

JOHN SEMMELINK

MEMORIAL AWARD

*+Sharon
Firth*

The late John Semmlink

*Firth sisters
ultimately won
this
award*

BY
LORNE "OAKIE" O'CONNOR



We waited silently together as the starters made their last preparations before starting the first forerunner. It was Saturday morning, February 7th, 1959. The Race, the 24th Running of the Arlberg Kandahar Downhill, over a treacherous, twisting, lumpy piste on the Kreuzeg Mt. in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. High patchy cloud drifted across the mountain tops throwing their patternless shadows on the hard packed race course below. The air was chilling but no match for the icy fingers which were at work inside us both.

Our eyes met in a moment of truth. The countdown of the first forerunner rang faintly through to our helmeted ears. We watched mutely as the forerunner pushed off; we were both committed now; there was only a short, last time until it would be our moment of truth.

About us stood the truly great competitors of our times; Shranz, Werner, Bonlieu, Oberagner, Hintereiser, Molterer, Perillat, Bognor and others. We all waited our turn anxiously watching the efforts of each racer as he accelerated towards the first schuss — the limit of our vision from the start. Some nervous ones didn't make it that far before the race ended for them.

My team-mate, 21 year old John Semmlink, had a low start number in the third seeding with mine following late in the fifth. We both edged closer to the start as John's number approached. He looked at me and I at him both knowing what was ahead. John captured the moment murmuring for my ears alone "I'm afraid Oak, but I'm really going to go today."

John went, just like the super stars accelerating strongly into the first schuss. He was displaying the ability that had been showing increasingly all season.

It was the last moment that anyone talked to John. Below on the most difficult portion of the course luck completely deserted him when he drifted ever so slightly off the so called "fast line" through a bumpy field. He was thrown slightly back and

off balance by the larger bumps in his path and in his attempts to regain his balance the tips of his skis crossed and he exploded into a fall. Bystanders later reported he at first somersaulted with his bindings releasing. As his speed decreased he began to slide toward the crowd of spectators lining the downhill side of the race course. He approached the spectators sliding on his back head first. Nearing the crowd his speed was almost a standstill. The spectators successfully scrambled aside to avoid the foreseeable collision.

John slid slowly into the underbrush lining the edge of the course behind the position of the spectators. The underbrush obscured a steeply pitched bank and small narrow creekbed about 2 feet across. His sliding momentum carried him upside down and backwards into this ice filled natural toboggan chute. The creekbed twisted down the steep slope that became impossible to walk down. The skis were brutally ripped from John's feet by the steep banks which were lined with hard rock and frozen earth. John plummeted headlong down the chute and came to rest 300 yards below, suffering from a fractured skull and other internal injuries. He died in hospital 3 hours later without regaining consciousness.

This is a tragic story but one which must be told if the reader is to completely understand the significance of the Semmelink Memorial Award.

On the brighter side one has only to hear of the many attributes of John Semmelink to realize just how appropriate it was that such an award was created by the C.A.S.A. to inspire and reward those skiers today and in the future who would, through sportsmanship, conduct and ability, best represent Canada in International competition.

John was an extremely intelligent person. He spoke five 5 languages fluently, including Chinese. He was big as far as skiers go, very strong and possessed the looks usually required of a movie star — tall, dark and handsome. He also possessed a sense of dedication and responsibility that were often favourably remarked upon by those who met him. His efforts to improve so as to better represent Canada were inspiring to all of his teammates. Of course his immediate goals were those of any international competitor, but he placed equal value on the importance of competitive success at home. In 1959, John expressed on several occasions a desire to convincingly win the Canadian Championships then upcoming at Mt. Orford in Magog, Quebec. This desire was to be in part repayment to all those supporters in his home town of Montreal and the Laurentians for their faith and support given to him in his quest to reach the top in skiing.

On the European racing circuit John was a real statesman as he could communicate with nearly all the members of the major teams in their own tongue. He could swap yarns and jokes in French, German and English with a completely straight face any time or place. The teams especially liked him for his humor. Even above this respect was that gained on the slopes in the events of Downhill and Giant Slalom which were John's favourites.



Linda Crutchfield, winner of the award this year.

It was more than fitting that the first recipient of the Semmelink Memorial Award in 1960 should go to John's teammate and Olympic Gold Medalist, Anne Heggtveit Hamilton, who on the same day of his death won the Ladies Slalom and Combination titles of the 24th Arlberg Kandahar. Anne displayed throughout her years as a competitor all the qualities necessary to win the presentation un-animously.

The second presentation of the award to Vern Anderson of Rossland, B.C. in 1961, was appropriate in every way as Vern brought to Canada the best male racing results of any international competitor since Ernie McCulloch. His winning of the award is a story of personal dedication and triumph.

On September 27th, 1964 in Montreal, the third and most recent presentation of the Award was made to Linda Crutchfield Bocock, the 23 year old 1964 Canadian Women's Champion. During her 4-year tenure on the National Ski Team, Linda proved by her efforts and example, an athlete who richly deserved the award. She represented Canada at the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics, the 1962, F.I.S. in Champonix and in the 1964 Olympics in Innsbruck where her performances were solid and exemplary. In every way Linda showed the sportsmanship, conduct and ability that was so typical of John Semmelink, making her the logical choice for the Award.

By being the true Champion that she proved herself to be at Mt. Todd in the 1964 Canadian Championships, Linda continues the heritage of greatness which the Semmelink Award typifies. Linda's efforts have greatly contributed to the ideal for which John Semmelink gave his life. Congratulations Linda, you really did go!