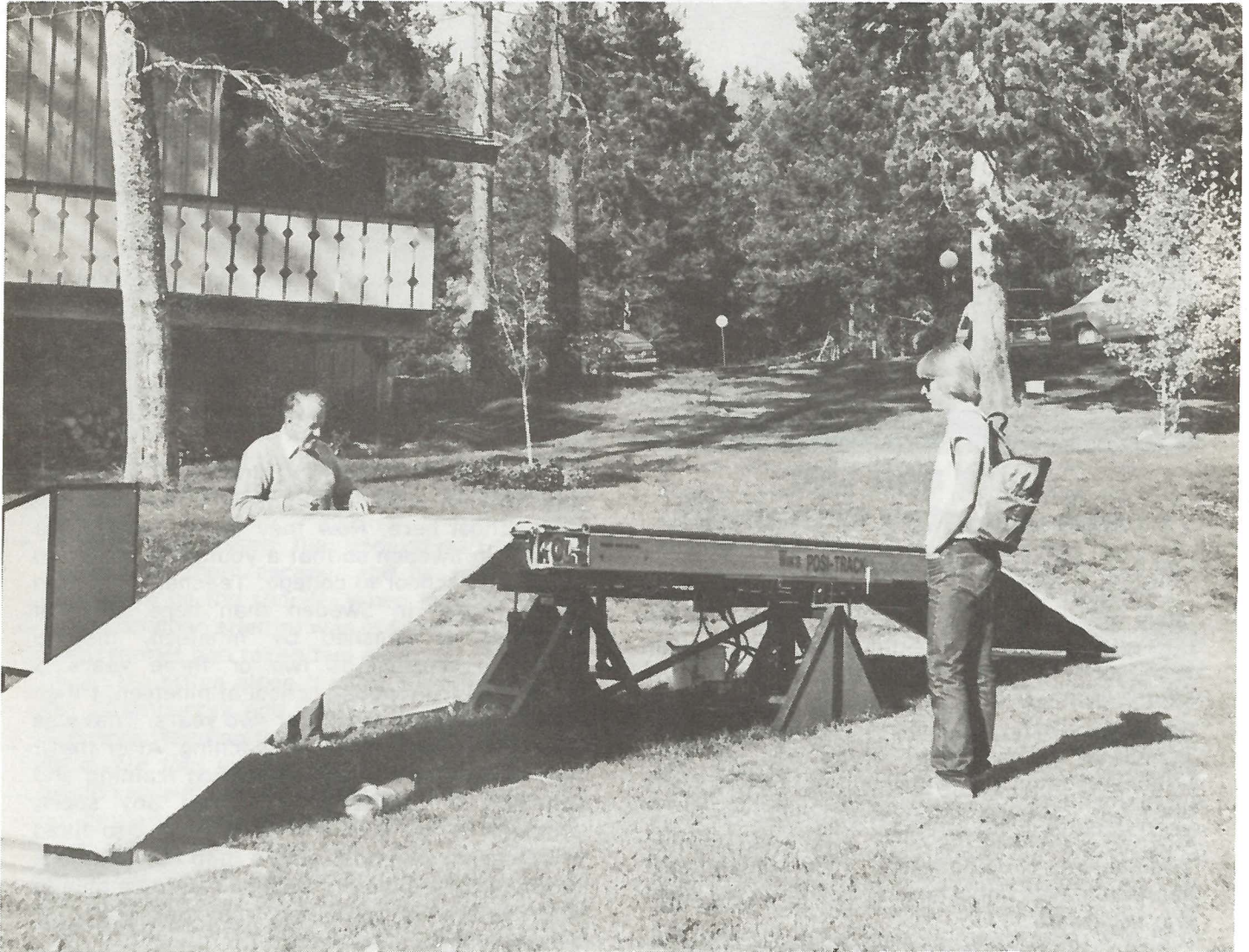


# Sven Wiik: A Sports Pioneer

By John Weber

and Terry Delli Quadri



## Wiik's POSI—TRACK

Sven Wiik, a cross-country skiing expert has been somewhat of a pioneer of cross-country skiing in this area. His life is cross-country skiing as well as being the owner and manager of Scandinavian Lodge, a sports oriented facility. His involvement in sports is not just limited to cross-country skiing but all kinds of sports. He has received numerous awards not only for sports achievement, but also for encouraging sports. Sven was inducted into the Colorado Ski Hall of Fame in 1979, and in 1981 he was awarded the honor of being in the National Ski Hall of Fame.

