

Interview with Joe Perrault

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Ishpeming, MI

Interviewer:

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INT: Can you state your name and birthdate please.

PP: Paul Perrault. I was born December 3, 1924.

INT: We'll be focusing on your career in ski jumping. I'd like to start with some background information. Where were you born?

PP: I was born in Green Bay. The family was down there on a trip. So I was only in Green Bay about 2 weeks. The rest of the time I lived here in Ishpeming.

INT: So your family at that time lived in Ishpeming?

PP: Yes. They were on a trip to Green Bay. That's why I ended up being born down there.

INT: Did you live in Ishpeming all your life?

PP: All my life yes.

INT: When did you become interested in skiing?

PP: That was something in our day that was a sport you took up. I lived on a hill and as youngsters we all had little jumps. I always thought of going on up to the big ski hill, but you had to get good equipment. We had pretty tough equipment in those days. I had a pair of 5 foot maple skis and I used to steal my mother's mason jar of rubbers for straps to hold my feet on. I wasn't alone. There were a lot of people who done the same thing.

INT: So most of the equipment was something you made yourself?

PP: Yes, a lot of it was homemade. At that time you didn't go out and buy a pair of skis that easily either.

INT: About how old were you when you started skiing?

PP: I would say I must have been on skis at least when I was 5 or 6 years old.

INT: Who were some of your early role models? Other people that skied?

PP: We had a lot of real good skiers in Ishpeming in my days. But the foreign skiers we would hear about. Today we have them over here. But at that time we just heard about

them skiing over there, where it is the main sport. Some of the older skiers here were the older Bietila boys and Ellsworth, Mitchell...

INT: Could you spell some of these names?

PP: B-I-E-T-I-L-A

INT: Would that be Paul and Ralph?

PP: Yes. Well Ralph is my age. Then there was...Anslem, he was the oldest. A-N-S-L-E-M I guess. Then Walter was the next one. Then Paul. By the way he was the one that was killed. He got hurt in St. Paul skiing and then died from it. Then there was Roy and Ralph. So there was Anslem, Leonard...did I get Leonard? Leonard was the second one. Anslem, Leonard, Walter, Paul, Roy and Ralph. Walt was one that we always looked up to. Paul was without a doubt one of the best skiers. If he had lived, there's no doubt he would have been the tops in the world. Even at his young age he had set records all over the United States at that time.

INT: Was he one of the older ones?

PP: There was Anslem, Leonard, Walter, and Paul. He was the fourth one. There were six brothers and at one time they all skied. They jumped together.

INT: Did you live by them?

PP: Yes I lived very close to where they lived. We all lived up on the hill. Cleveland location.

INT: I'm not familiar with where that is.

PP: As you go from Ishpeming to Negaunee, you go by the hospital and you turn to the right, just after that research lab, you go up the hill to the south there. Cleveland location we used to call it. That's what it was in our days, it was locations. You all had your own ski hills. You didn't like the others coming and skiing on your hill. Typical youngsters at that time.

INT: Territorial. Do you remember the first time you jumped?

PP: I couldn't say. We always had to jump. That was part of it. You didn't just ski down the hill, you had to have a little bump to jump over. You didn't jump very far, but you had a jump.

INT: Do you remember your first tournament?

PP: It wasn't really a junior ski club at the time in Ishpeming, but there were some people that worked with the youth in the city. They would get some of us together to ski

and they had tournaments at the winter sports area. The first tournament I skied out there, it was sort of odd. My brother was a year younger than I am. My dad had bought us each skis at one Christmas. These were nothing fancy like they are today. But I used to go out to the winter sports club and ski all week with these kids. I was doing fairly good. But when it came to the tournament on the weekend, I didn't want to jump. I don't know why I didn't want to go. My brother finally talked to me and said that Dad was going to take our skis away if I didn't ski. So I went out in the tournament and I won in my class and I won a most graceful prize. At that time it was sort of comical. I think I won a pair of socks. And the graceful prize was a pair of ski poles. Two of us tied for it so they gave each one of us a ski pole. It was because of that, that when I got into high school I couldn't compete in high school sports because if you accepted a prize valued over a dollar at that time you were considered a professional at that time for Michigan high school. One of the judges in the tournament was the high school coach. I guess he didn't think I had much potential for basketball or football. So he never did warn me that I shouldn't take it. But I couldn't compete in high school sports because of that.

