - and climbing their mountains - in violation of their religious beliefs. Our own Wick Walker may know more about this region than any living Westerner and he observes that this is a "tough neighborhood" and that he wouldn't go there alone.

With his murder, the world lost a world-class person and world-class athlete. And, a person who could dream up Trips that nobody else could even believe. He was a good friend and a good husband. We all miss you, Ned.