Sven came to the United States in 1949, when he settled in Gunnison, Colorado. He worked as an assistant professor at Western State College for 19 years. He began our interview by telling us about his youth in Sweden. "I was born in Solletlea, Sweden, in 1921. Solletlea is located in the northern part of the country bordering Lapland, three hundred miles south of the midnight sun. I grew up in a town pretty much like Steamboat, a small wintry town which hosted a World Ski Championship in 1934. My childhood reflects being brought up in a sports-minded town with similar activities as here. We





## John and the cross-country treadmill.

had Boy Scouts and everything.

"We didn't have as big of mountains there as here; it was more like the Midwest as far as the hills were concerned. We didn't have to go as far to the mountains, and skiing was the sport in the winter with soccer in the summer. Every child was associated with skiing in one way or another especially in the north. Skiing was not only important when I was growing up, but as I was older too. I started skiing when I was two, but it was not organized teaching. That's against the Swedish way of doing things. They thought good equipment was important. Exposure to the sport was necessary.

"As a rule parents are too anxious for the kids to ski. My daughter started pretty much the way I did. Parents who are skiers often push their kids to be good ski racers. We put Brigitta outside our home in Gunnison. At first she played with her skis. She would lie on her stomach on top of the skis or sit on them and go down the little hill. Eventually she found out that standing up on them and moving across the snow was the best way. I guess a part of good teaching is to answer questions, but not to show too much interest in what the child is doing, or else they might rebel. When I was a kid we had something like 'Little Toots' where we would play games like catch on skis and hide-and-go-seek. If we had a few kids it wouldn't be long till our ski tracks

criss-crossed everywhere. It was tremendous training, and we never knew the purpose of it. It was geared to the development of good skiing.

"When I got to be eight or ten years old I was taught the fine points of skiing. I think most people would be surprised how many kids pick up skiing by imitation, by looking at others, then trying it. I raced as a kid, all the way up until I came to this country. We were handicapped there because of the war. I came here in 1949. The actual war was over there in 1945, and the international exchange of skiers started again in 1946.

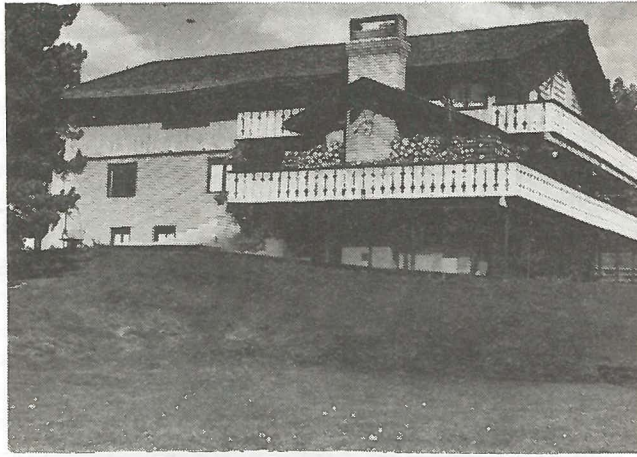
"When I came to the United States I was 28. I got all my education in Sweden (business and teaching), and I was teaching there for a while before I came over here. However, I was mostly in the service. Education was more formal there than here. We didn't have the social aspect of growing up and getting along with others. We went to school to learn math, history, and language. I took English in school, and now they teach conversation English in the 4th grade. Kids grow up learning to speak good English, German then French and Russian, but we didn't have that when I was in school there. I was exposed to English and German, but we didn't start that early.

"We had a compulsory nine years of school and then we went to gymnasium that was like high school here. Now they have changed the system in Sweden so that a youngster would go from high school to college. Teacher's training takes longer in Sweden than here. General schooling is finished by nineteen, then a teacher's seminar is two or three years. I graduated from public school at nineteen. I then went to business school for two years. That was after my college course in teaching. After that I took up lots of physical education training and athletics. I competed in almost any sport, although skiing was my favorite. I also liked orienteering which is using a map and compass to find a certain point. We also had to be able to swim before we graduated from high school. It was considered a necessity.

"I was a sergeant in the military. I was drafted during the war in 1943. Sweden was neutral in the war. I enlisted in 1943 and was in for four years total. We never fought, but we patrolled the borders. I patrolled along the Norwegian and Finnish borders. We saw no combat. There were lots of people coming over the border, some Russians and Germans. The Norwegians came over to get training or get supplies. Sometimes they were fleeing with Germans on their tails. Norway was occupied by Germany.

