



The views of Lake Tahoe, from the high Sierra peaks at Squaw Valley, are one of the ski resort's big draws.

TRAVEL

A Winter's Tale

SQUAW VALLEY CELEBRATES ITS OLYMPICS, 50 YEARS LATER.

By Eddy Ancinas

ON THE AFTERNOON of February 18, 1960, in a blinding snowstorm, I maneuvered my car onto the one-lane road into Squaw Valley, California. The *click-clack* of my tire chains measured slow progress as I inched—in a steady line of cars—toward the opening ceremonies of the 1960 Winter Olympics.

I hadn't skied Squaw Valley since the early 50s. In those days Alex and Justine Cushing, owners of the fledgling ski resort, would join their guests for lunch on the deck in full view of the mountain run, or around the fireside for drinks in the evening. In the winter of 1950, and for the next two winters, avalanches demolished "Squaw One," the ski area's one and only chairlift. The next winter the valley had serious floods, and not long after, the lodge burned down. Still,

in 1955 Alex Cushing had charmed and cajoled the International Olympic Committee into awarding the VIII Olympic Winter Games to Squaw Valley.

Next month, to mark the 50th anniversary, Olympians will be back at Squaw to celebrate an event that transformed a remote mountain valley in the Sierra Nevada to what is now one of the largest ski resorts in the United States. There will be a torch relay, fireworks, tours of alpine courses, and historic longboard races.

As a volunteer guide for the Squaw Valley Olympics, I had been issued a parking permit and a pass to Blyth Arena's opening ceremonies. Snow obliterated the wide-open meadow on my left—green and grassy in summer, laced with cross-country ski tracks in winter. At the head of the valley, Squaw Peak, with its open bowls, tree-lined

slopes, and the men's downhill course, was invisible. So was the familiar wall of granite cliffs to the right of Squaw Peak. I edged my car into the parking lot and, at last, joined hordes of hooded figures groping their way in near-zero visibility to the entrance, and to our seats looking over the indoor arena.

The flags of Greece, the United States, and the Olympics were raised. The band played "The Parade of the Olympians," the sun splintered through the clouds as the athletes marched in, and Vice President Richard Nixon declared the Games open. Outside, Andrea Mead Lawrence, 1952 gold medalist, skied down Papoose run, carrying the Olympic torch. Fireworks exploded and two thousand of "doves of peace" (in fact, pigeons) were released. California's blind luck added another foot of snow to the mountain that night, and then bestowed a week of clear skies over the Sierra Nevada.

The Squaw Valley Olympics was the first Winter Games to be televised exclusively (and extensively) on one channel (CBS); it was the first time instant



Clockwise from top: the Squaw Valley village today; an ice skating competition and speed skating practice, at the 1960 games

replay was used; the first to electronically tabulate results and scores involving speed, distance, and style (IBM); the first Winter Olympics held in the western United States. It was the first time women competed in speed skating, and the first time the biathlon was an Olympic event. It was the first and only time that all alpine and skating events, including the 80-meter ski jump, were within walking distance of one another. Skiers and skaters watched and cheered at each other's events on the way to and from their own competitions. It was the only modern Olympics where all the athletes and coaches lived and dined in one village.

After the Games, I went to a nearby ski area and found myself waiting for the chairlift with a member of the Argentine Olympic team. I had heard him play guitar the night before, and seen him on the slalom course. I thought I might improve my Spanish if I rode the chairlift with him. Now, my Spanish much improved, he and I live in Squaw Valley, where we have raised three children and three ski shops, and

watched the ski area grow from a village designed to stage the Olympics, to an international resort.

Blyth Arena is now a parking lot. The lodge, surrounded by shops, restaurants, condos, and a village, has been re-invented for day use, the view from the old deck blocked by new ski lifts. The Athletes' Village is corporate offices.

In 1960, there were four double chairlifts and a rope tow; today, there are 33 lifts on six different peaks, including a cable car to High Camp at 8,200 feet, with its tennis courts, swimming pool, spa, and restaurants—all in full view of Lake Tahoe. Before the Olympics there was one hotel in the Valley; there are now seven, including the luxury Resort at Squaw Creek, with ski-lift access in winter and golf in summer. It's not the number of lifts or amenities that make Squaw special, however. When I ski across an open bowl or down a steep chute, or glide on a gentle track through the pine forest, I know it's the mountain—and the assurance that some things just can't be improved upon.

Still, I often think of 1960. In those

11 days, Jean Vurnet of France won the men's downhill on metal skis, and left the favored Austrians to wonder why their wax didn't work in the Sierra's changing cement-to-slush conditions. One of Korea's skiers, Kyung Soon Yim, having never skied on snow before (he practiced on grass), finished almost every race last in front of a cheering crowd. And of course, the U.S. hockey team, an improbable assortment of college friends, insurance salesmen, carpenters, a soldier, a fireman, and a TV advertising salesman, who had played together for only a month, took on the formidable Russians. Watched by the entire world, the scrappy team took a last-minute win in a heart-pounding game, and then went on to win the first U.S. gold medal in hockey by defeating the Czech team, with the support (and advice from the coach!) of the defeated Russians, who famously—during the height of the Cold War—claimed they liked the spunk and determination of the Americans. ▣

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