INT: Do you approximately what year that would have been?

PP: That would have been probably 1938, '37 or '38. I graduated in '42. That would have been probably my first year. Our first trip was a car load of us went to Trout Creek. Do you know where that is? He took us to Trout Creek and I did meet a fellow, Rudy Saari. Did you know him?

INT: That's my step-grandfather

PP: Really. I knew Rudy real well. My wife's folks were from Ashland and we used to go through Trout Creek all the time and we'd stop and see Rudy whenever we went through. He was up at White Pine. He worked for the State up there didn't he?

INT: Yes. And he had the sporting goods store downtown.

PP: I remember him taking some skiers from there to a tournament here in Ishpeming and those kids had never seen a hill that size. But Rudy had skied some. He was a fairly good skier himself. It's funny how over the years you think of those things. Even now when I go through Trout Creek around the outside of town from where you used to drive through it, I still think of Rudy Saari.

INT: He was really involved. How serious were you about skiing and the time?

PP: I think I took it pretty seriously. Seeing as I couldn't compete in high school sports, that was one sport I could compete and I did fairly well. So I concentrated on that. I tried to do the best I could all the time.

INT: What were your goals? Any career goals?

PP: Naturally an Olympic team. I was... I skied in Switzerland in 1948 on the team. I placed 15th. I was picked for the 1952 team. We were sent down to Westby, Wisconsin to train. I took a summer sault and crushed a couple vertebrae and broke the ribs off my spine. I came home and sat for three months with a brace on my back. I didn't get to go to Norway, which I really wanted to go. In the tryouts for the 1948 Olympics, the tryouts were in Seattle. I won the tryouts. It was a two day event. I won the tryouts. Then in 1952 Olympics the tryouts were at Iron Mountain and I placed 2nd in the tryouts there. I felt like I was just coming into my own. I never had a real good landing. It was stiff all the time. I think that's why I got hurt in Wisconsin. But that summer before the Olympics, '52, the wife and I would be walking down the street and I'd jump off the curb and set a landing. Her along with other people thought there was something wrong with me. It was finally coming into me. I wanted to make sure...I always knew that so I could do a good landing. But I didn't get to use it. I skied afterwards...if fact 2 years after it happened I went to Wisconsin, Westby where I got hurt, and also Iron Mountain and Ishpeming. But the spirit wasn't there anymore. I wasn't afraid to ride, but I didn't have the spark anymore.

INT: Was that a big hill?

PP: Yes it was a good sized hill. It's a lot bigger now than it was at that time. It's not quite as big as Iron Mountain now, but it's a good sized hill.

INT: Did you do a lot of competing in Iron Mountain?

PP: Yes. I had set the record there in 1949. Two records that year. I set that record and got married.

INT: That was quiet a year.

PP: Yes.

INT: How big was jumping in the Marquette area?

PP: Well, skiing here, ski jumping was the big thing. There wasn't too much down hill. You never had Marquette Mountain and all that. Up in your area there, they had White...the Porcupines. That was a state deal, but now you've got areas all over. They had at Houghton that ski hill there, I can't think of the name...

INT: Ripley

PP: That's where Fred Londorf was there. He was one of the promoters up there. He done an awful lot up there. In fact there was an American girl, one of the first ones on the ski team that he had coached up there from Houghton. Barbara Ferries. I think that's it.

INT: Was she a native of the copper country?

PP: She was from copper country, yes.

INT: Was there a ski jump at Ripley at that time?

