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The Hero of the Thunderbolt (Rudy Konieczny)

THE STORMS ROLLED ACROSS WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS IN FEBRUARY 1936 AS they always had, leaving a blanket of white on the hills around Adams that turned luminous under the full moon. Down the road in the southern Berkshires, Norman Rockwell was capturing on canvas the idealized images of small-town life in Depression-era America. On this night, he would have done well to travel a few miles north for his inspiration.

On the wooded slopes behind the old Konieczny farm in Adams, several young men shivered in the moonlight, shouldering their seven-foot hickory skis toward the modest summit. In front of the pack, as always, was a slightly built teen of medium height, with short blond hair and baby-faced, angular features. Over and over, he would lead his gang up, and then beat them to the bottom. His name was Rudolph Konieczny (Kon-EZ-nee), but to everyone in town he was just plain “Rudy.” And Rudy liked to win.

In the near distance of this idyllic scene loomed the behemoth, “the highest wave of the great landstorm of all this billowing region,” as native son Oliver Wendell Holmes described it.¹ Dark and foreboding even in bright moonlight, Mount Greylock rose far above them, teasing the boys into dreams of racing glory. Herman Melville had drawn his inspiration for the hulking Moby Dick from the snowcapped peak. It was the “great white hump” the author could see through the window above his writing desk.² Now the mountain was pulling on Rudy in a way reminiscent of the beast’s inexorable tug at Ahab.

When the church bells tolled nine, Rudy led his tired, happy group back to the farm. Skiing was their passion, and little satisfied more than a rare and exhausting moonlight practice. As they skated toward the house and the main road, their conversation yielded a consensus that this night had been particularly exhilarating. The snow had been good for a change, not the usual mixture of New England slush and ice. The weather was clear and cold. They had done well. All was right with the world.³

Moving along at Rudy’s demanding pace, his younger brother Adolph—Rudy’s shadow—struggled to keep up. Though the gangly Adolph was several years Rudy’s junior, he was already taller, which irked the smaller Konieczny. His little brother’s sudden growth spurt toward an eventual 6’4” was particularly difficult for Rudy to accept, since for years he himself had been tagging after his older brother Charlie, a local star athlete who towered over both his younger brothers and their five sisters.⁴

The growing frustration over the “averageness” of his height, according to Adolph, led the seventeen-year-old Rudy increasingly to place his highest priority on excelling at activities that proved his physical prowess and daring. Prior to finding his true love of skiing, Rudy had even talked his older brother into managing his fledgling boxing career.⁵

Rudy, in fact, won his first amateur bout at sixteen. His initial pugilistic success came as a surprise to everyone, including Charlie, who was quite amused when the young boxer announced that getting into the ring seemed about the easiest way in the world to earn three dollars. Rudy’s second match against a more seasoned Holyoke boxer with the ominous pseudonym “Kid Shamrock,” however, was his last. It was a reluctant career choice with which everyone in attendance at the bout—*especially* Charlie—concurred. Rudy returned to the slopes after his brief fling with the sweet science having demonstrated that, if nothing else, he wasn’t the type to back down from a scrap.

“As a kid, I think that Rudy might actually have liked fighting,” remembered Adolph. Rudy, however, was no bully. “Quite to the contrary, he never

picked on anyone. He just wouldn't brook nonsense from anybody. He could not back down. It was not in his nature."⁶

Gliding along between the two brothers that night was Rudy's gang of neighborhood ski cronies. First behind the leader was Maurice "Greeny" Guertin, a fine skier possessed of an even wilder streak of teenage insanity than Rudy. Guertin once scaled the outside of the huge Adams church steeple for the simple, extraordinarily dangerous pleasure of waving to his friends below.⁷ Behind Greeny came Roy Deyle, a good athlete, but definitely the more cautious "follower" of the group. And finally, there was Gerard "Stumpy" Gardner, who at five feet tall had something even greater to prove than Rudy did. Gerard understood what drove Rudy, and vice versa. He was the only one permitted to call Rudy by his rhyming nickname "Tooty," a reference to Rudy's occasional tooting of his own horn, without risking reprisal. They were both in the process of molding themselves into first-class downhill racers, and each respected that in the other.⁸

More than anything else this night, the five boys exuded pride. Every one wore the badge "Adams Man" with the same sense of self that the young fishermen from across the state in Gloucester wore theirs, the name of the town itself a synonym for the utter tenacity of its sons. Fearlessness in the mountains was identical to courage on the sea, as far as the Berkshire boys were concerned, and that belief caused them to move with a purpose, their heads high. To a man, they were out to conquer Greylock, where they agreed to meet again to practice at first light.



