

High Achievers

By Martin Cleary

Sue Holloway

Four-time cross-country skiing Olympian



PHOTO: S. HOLLOWAY

Holloway remembers her introduction to snow, cold, and skis, as if it were yesterday. Simply, she detested it.

For her parents, Maurice and Thea, alpine skiing seemed to be the most logical way to enjoy outdoors in the winter. That was the link that brought them together as a couple and they hoped it would become a family tradition.

Even at a young age, Holloway knew how to make a point.

“I didn’t enjoy downhill skiing. There was a lot of standing in line, it was cold and there was a lot of waiting. It wasn’t what I liked,” said Holloway, vividly replaying that moment.

The next time Holloway confronted snow, cold, and skis, it involved another skiing discipline, cross-country or nordic. Now, that brought a smile to her face. Maurice took her to the former Heggtveit Ski Shop on Bank Street in Ottawa to initiate Winter Activity Plan B.

Holloway remembers that retail experience, as well.

“Mr. Heggtveit said if I wanted to go to the Olympics, I could, if I worked hard and committed. I was 10 and that went over my head,” she added. “Just give me the skis.”

Holloway was sold on cross-country skiing even before she received her first set of equipment. She loved the idea of being able to ski almost anywhere, including going up a mountain instead of taking a chairlift.

Going anywhere took her to the 1976 Winter Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria (seventh in 4x5-kilometre relay). Her dedication and commitment to sport and training for nordic skiing spilled over to her off-season, cross-training fascination with sprint kayaking.

Holloway, who turned 65 last spring, was named to four Canadian Summer and Winter Olympic teams, competed in three Games and was selected the opening-



PHOTO: S. HOLLOWAY

Sue Holloway capped her career in 1984.

ceremony flagbearer before the country boycotted the 1980 Moscow Games. She capped her elite athlete career at the 1984 Summer Olympics, winning respective K2 and K4 silver and bronze medals.

"My parents believed I could do anything, if I put my mind to it," said Holloway, who has spent almost the past two decades as a dragon boat racer and coach and will venture into outrigger paddling in 2021.

That's the message she wants to deliver to mature adults, who are looking for a meaningful activity to get them out of the house and hopefully help to keep them healthy during this all-embracing COVID-19 pandemic.

Cross-country skiing is one of seven different winter activities, along with hiking, snowshoeing, tobogganing, downhill skiing, ice skating and outdoor play, that carry a lower risk of COVID transmission, according to Ottawa Public Health.

Nordic skiing is good for overall health, as long as the participants keep two metres away from people outside your household and avoid sharing snacks or drinks.

"Even more so (this year) than other years — activity is always good for the soul. Being outdoors is great for mental, physical and spiritual well-being," Holloway said.

For the last 55 years, Holloway has spent most of her winters as a cross-country skier, coach and advocate, because of the friendships she has developed and the health benefits she has derived and seen others acquire.

"The number one benefit is seeing friends," Holloway said. "I have an amazing group of people and I'm still close to most of them. Friendships made me come out and stay."

She has continued to be driven by that camaraderie even as a 25-year coach with the Nakkertok Nordic ski club, where she coaches and coordinates the Racing Rabbits youth program.

"These will be friends for life. How lucky to share something like this — I love the people, the relationships and experiences you share," Holloway continued.

Canada's first woman to compete at the Winter and Summer Olympics in the same year (1976) has a few tips for mature adults to glide safely into cross-country skiing.

Be kind to your body by having a medical check-up and develop an exercise program to improve your strength, flexibility and endurance.

If you are looking for lessons, there are numerous clubs in the National Capital Region, City of Ottawa

programs, and private instructors. When it comes to equipment, consider renting first from a local ski shop before purchasing.

Ski boots are critical as they must be comfortable for you to enjoy your outing. Start with plastic, waxless skis and the classical style of skiing, which provides stability with a walking-style motion in a set track. It's an easier introduction to nordic skiing for older skiers. Graduating to the skate-style skiing, where you push your skis to the side like ice skating, will give you more freedom using a different type of skis.