PP: I think they had a small jump there yes. Because Fred came down here a few times and jumped in tournaments. He was not the best jumper, but he knew what he was doing when he came off the hill you know. But ski jumping...today you've got so many other things. The snowmobile, there was hockey back then, but there's so much more of that now with the younger kids and everything. So many teens. Ski jumping was the main sport. They used to leave us out of school for the ski tournaments when they had the ski tournaments here. I don't know how to say it. It was the sport as far as winter went. Now you've got dog racing and everything else now. These snow machines and 4-wheelers and all that now...

INT: Would you say it's not as big now as it had been?

PP: No. Sad to say, in the whole United States it's been fading. I often think that when I got out of the Service, I enrolled at Northern under the GI Bill. At that time I was just getting into skiing pretty good then. I was afraid I would miss out on skiing. If it had been like it is today where they have the ski team down there...they didn't have any ski team at that time. So I didn't go to college because of skiing. It was that important. You ask if I took it seriously, we did.

INT: You were in the Service?

PP: Yes. I was in the 10th Mountain Division.

INT: Oh you were.

PP: There were quite a few of us from Ishpeming here that were...Roxie Lawson, Kenny Oja, Mitchell, Escala, there were quite a few from here that were in the 10th Mountain.

INT: Where were you mostly stationed?

PP: We were at Camp Hail, Colorado. That was the base camp where they started the mountain troops. I ended up, foolishly telling them I played trumpet thinking I could get in the band. The infantry was the actual ski troops. You were supporting artillery and engineers and that. So I get up to Camp Hail in the infantry company and they needed a bugler down for the engineers, so I got sent down there. But when I got down there I remembered my Dad telling me that in war time they used to shoot the buglers. This was just something he had said. That stayed in my mind. I didn't want to play that bugle. Well I practiced every day for about two weeks. Finally the sergeant came in and I said I can't get the hang of that bugle. It was simple to blow but I said I can't get the hang of it. He said that's enough of that. Get out on the line with the rest of us. So I stayed in the engineers while I was in the 10th Mountain Division. I was pretty proud of the fact that

our company put up an aerial tram way in Italy. It was taking them 6 hours to get a wounded man off this ridge. We put the tram way up undercover at night and it had a basket on it where you could take a medic and a wounded man. In 6 minutes we could get him down. It was the first in the history of the army that it was done. We were pretty proud.

INT: Whereabouts in Italy was that?

PP: We used to call it Mount Belvedere. In fact they even say now, every February they have this Mount Belvedere Day. They've got quite an active 10th Mountain Alumni Association here. All over the country these different chapters get together and have a luncheon or something to remember.

INT: Are you involved in that group at all?

PP: Yes I belong to it.

INT: What were the years of your ski jumping career? What's the span?

PP: Starting in '38. I went in the Service in '43 and I got out in '45. I got hurt in '52, just before we went to Norway. And I skied 3 years after that. So '55 was about the last.

INT: Did you still jump for recreation after that time?

PP: No. When I retired, I retired in 1982 from the mine. I did some cross country then. We had some cross country trails at Cleveland location. It goes around where the ski hill was. I did some cross country for a while, but I don't ski any more. I've been through heart surgery, abdominal aorta aneurism. I had one of those repaired. It's changed my...I'm not quite as athletic anymore.

INT: What did you consider your finest achievement in ski jumping?

PP: Well, I would have to say that setting the American record in Iron Mountain in 1949. It was 297 feet. The reason it was important is because I beat 3 of the Olympic competitors who had beat me in Switzerland in '47. Peter Hugstad in Norway had won the Olympics in '48. There were two Finnish skiers Theneginin and Locksol. The other guy placed 4th and Locksol was 6th. Our own Gody Ren from this country was 5th. That was highest that an American jumper had placed over there. I'm sort of proud of myself that I placed 15th. Since that time most of the American team has been in the 20s, 45, 36 or something like that. So I'm sort of proud of that fact that I placed 15th.

