

James "Jimmie" Frederick Heuga

September 22, 1943 - February 8, 2010

Jimmie Heuga, of Edwards and Louisville, CO, who with Billy Kidd were the first American men to stand on an Olympic podium holding an alpine ski medal, died February 8, 2010 in Boulder of complications from his four-decade long battle with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). He was 66.

Heuga's Olympic medal in the slalom in Innsbruck was not, however, how he is best remembered. In later years, Heuga became better known for the radical approach he took to the treatment of his disease. Diagnosed with MS at the age of 26, he turned upside down the conventional medical approach to the disease by undertaking an aggressive program of exercise and optimistic thinking. With the founding of The Heuga Center for MS in Edwards, he became a passionate advocate for other MS patients and for new treatment therapies which are now the medical standard for MS care.

Born in Lake Tahoe, CA, to Lucille and Pascal Heuga, a Basque immigrant who ran the cable car at Squaw Valley, Jimmie began skiing at two and three years later, he was competing on the junior circuit. In 1958, at 15, he was named to the US Ski Team, coached by Bob Beattie. He remains the youngest man ever on its roster. In addition to his bronze Olympic medal, his skiing awards include 1963 NCAA Champion in slalom, a 6<sup>th</sup> place in the slalom and 4<sup>th</sup> place in the combined at the 1966 World Championships at Portillo, Chile. He was the first American to win the prestigious Arlberg-Kandahar race in Garmisch, Germany.

Though celebrated for his skiing talent, Jimmie's career was abbreviated by MS. During the 1968 Olympics, he experienced early symptoms of the disease, but he was not diagnosed until 1970. Doctors advised him to stop exercising and to avoid any activity which might put stress on his weakened body. As instructed, Jimmie was inactive for several years. Then, realizing just how ill-suited he was to a sedentary life, Heuga tapped the goal-setting skills he learned from coach Beattie and built a fitness and wellness program based on exercise and positive thinking. Unsteady on his feet, Heuga at first concentrated on cycling, often telling friends that he fell off the seat more than he stayed on it. With regular and intensive workouts, his health and disposition improved markedly. At the same time, the progress of the disease slowed significantly, suggesting that exercise, though no cure, had deterred the debilitating effects of MS.

Founding the Heuga Center in 1984, Heuga blazed a trail for others to follow. He encouraged those with MS to, "do the best they can with what they have." Today his groundbreaking approach to living with MS is widely accepted by neurologists who treat the disease. "I'm the least qualified person to found a medical center," he says, "but I do know how to live. You can't just wait for the lights to be shut off."

He inherited a love of learning and books from his mother, Lucille. Heuga's brother, Bobby, a retired college professor in Martinez, CA, also has MS. Pascal Heuga, now age 100, was considered an outstanding powder skier

even in his 80's. Heuga graduated from the University of Colorado, with a degree in political science. He worked in the ski business for several years, and owned a ski shop in Lake Tahoe. He was married to Debbie Dana of Edwards. He and Debbie have three sons: Wilder (20), Blaze (18), and Winston (15). He was also father to Kelly Hamill, of Seattle.

Heuga has been honored by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and is an awardee of the Texaco Star Award. He has been on the President's Council on Physical Fitness, and was inducted into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame. He has been on a 1968 cover of Sports Illustrated Magazine, pictured with his best friend and teammate, Billy Kidd. The duo were the first American men to win Olympic medals in Alpine skiing. In a 1996 "Where are they now?" update in Sports Illustrated, Kidd said, "Jimmie is an inspiration to everyone. He doesn't think about MS as a disability but as a challenge. Jimmie says, 'Don't feel sorry for me, I just have MS. Some people have real problems. For example, you might not get along with your mother-in-law, or maybe you can't balance your checkbook.'"

One of Heuga's major ski rivals was Jean-Claude Killy. When Killy spoke at a Heuga Center fundraising dinner in NY, he recalled how Heuga, who spoke French, taught the French Ski Team how to do the twist. The story highlighted Heuga's friendliness, dance skills, and trend-setting style. Killy has referred to Heuga as "my champion."

Jimmie has lived in an assisted-care facility since 1999, and used a wheelchair. Heuga remained active swimming, skiing/water skiing in a sit-ski, and cycling, often alongside friend Richard Rokos, current coach of the University of Colorado Ski Team. Jimmie often spoke to Heuga Center participants, and worked to raise funds for the Center's programs. Heuga described exercise as an emotional anchor that keeps him grounded in the world. Exercise helped to maintain his sense of self, his sanity. And it kept his heart, muscles and lungs healthy - despite MS. "I've always drawn a distinction," he stated, "between my condition and my health."

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to the Jimmie Heuga Endowment Fund, 27 Main Street East, Suite 303, Edwards, CO 81632.

A Memorial Service will be held Monday at 1:00 p.m., February 15, 2010 at Beaver Creek Chapel in Avon, CO. The United States Ski Team and the Heuga family welcome all who knew and loved Jimmie to come to the celebration of his life in late spring.