

Austria's Ski-School Genius ♦ Manhattan Project Skiers ♦ Chasing President Ford

SKIING HISTORY

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Ski Genius Marks 100th Birthday

Kitzbühel's Karl Koller formalized short-ski instruction for beginners, reshaped children's learning, fostered terrain-based teaching, and was a dominant force in Interski.

BY JOHN FRY WITH BARBARA THALER



Karl Koller with an array of different manufacturers' short skis that he used over the years in his ski school, enabling novices to make parallel turns. His pioneering *kurz-ski* teaching began ten years before GLM was known in the U.S.A.

The man who systematized the use of short skis to accelerate learning is alive and well, and about to celebrate his 100th birthday. Karl Koller shook up the world of ski instruction in 1953 when he demonstrated to the International Congress of Ski Instructors how in his Kitzbühel ski school, the year before, he had successfully employed 150- to 170-centimeter skis to teach novices to make simple turns with skis parallel, bypassing the traditional snowplow and stem progression. And that's not all he did.

Austrian junior champion in downhill and jumping in the 1930s, Koller was the first man after the war to win the Hahnenkamm Combined title, in 1946. For 25 years, from 1950 to 1975, he headed Kitzbühel's renowned Red Devils ski school. He built what was, at one time, the world's most successful children's ski school, Kollerland. He invented Kollerhelp, a device that children could hold onto when first learning to ski. He inaugurated terrain-based teaching. He introduced the early season *wedel* week in Kitzbühel. He

Das Skifahren-Lernen wird leicht gemacht
mit dem
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski
Der Besizer eines 3-jährigen Verwehrens der Skischule Kitzbühel (amst. 20%) schenkt Ihnen einen und hat keine Unfallgefahr!
Sicher, Freude am Skifahren und dem
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski



Il est désormais facile d'apprendre le ski grâce
au
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski
Une expérience de 3 ans, effectuée par l'école de ski de Kitzbühel avec le
placard, a été le résultat suivant:
La période d'apprentissage est réduite de moitié, les risques d'accidents
sont presque totalement éliminés. Le ski procure d'incompréhensibles plaisirs avec le
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski

To learn to ski is becoming much easier by use
of the
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski
The result of three years' experience of the Kitzbühel Ski School proves:
It is quicker learning and hardly any accidents.
Skiing is much more fun with the
Kitzbüh'ler Schoolski

For his innovative children's ski school, Karl Koller invented the "Kollerhelp" to make getting back uphill easier for young learners. He brought children to the 1968 International Congress of Ski Instruction (Interski) at Aspen, Colorado to demonstrate his novel teaching methods.



invented the "Golden Ski Book," honoring any skier on holiday who completed runs on 50 slopes around Kitzbühel. Indeed, Koller was the heart and brains of Kitzbühel's ascendancy as a ski resort—home of the world's most famous downhill race, and of more famous natives like triple Olympic gold medalist Toni Sailer, Anderl Molterer, Christian Pravda, Hias Leitner, Ernst and Hansi Hinterseer, as well as nordic and snowboarding medalists.

SHORT SKI TEACHING

As *wedeln*—the quick ski turn with reverse shoulder action—grew in

popularity in the 1950s, the conventional method of teaching beginners with the old Arlberg system—snowplow to stem to stem christie turn, with rotation—looked increasingly obsolete. Students had to unlearn V-shaped ski turns in order to turn with skis parallel.

Koller sensed that the solution was to have students make parallel turns from the beginning, eliminating the old, slow, stage-by-stage Arlberg progression to parallel. But it couldn't happen if beginners started on conventional skis of 200 centimeters and longer—skis that they would later own, but were too

cumbersome for novices.

Koller first experimented with the use of short skis in 1952. He got a factory to make the skis—the Kitzbüheler Schul-Ski. The next year, he spoke about the radical new development in teaching at the 3rd Interski Congress of instructors at Davos. Eventually 93 ski schools in the Tyrol alone took up short-ski teaching.

Independently, and probably unaware of Koller's teaching in the early 1960s, Clif Taylor with Morten Lund in the United States popularized GLM, the graduated length method of ski teaching (*see sidebar*). GLM involved a progression through three or four lengths of skis, more complicated and arguably less efficient than Koller's *kurz-ski* method. GLM did not make lasting inroads in Europe.

To meet the demand from ski schools around the world, Head Ski began full-scale manufacture of short skis. Others followed. But with the advent in the early 1990s of Elan's SCX and Kneissl's Ergo, and the introduction of high-performance carving skis under 190 cm in length, the special use by ski schools of short teaching skis came to an end.