INT: And that was in Switzerland?

PP: Yes. St. Lawrence. See Ralph and I are about the same age. He's a few months older than I am and I let him know that. But he was on the '48 team and the '52 team. In '48 he had a broken wrist. He wasn't able to compete. In '52 he had some trouble. The

hill was a pretty flat landing and he landed real hard and he hurt his heels. He couldn't ski over there, but he was on two teams.

INT: Do you remember Paul Bietila?

PP: I just remember him knowing how good he was. I remember seeing him jump at the local hills here. I remember him coming to the high school when I was in high school and came in just to talk to some of the teachers. He went to the University of Wisconsin. I remember seeing him there. Knowing the family, I used to go up to the house after we got out of the Service all the time. We'd get together and go down to Negaunee and practice. They had a small practice hill in Negaunee and one in Palmer.

INT: A lot of people say ski jumping is a dangerous sport...

PP: Well I don't think it's really that dangerous. In fact it's gotten safer because now days your equipment is so much better. The skis are better. They wear helmets to protect you from a bad fall. The hills are designed. What I understand today they have, not just a hill captain, but one of the officials in charge of the hill. If things aren't right, you don't ski. It's controlled a lot better today. I think it's safer. Some of us didn't have the best of equipment. I know my brother, I remember him coming off one time and the binding pulled apart. I don't think you'd see that today.

INT: Did you wear helmets?

PP: No. We never thought of that. No. The clothing is so much different too. We had some skiers from National Mine, brothers that used to ski for the Ishpeming Ski Club. They had overalls and would roll them up. They'd get wet and freeze. You had about that much on the bottom of a frozen ring. When they come off in the air, it was just shattering you know. You don't see none of that today with the clothes they wear. We done what we could with what we had.

INT: So when you got hurt in '52 before the Olympics, was that the only time you were injured?

PP: It's the only bad fall I ever had. I've got to say I was pretty lucky. I was lucky to come out of that because the two vertebrae were crushed in the neck here. What they call the 5th and the 7th. One of them was crushed flat and the other was about half way. My wife was an ex-ray technician at the hospital here so I know a little of what it was about. They callused out in front. If I took a picture now they could see that and wonder why that vertebrae is mis-shapened. The only time now days I have problems is if I've been sitting up too long and I'm tired I can feel something. If I'm driving a long distance I can feel it in there. I've never really been bothered by it.

INT: What were the conditions that attributed to that?

PP: Well it's the way... I never used to...It's hard to explain. When you land one foot is ahead of the other. I never done that. I landed stiff like this. My head would go down. In fact when I set the record at Iron Mountain my head went down. I was actually looking through my legs at the top of the hill. If I had fallen there that would have probably killed me because I was going at a pretty good clip. But like I said, I was training myself to go into that landing. The minute I got into trouble at Westby I went back to the old way and went stiff. That's why when I landed I went head first. You ski that way for so many years and it's hard. The minute I got in trouble I didn't realize that if I stayed with that landing I would have made it. I tried to pull out of it and I didn't.

INT: Is there any other information that you wanted to share about...

PP: Well, this has something to do with the history of the club. The Ishpeming Ski Club has been the main club in the mid-west for many years. I'm a little disappointed now that you have a tournament and it's all foreign skiers. You're actually hiring people to put in your tournaments. We had so many skiers that at the end of the year when the tournament season was over in March, we used to have extra tournaments that the skiers would put on and do all the work ourselves. Just Ishpeming and Iron Mountain and we'd have between 50 and 60 skiers in each class, and put on a good tournament. Whatever we made from it, we'd go around to the stores and get prizes. Nearly everybody would get a prize because skiing was known as the sport here. But the ski club years ago is different from how it is today. I don't belong to the ski club anymore. I haven't for quite a few years because of a misunderstanding a few years back. In those days when the ski club was out of money, and they never were rich, there were certain business people in town that would go down and sign notes at the bank to get money to put on the tournaments. Then if they didn't have a good tournament those people were liable for that money. But it isn't that way today, so I don't know.