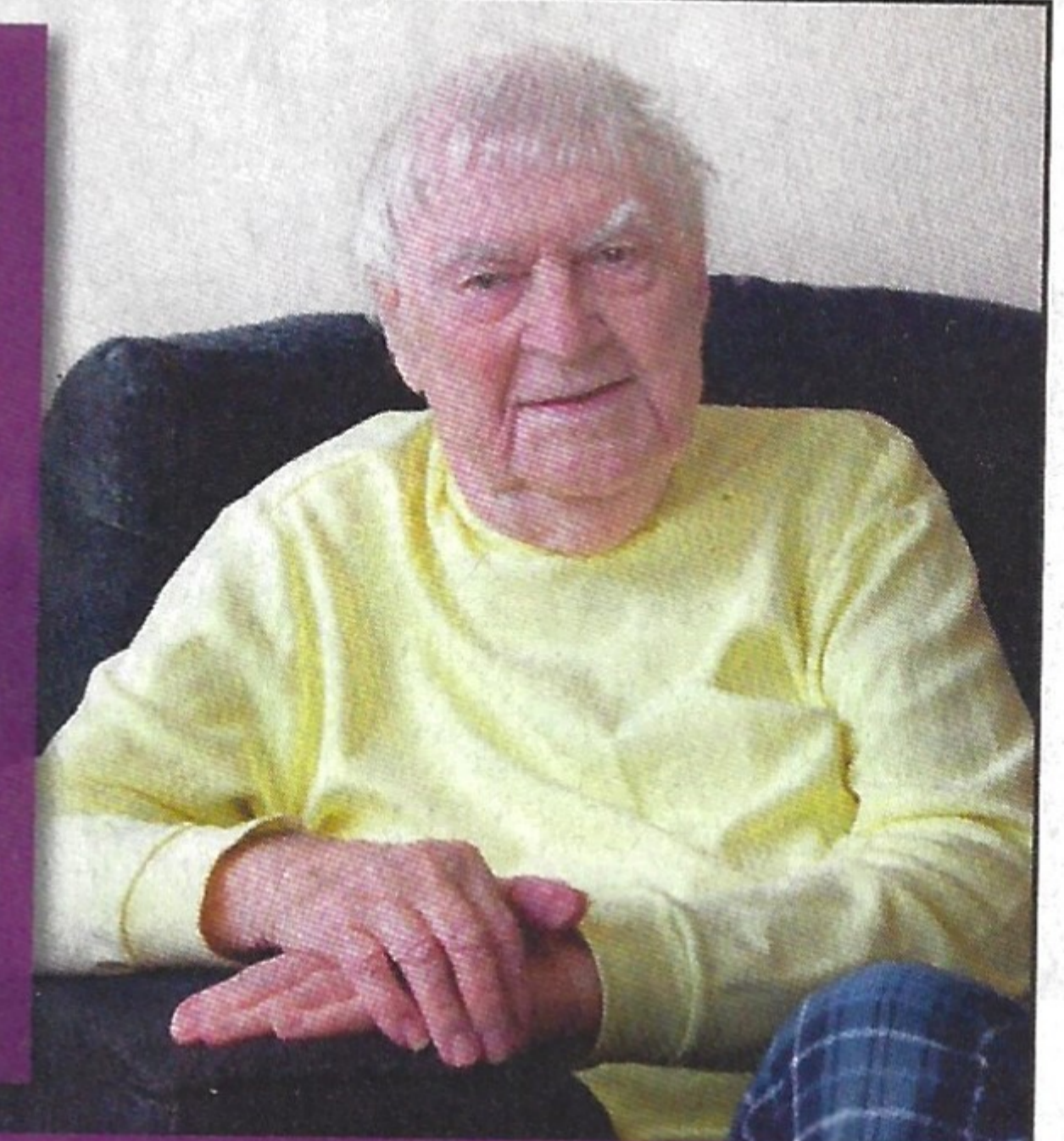
"If you want a workout, skate skiing is the choice. If you're not sure what to do, go with classic," said Holloway, adding it's important to follow a comfortable pace at the start.

"Just get out there and give it a go. Get out and have fun. Have a few lessons and practice. Nothing improves your technique more than practice. Get out and practice, practice and practice." ■

Martin Cleary has written about amateur sports as a sportswriter for more than 44 years. His biweekly High Achievers column concentrates on athletes, teams and builders from Olympians to Little League Baseball players. Martin won the Doug Gilbert Medal as Canada's sportswriter of the year in 1983.

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