SKIING POLYMATH

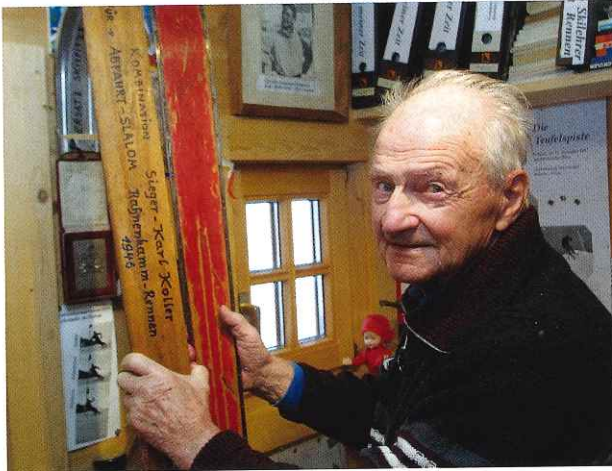
Karl Koller was born in 1919, the youngest of ten children. As a three-year-old he suffered from skin problems. A doctor recommended fresh air, and from that time on he spent every possible minute outdoors. He competed in both nordic



An artist's imaginative rendering of the Kollerland children's ski school in the 1970s. Koller created a playground of gates, jumps and bumps to make the learning experience for kids fun.



Koller was an early advocate of terrain teaching, challenging his students to enlarge their technique. The “Devil’s Slope” in his Kitzbühel ski school combined skill and daring.



Karl Koller holds the skis on which he won the famous Hahnenkamm Combined 73 years ago, in 1946. He used the same pair in both the downhill and the slalom.

and alpine skiing, and played soccer in summer. In 1936, he became Tyrolean Youth Champion in downhill and jumping.

Nothing stood in the way of his skiing career except World War II. Drafted, he became a member of the Greater German Reich National Ski Team. From 1943 to 1945 he was a mountain guide for the German Army at the Mountain Medical School in the neighbouring village St. Johann in Tyrol.

“I also had to teach the Nazi bigwigs how to ski,” he says, his face darkening.

During World War II, Koller met his wife Hilde in Zurs. Their son was born in 1944. At the end of the war he wanted to become an instructor, although his family didn’t like the idea. “At the time two instructors had fallen ill with syphilis and died,” Koller recalls.

In January 1946 he won the Hahnenkamm Combined, finishing second in the downhill. As stipulated in the regulations, he competed with the same pair of skis in the slalom and the downhill.

“The 1946 downhill on the Streif was unforgettable,” recalls Koller. “It had rained all through the night. The slope was like an ice skating rink. Worse, thick fog reduced visibility down to no more than fifty metres. There were no directional gates. ‘Another one’s coming,’ called out the fans, who could only ascertain whether a racer was approaching in the thick fog by the sound of their skis rattling on the hard snow.”

THE RED DEVILS SKI SCHOOL

In 1947 after gaining certification, Koller founded the new Association of Kitzbühel Ski Instructors and Mountain Guides in 1950, uniting

two Kitzbühel ski schools. Under his leadership, the reconstituted school expanded rapidly.

It was important to Koller that his instructors have a clean, neat appearance. With his best friend, painter Alfons Walde (see *Skiing History*, July-August 2012), he developed a uniform—black trousers, red sweater and a red pointed cap. The *Rote Teufel* (Red Devils) ski school was born. The instructors were often required to attend five o’clock tea, the hottest society gathering of the day. They had to appear in uniform, always with a tidy haircut.

“One day,” recalls Koller, “Anderl Molterer came to ski school finely dressed, crisply pressed trousers, nice shoes, a smart sweater. When asked if he didn’t have work clothes with him, Anderl said: ‘No, I always work in these clothes.’”

The famous Ski Instructors Ball and New Year’s firework display with ski show were Koller ideas. He also introduced Wedel Weeks: To promote lessons, he created tests for pupils at four levels of turning skill. You needed an instructor to succeed. On Friday, at the end of ski week, an award ceremony was held at 5 o’clock tea in the hotel Zur Tenne.

Along the way Koller was elected president of the Austrian Ski Instructors Association, and chairman of the Kitzbühel Tourism Association. He and his wife Hilde came to run a boarding house, Das Kollerstüberl, in the center of town.

TEACHING CHILDREN IN A NEW AND DIFFERENT WAY

In 1960 Koller introduced specialized teaching for children in his Red Devils Ski School. He was convinced that children should be introduced to skiing in a playful way. He built a special terrain playground of steep curves, hillocks, jumps and gates. Koller's approach was so innovative that in 1968 he brought children with him to make a demonstration at the 1968 Interski congress of instructors at Aspen.