INT: You had mentioned Barbara Ferries. Were there any other women involved in ski jumping at that time?

PP: This wasn't ski jumping. She was a downhill skier. The only two women ski jumpers that I knew, there was a Johanna Colsted. She was from Norway. She had skied in this country before I started skiing. But being in the skiing game, you knew about them. A woman ski jumper in those days was great. There was a girl from Ishpeming that used to ski, an Isaacson girl. This was just ahead of my time. The ski club bought her an outfit, shoes, pants, and a jacket, cap and skis. They come to the tournament and the weather was bad and they didn't want her to ski and get hurt. She got mad and I guess she quit. This is what I heard anyway. Then there was a girl from out east that ski jumped. Her name was Dorothy Graves. She was from out east somewhere. I don't know what state. She skied in 1944 or '43. We skied in Chicago at Wrigley Field. They built it right in the ball park. They got those of us from Camp Hill at least 5 or 6 of us got leave to go to Chicago to ski. This Dorothy Graves was a woman Marine. Roy Bietela was in the Marines. His brother Walt was a pilot in the Navy. I think he was there too. It was comical because we skied that one weekend on a Sunday afternoon. They had such a crowd there and they spent so much money building that hill inside the ballpark

that Chicago wanted to hold one the following week again. They contacted the commander at Camp Hill and I suppose other places also. They got permission for us to stay. I done something that strictly wasn't legal. They done it. I had two three day passes to go from Denver to Chicago. On a three day pass you aren't supposed to go more than 200 miles from camp. But this is the way they set up my leave. Instead of giving me a big one they gave me two three day passes, one following the other one. When they decided to hold it the following week you had to have an extension. Some of them had ??? so they got an extension on it. But when it come to mine they give me a telegram with a 6 day extension on the last three day pass. We didn't stay in Chicago. Naturally we came home. I remember coming up on the 400, the MP stopped us and asked for our papers. That's all I had to show him was the telegram. He said if you have nerve enough to go that way I won't dare stop you. I never did get asked anymore on the trip for it. I was a 6 day extension on a three day pass.

INT: You said you were coming up on the 400?

PP: That was a train that used to come. That was a real modern train in those days. In fact there was another thing, Northwestern used to run trains up from Chicago and Milwaukee up here to Ishpeming. They used to park them, the main tracks went right through down town Ishpeming. You know what they call Hematite Drive now? That was the old rail road tracks through there. They used to park the sleepers there and people would stay in them over the weekend. They used to have snow trains. This is how important skiing was.

INT: And where did that run from?

PP: From Chicago and Milwaukee up here.

INT: So did you get to jump in Wrigley Field?

PP: Yes.

INT: What was that like?

PP: It was new to us. We were jumping on crushed ice and snow. It was mostly crushed ice. As you came off the landing at the bottom they had straw. You ran out onto the straw. We skied in Pomona, California in '51. The fall of '51. They had a ski jump at the Los Angeles County Fair. That was quite a fair. The scaffolding was built right from flat ground. It was 275 feet in the air. You see along side buildings where they have scaffolding so people can go up and work on it. It was built with that type of scaffolding and we were 275 feet in the air. We jumped 160 feet on that hill. They used 120-150 tons of crushed ice a day. And we were out there for 10 days. We stayed in Huntington Hotel in Pasadena. That's where the Rose Bowl teams used to always stay when they went out there. That was an experience. That was really something. When you're up that high like that you could feel it rock. Art Develin, a skier from New York and a very good skier in his day, I remember him the first time he got to the top. You had to climb

up, walk up the landing. Then you walk up to the edge of the bump along the side. Then they had a platform there. The last 10 feet was just stuck up there. You had to climb a ladder up there. This is 270 feet in the air. So you get two of you up on the top and that was about all. I remember Art bending down to put his bindings on and he said this is moving. They had lights, they had a string of lights right down the center. When you came down you thought you would jump right into the bulbs. They had one tournament like that, I think it was after that, in Portland. They had a hill built up like that. They skied in Soldier Field like that too. Twice. Ralph had skied there when all the brothers were there.