"When I first came to the United States I met the people who sponsored me. I was teaching in the mountains and they told me that skiing was becoming popular in the U.S. They said if I





## The Scandinavian Lodge

wanted to come over that they would sponsor me. I got the immigration visa and came to Chicago. I stayed with these Swedish Americans for 45 days before I got a job at Western State College in Gunnison. I remember them telling me that I would get better at the language. I thought I would only stay for a year or two and then go home.

"I was in Chicago for two weeks, walking the streets and seeing all there was to see. I went to the museum, the planetarium, to libraries, and all different kinds of things. I saw the town as a whole. Then I got restless and became interested in country life. I said, 'Boy, I had better get a job for the winter.' The people that I lived with suggested that I go to the library to look through the resource section for information about skiing places, since, of course I was a skiing teacher.

"I wrote to Arapahoe Basin, Lake Placid and Sun Valley to inquire about positions. I had gotten a response from Arapahoe Basin and they said that they had heard that a school in Gunnison was looking for a ski coach, and they gave me the address. I applied and got an invitation to come for an interview. They had had a Norwegian coach the year before and they had trouble with him. They couldn't offer me a job until I had an interview. If they hired me then they would pay all my expenses, but if they didn't then I was on my own. If I didn't get the job I would go to Aspen and find something there for the winter. As it turned out I got the job in Gunnison.

"I came to Gunnison in 1949, and stayed there until 1968. I worked in the Health and Recreation Department and was coaching skiing. From time to time I coached other sports like track and field. Those were some great years when the school was growing. We had about 500 students when I came and about 3000 when I left. Our ski teams did quite well. We were second in the NCAA's, and we won some individual events.

"I coached the FIS team in '58, the Olympic team in '60 and the World University team that went to Italy in 1966. There's more managing for

a team like that than coaching or teaching. I only worked with those athletes for about three weeks. It was just a matter of getting them ready for the games. I was the national coach from '57 to '62. In those days I had no more than three months direct contact with the athletes. They would depend on their own coach the rest of the time.

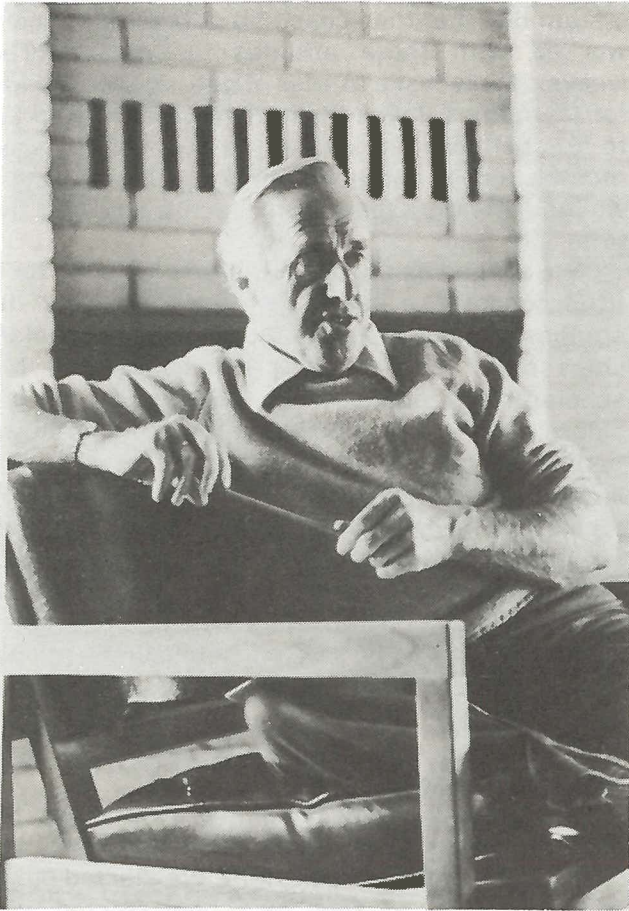
"We always had good teams. It was tough for a little school like ours. We were definitely the smallest school in the league, with no scholarships other than tuition. We never had big scholarships, consequently, we never got the big skiers. Lots of our skiers became good, and we had one thing that very few other schools did, a location like Steamboat. If a college had been located here, it would have had a tremendous advantage over other schools. For example, C.U. and Denver have to travel to Lake Eldora or Winter Park to train. We could go to Crested Butte for the afternoon from Gunnison. We could train right on campus with the Nordic people. Lots of skiers who were not champions when they came became champions because of these opportunities to train.