His ski school was among the first to enable its instructors to share in profits, a seemingly benevolent idea. But Koller came to see it as a mistake. The instructors, or employees, now had a voice in how the ski school was run. He was no longer totally "the boss," free to invent new ideas as he wished. Innovations like short ski teaching were questioned. The costly construction of a building to house the instructors caused the ski school's profits to decline. Arguments ensued. Finally in 1975, angry, he left the ski school to concentrate on teaching children, founding his own school, Koller Kinderland.

Koller is the author of two books, *Freud und Leid zu meiner Zeit* (Joy and Sorrow in My Time) and *Kitzbühel zu meiner Zeit* (Kitzbühel in My Time). He has documented and archived every development in Kitzbühel, neatly filed in folders and bound books, which he keeps in his garden house.

His wife, to whom he was married for 54 years, died in 1997. One of his grandchildren, Alexander, won the overall World Cup of snowboarding and the World Cup of boardercross in 1998. Koller enjoyed cross-country skiing regularly until he was 95 years old. He suffered a health setback in 2017 when he broke his femur. But he battled back, diligently completing his rehab—typical for a man who has lived a century of "never giving up." 🐛

ISHA chairman John Fry prepared this article based on the writing and research of Barbara Thaler of the Kitzbühler Ski Club.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SHORT-SKI TEACHING

Koller's use of short skis for teaching was not the first. The Kitzbüheler appears to have been unaware of the twin-tip goon ski invented by American figure skater Jimmy Madden, and made in 4-, 4-1/2 and 5-foot lengths by Grosvold and Derby-Bell in the 1940s. Madden informally used them to teach novices.

At his Mad River Vermont ski school Bud Philips, and one of his instructors Clif Taylor, used goon skis for teaching in the winter of 1946–47. Koller's early short-ski teaching method was briefly adopted by California's Dodge Ridge. Other areas didn't follow. Putting novices on short skis, critics said, would teach them bad habits, such as weak edging and lack of body angulation.

Clif Taylor never gave up on the short ski. He became an evangelist for the idea that intermediate recreational skiers would enjoy the sport more on shorter skis. Taylor translated the goon into an 82-cm straight-sided ski, the Shortee, which he sold, with financial support from Laurence Rockefeller.

You didn't have to stem or edge the Shortees to turn, you simply twisted them. "Learn to ski in a day!" proclaimed Taylor, who appears to have been ignorant of Koller's work.

In 1961 Stephen Green Press published Taylor's *Instant Skiing on Short Skis*. The book got the attention of *SKI Magazine* contributing editor Morten Lund, who pressed me (as the magazine's editor-in-chief in 1965) to allow him to write positively about Taylor's work.

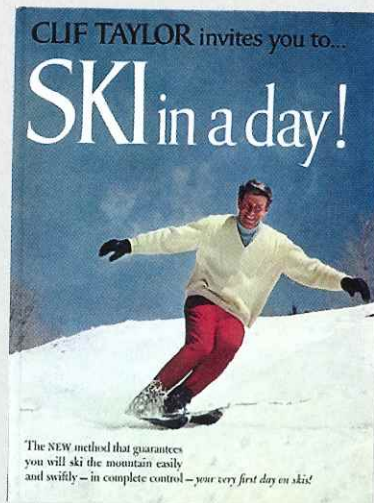
"The public isn't going to believe what you and Clif claim without proper testing," I told Lund. "We need to evaluate, independently, the progress of novices typically being taught by the standard stem-progression method, compared with novices being taught on a progression from short to longer skis." And so in the winter of 1966 I approved the magazine's organization and partial funding of experiments at Killington, Tremblant, Sun Valley, Boyne Mountain and Jay Peak. Their ski schools enthusiastically collaborated. *SKI* formalized the statistical results. To no one's evident surprise, the tests showed that after a week the GLM experimental groups were able to make better turns with skis parallel than did the control groups.

Killington was the site of the largest experiment, where it got the enthusiastic support of CEO Preston Smith. Killington ski school director Karl Pfeiffer called it the *Graduated Length Method*, which was abbreviated by Lund to GLM. Dozens of ski schools around the country adopted it.

Starting in the 1990s GLM went into steep decline with the introduction of easy-to-turn, wider and shorter skis with the performance qualities of longer skis. Over 50 years the average length of skis owned by a recreational skier shortened by 30 centimeters (about one foot). Ski schools were not unhappy to rid themselves of the logistics of organizing GLM classes as well as the financial burden of stocking multiple ski lengths. — John Fry



Jimmy Madden introduced his twin-tipped "goon" skis in 1939 and used them to teach beginners.



Vermont instructor Clif Taylor became an evangelist for the idea that novices could learn the sport easily on short skis.