INT: That's Chicago right?

PP: Chicago. Soldier Field. The Chicago Hill is out at Fox River Grove, the regular hill.

INT: How was it skiing on crushed ice compared to snow?

PP: It was a little different. But it was so warm. The thing we were scared of in California, the landing hill was built like that with boards. Then they put straw and they put chicken wire on top of the straw. Then they sprayed the crushed ice on. What we were scared of is if somebody were to fall and their hand get down in that chicken wire. We never had any troubles. We even made the shooting star out there where five skiers come down and they're all almost on the hill at the same time. What you have to do is the first guy picks the guy that is not going to fall. Him first. He gets to the landing and has to turn. Then one goes that way and one goes this way. We did that out there. Then we did twin jumps here at the tournament all the time. A triple jump, one skier is in the middle and the other two are just a little bit back on the sides and come down. You don't see much of that anymore. Of course, I don't think you can do it anymore. With the design of the hills and the equipment, I don't know. But....

INT: Do you have any advice to young ski jumpers?

PP: If you...I imagine it's the same as for any sport. If you're going to get into it, don't go half way. Make up your mind if you want to be the best. Everybody isn't going to be the best or number one. But the best to your abilities. I've seen a lot over the years, guys that skied and they skied because they could go on a trip. There's another thing as far as the ski club goes. Years ago Monday was the ski meeting. You go on a ski trip on the weekend. A lot of times you'd leave Friday night. The ski club would give you \$3-5 a weekend. When you got to the host club they paid for your meals and your room there. You come home always late Sunday night or early Monday morning. If you didn't get to the meeting on Monday night, you might not get to go. We used to send sometimes 2, 3, sometimes 5 cars on a weekend if there were 2 or 3 different tournaments. That's how you went, by car to all the meets. A lot of them, it was that trip on the weekend. I'd say for a youngster to get into it, it's expensive now. Expensive equipment. There's a certain amount of dedication. To me now days everything is done for them. When ski flying was first at Iron Wood there, that first hill they made, I couldn't believe it. All these skiers from all over the world, and it was a little windy. Especially with ski flying,

they won't let you jump. These guys were at the bottom with nice warm up pants on and these guys were playing soccer. Kicking the ball around at the bottom. We never done that. We had to work on the hill. Many places where we went on ski tournaments, Chicago, St. Paul, we always ended up working on the hill while we were there to get it in the best of shape. The thing that was always said about Ishpeming, and this was all around the Central Ski Association was that our hill was always in shape when they came. But we worked on it. I imagine a place like Chicago, St. Paul, it's harder for the skiers to get out there. Here you could just walk out. Chicago, you had to drive about 35 or 40 miles. I remember one time going down there by train. From downtown Chicago we took a train out there. They never liked that on the train, we had those big skis. We used to go out to Steamboat Springs, Colorado a lot, always by train. But I don't regret any of it. I enjoyed it while I was there. It's hard for me today to go to a ski tournament because you don't have enough to compare. As far as I know Ishpeming has 2 maybe 3 jumpers that have some potential. We used to get...when I first started, you never heard of importing a skier. But they started to bring in...they would get a couple Japs, a couple Finns, a couple Norwegians. That was good because then you could compare where you were with them. They were usually head and shoulders over most of us. But their ski program was a lot different too. Over in Europe that is a big sport. These hills in Lutey, Finland, they have 3 big hills right in town. That's what they want to do here. They want to build a hill up here, which is fine. But that takes an awful lot of money. To have one tournament a year, can that be justified, I don't know.

INT: I guess that's all I have for you.

PP: You get what you want?

INT: Yes.