"I was coaching all the skiing events. For the first ten years I was alone with the team, but then I got a graduate assistant. We started out in the preseason, as soon as school started with about 70 kids. In a week or two that went down to about 50. When the snow came we had about 30. We kept about 25 for the whole winter. During my last few years the team had about 14 skiers. That was the Alpine and Nordic together. During the pre season we all trained together, and when the snow came the Alpine skiers went to Crested Butte and the Nordic skiers trained in Gunnison. Our ski jumpers also went to Crested Butte where we had three jumps. We built one that was about 140 or 150 feet. Then we built one in Crested Butte for the N.C.A.A.'s. One hundred ninety feet was the longest jump. That jump has been taken out, but one can still see it.

"After working for four years in Gunnison I went back to Sweden, and that was the summer I got married. My wife is Danish and was born in Copenhagen. Actually I took a leave of absence to further myself in the field of skiing. I got a grant from an association for promotional skiing. They were in the process of reorganizing their entire ski program. So, I got involved in this process; therefore, I traveled from resort to resort looking at the different ski programs. My wife, Birthe, was then working as a hostess in one of these resorts, and that's when we met.

"Birthe's education was in management, and ever since we married we dreamed about having a business of our own. We were set on doing it in Crested Butte, but then since I had come to the United States in 1949, I had been to Steamboat several times for ski meets. I had met Gordy





**“It is a good life,  
and enjoyable work.”**

Wren and Marvin Crawford who were managing the ski area in 1959, when we had the Olympic tryouts here.

“One day Gates Gooding and I were laying out trails for the tryouts and we stopped for lunch. We were sitting right here (where the Scandinavian Lodge is now) and I told Gates, ‘You know, Birthe and I were thinking about this sort of an area for a ski related business. We were working on this in Crested Butte, but it is hard to get more than one acre in the Gunnison area.’

“In Crested Butte there were financial problems with the training camp set up. We were discussing that and looking around at the mountain, and we decided that this area would be the center of development. If you draw a circle around Mt. Werner and down through the golf course and close to the highway and around and put a pencil right in the middle of the circle, that is the Scandinavian Lodge.

“So Gates said, ‘Why don’t you build right here?’ I replied, ‘This is probably National Forest anyway.’ But we weren’t too sure, so we checked and it wasn’t. It was part of a ranch owned by Don Valentine. I introduced the plan to him and he got interested. At that time there was not even a road up here. In fact, Don wouldn’t even come up here since he was an Alpine skier and he didn’t have cross-country skis, but he was

excited about what we wanted to do.

“We have an ideal location here, with a lift right around the corner. We started with the lodge and the athletic building 14 years ago. The Viking building is five years old. The athletic building has a gym floor, eight rooms downstairs, and also some dorm rooms. We can accommodate 119 guests and twenty personnel. We like for our personnel to have their own rooms. Last year all of our personnel, except for two, lived here. Since housing is quite expensive and most jobs here are not very high paying, our employees come here to ski and work. Someone who wants to work and make a lot of money should not be in this kind of work. But it is a good life, an enjoyable life, and enjoyable work at the same time. This is a good business.

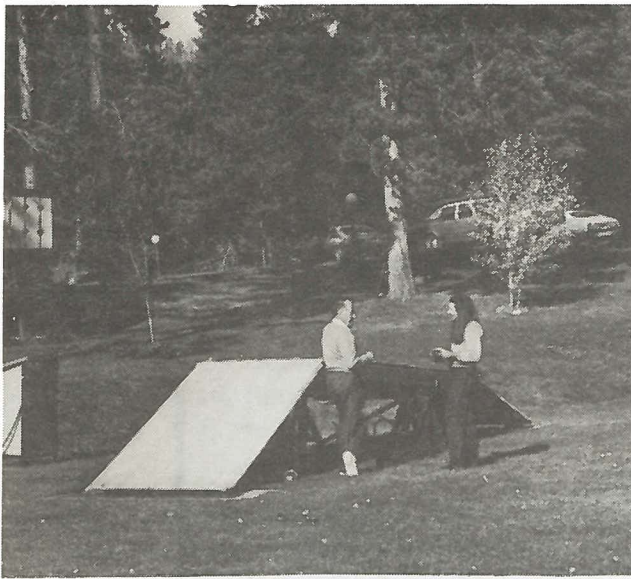
“The purpose for building the Scandinavian Lodge was to have a lodge like any other lodge. It would attract athletic groups, educational groups, and small convention groups. We needed 16 acres for a soccer field, a swimming pool, tennis courts, and buildings. We had three objectives, a lodge facility, a training facility, and a small convention center.

