

NCWSA Hall of Fame

Tommy Wycoff

Tommy Wycoff's high-profile days as a tournament skier came and went before tournament skiing took off in our state. What Tommy did on the water was unprecedented in North Carolina. What he left behind was a generation of skiers who benefitted from his generosity, kindness and willingness to help them learn what he had to figure out on his own.

Among the more notable skiers he helped were Sammy and Camille Duvall, who grew up in Greenville, S.C., Roger Fox of Hickory, a state slalom legend himself, and the late Kyle Ledbetter of Marion, who was chief instructor at North Carolina's first water ski school.

There are scores of others he helped over the years, asking nothing in return, just sincerity and commitment to learning. He was legendary for his smile and his quiet, unassuming nature as well as his skiing.

A life-long resident of Burke County, Tommy is believed to be the first skier from North Carolina to ski in the nationals. He went five times; he won twice and finished second the other three times in Senior Men. In his day, Senior Men meant everyone older than 35. If you were 45, 55 or 65, you skied in Senior Men.

His fifth and final trip to the Nationals was in 1974, at Callaway Gardens, Ga. Tommy had finished second to Florida's J.D. Morgan in Seattle in 1972 and at Colonial Heights, Va., in '73. In '74, Morgan thought two at 32 off would win in the roly conditions at Callaway Gardens. There wasn't much chance of running the full pass; the rollers hit right at No. 2. Morgan got his two at 32. Tommy got four - and the championship.

"I don't always remember the ones I won, but I remember the ones I lost," Morgan said years later.

There was a mutual admiration between him and Tommy. Morgan said Tommy was his toughest competition in slalom, and he figures they pretty much split their matchups. What made Tommy special?

"His ability to ski in tournaments like he did in practice," Morgan said. "He was never nervous on the starting dock. His demeanor was consistent. He didn't have a lot of natural athletic ability, but he had a lot of grace in his skiing."

Tommy was innovative in his practice, often training at 36 mph even though he competed at 34. He also set his course wide to make it harder than it would be in tournaments. Tommy also didn't have the comforts and conditions most tournament skiers have today. He skied on a river, his course was set up at a marina, among a sea of houseboats anchored in the water and tied off along the shoreline, with fishing boats buzzing in and out, and he went at it any time of year.

Tommy died tragically in 1993. He drove an 18-wheeler for a living, making day trips. He was killed trying to avoid a driver who pulled out in front of him on his return trip home one day. He was 63.

TOMMY WYCOFF, 1930-1993

National championship results

Senior Men:

1970: 2nd place, Canton, Ohio (Bill Collins 1st)

1971: 1st place, Columbus, Ohio

1972: 2nd place, Seattle, Wash. (J.D. Morgan 1st)

1973: 2nd place, Colonial Heights, Va. (J.D. Morgan 1st)

1974: 1st place, Callaway Gardens, Ga. (J.D. Morgan 2nd)
(Submitted by Marjo Rankin)