“The National Ski Team comes here from time to time and we have our own athletic program too. In June we have soccer camps, and we have had wrestling camps, and a gymnastic camp one summer. November is our ski touring education month. We teach skiers to become certified instructors. The U.S. jumping team was here last fall, and the combined team comes here often. The junior Alpine training camp has been here, and we hope to attract summer ski jumping on our new ski jump.

“We have other educational programs. The students of the University of Northern Colorado have come with part of their campus of Arts and Humanities. They usually have pottery workshops, but they also have weaving, painting, and other workshops. That is the image we are trying to establish. We have tried to be complete. A person that comes here can sleep here, eat here, entertain here, use our soccer field, go jogging or walking, swimming, or play tennis. We have guests here who have been here eight to nine years and have never been downtown. They always talk about going downtown, but they never do. They are so busy, they get up and want to be the first on the lifts or go on a tour. We have ski tours on the pass that leave at 9:00 and return at 5:00. When they return they can swim, take a sauna, or lie down. And then at 6:30 is dinner. After dinner they sit down and play cards or watch a movie that we are showing. Many families just entertain themselves. They come as a family and entertain as a family.”

In recent years Sven has spent time promoting the Scandinavian Lodge, skiing, and Steamboat in general. He told us about this. “I have com-





## Tanna learning about Sven's invention.

bined my involvement in the ski industry with the promotion of this lodge. We could never afford to send one man out for two or three months to promote our project. Therefore, I have been combining that with working in ski shows and in mechanics workshops, which are done by an outfit in New York. They pay my travel expenses and I do a little teaching and at the same time pass out our Scandinavian Lodge brochures. I talk about the lodge and encourage people to come here.

"While at one of these consumer shows I got an idea. They had laid out a plastic track and I demonstrated cross-country ski technique. This was very difficult, and I felt there might be a better way. After six or seven years I finally got the money to pursue this project.

"My invention is a machine which helps an individual practice cross-country skiing on a treadmill. It has four different purposes. It is a testing machine for skiers and a training machine for athletes. In fact, Art Dickerson of the Human Laboratory Center in Boulder came here to see and use it for physiological testing of skiers. He can't test skiers up on the snow, but he can now bring them into the lab and test them. The third purpose is to use it for clinics in schools and things like that. That is probably where the marketing will come in. Ski shops will buy it so they can have a clinic right in the shop to show people how to ski. There could also be a mini-model, a basement model used for recreation. On the drawing board we figure that we could program the machine to resemble the Olympic courses and have our skiers skiing it all summer. Three summers before the Olympics, they will feel at home racing and breathing. They would have skied the same course one hundred times over. We are still working on that.

"The machine can run at any speed. If you simulate a course, you approximate how long it would take to ski uphill. That could be walked on by the programmer. The machine will pace itself so if the racer keeps up with it, he will complete the course at whatever the machine was set at. That means that any given hill would have to be skied at a given pace. If a skier has to ski a hill in ten seconds and those ten seconds are up, he's got to go down. If we figure that the downhill is 100 yards long, it will take ten seconds to cover that downhill. As the hill gets steeper, the carpet starts going faster because if the machine gets steeper and the carpet stays at the same speed the skier would fly off.

"If I knew what it would cost I would not have started this project. But I got started and it ran into lots of money, much more than I had. When it worked out as well as it did I got excited and forgot the money problem for awhile. Now we have filed for a patent application. There has been a patent research. It is surprising how a German guy had thought of a similar thing. He doesn't have a track down the middle but it is similar. There are many downhill carpets around. It will be eight or nine months before we get an answer. An idea cannot be patented as a whole. Then you have what you call patent pending. Now we can say patent applied for. I'm not concerned about getting a patent on it. My real concern is that before I go any further with it, I want to know that there's no infringing on anybody else. That problem's down the road."

As we concluded the interview Sven summarized his philosophy of life. "All people are good people. If you start with that attitude whatever comes in your path will be worthy."