By 1936, Adams, Massachusetts, had already earned a reputation as one of the skiing capitals of the eastern United States. The first American ski boom of the early 1930s coincided with, and was in part fueled by, the activities of the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps. Looking for projects to keep its workers busy in the midst of a seemingly endless Depression, President Roosevelt's CCC had decided in 1934 to cut a "Class A" ski trail in the hill country of western Mass in the hopes of stimulating local business and tourism.⁹ The site chosen was the highest peak in the Berkshires, Mount Greylock, smack in Adams's backyard. They called the trail the Thunderbolt, and even without the installation of one of the popular, new rope tows recently invented to pull skiers uphill, it instantly became one of America's legendary ski runs.¹⁰

The Thunderbolt was tough to climb, and even tougher to ski. In the words of 1934 U.S. National Downhill Ski Champion Joseph Duncan Jr. of Colorado (a future Tenth Mountain Division officer), those who made the nearly two-mile, forty-five-minute hike to the summit were faced with “undoubtedly the most thrilling wooded run yet built in the country—it beats anything in the Rocky Mountains.”¹¹ Dartmouth Ski Team member and another future Tenth Mountaineer, Bob Meservey, had a less exuberant view. “It just scared the hell out of you. Steep, icy, and full of nasty surprises. It was the toughest run we had to ski.”¹²

From all over New England, the best skiers in the eastern United States flocked to the Berkshires to take their crack at the mighty ‘Bolt. These pilgrimages of the elite exposed the local Berkshire youth to championship-caliber racing, and Rudy Konieczny and his friends were among the many who contracted skiing fever as a result. The first Massachusetts Downhill Championship was held on the Thunderbolt in 1935 and won by the superb Dartmouth racer Dick Durrance. Fellow Olympian Jarvis Schauffler of Amherst College followed Durrance by setting a new speed record on the run several months later.¹³

Before long, Rudy and the others were flocking to the hills of Adams on primitive, homemade equipment that often included bicycle inner tubes fashioned into bindings and nailed to their skis. Inspired by the thrills they had witnessed and willing to take enormous risks in pursuit of the speeds they had seen Durrance and Schauffler achieve on *their* mountain, the young Berkshire skiers painfully learned their sport by imitation, and then quickly organized themselves into ski racing clubs. These included the Mount Greylock and Pittsfield organizations and Rudy’s first affiliation, the Thunderbolt team.¹⁴

As their skill and confidence progressed, Rudy’s gang soon set out to procure skis with real metal edges and leather bindings. The working-class kids of Adams received a tremendous stroke of fortune in that pursuit when local furniture store owner Art Simmons himself caught the ski bug and took on the role of Santa Claus for the fledgling racers. At the height of the Depression, Art’s store, A. C. Simmons, sold twenty-dollar pairs of Groswold skis to Rudy and his cohorts—some of whom were lucky enough to be making \$10.40 a week at the Berkshire Mills—for one dollar down and interest-free terms. For those Saroyan-esque acts of kindness, Simmons is recalled with fondness nearly seventy years later by the surviving club members, who continue to patronize the family-owned A. C. Simmons Department Store on Main Street in Adams in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Now more properly outfitted, Rudy, Greeny, and their friends began training in earnest on the Thunderbolt. They would frequently scale Greylock three times in a single afternoon to practice racing down. "We'd strip down to our undershirts on the way up," Adolph remembered, "to keep the perspiration to a minimum. The wetter your clothes got on the way up, the colder you were going to be once you stopped moving. We were cold most of the time, I guess, but we just ignored it."¹⁶

On those rare occasions when the light and conditions were just right, they'd ski all day on the mountain and come back to the Konieczny farm to continue their workouts at twilight. From the start, however, it was apparent that Rudy—frequently adorned in his trademark, floppy-brimmed ski hat (a knitted gift from an older sister that he believed created a look that was unique if not outright jaunty)—was head and shoulders above the rest.

"Rudy skied like water flowing over a waterfall," was friend Lester Horton's assessment.¹⁷ According to Bill Linscott, the Thunderbolt champion of 1942, "[a]nyone who saw Rudy ski would try to imitate him because he had such great style. He was such a natural. When you saw Rudy coming down, you watched, because you knew it was going to be beautiful."¹⁸

Rudy was not only better than the rest, he was also more committed. During the winter, he refused to work at the mill (where he had started at age fifteen after quitting school), saving his factory earnings the rest of the year to get him through the months in which he did nothing but train and race. Rudy would pay room and board to his parents, but he spent most of his time on Greylock. According to his younger brother, he'd hike up alone, stay at the Bascomb Lodge on top with caretaker Charlie Parker if the weather came in, and ski down himself. Skiing alone has always been a dangerous pursuit. "Some good skiers got killed in those mountains," recalled Adolph, "but one thing Rudy wasn't short on was confidence."¹⁹

Rudy and Greeny Guertin, who gradually became best friends based upon their obsession with achieving speed on skis, also became familiar figures on the slopes around Hancock, Massachusetts, that today comprise the Berkshires' largest ski area, Jiminy Peak. Actually, the two pushed each other both on *and* off the slopes. "A lot of people thought they were nuts," said Adolph. "But they were just challenging themselves. Not showing off, just marching to their own drums."

It wasn't only ski racing that gave the boys their requisite charge of adrenaline. While Greeny amused himself scaling church steeples and doing front flips and other acrobatics on skis, Rudy reveled in riding a bicycle without

brakes around the hills of Adams, figuring out ways to stop only as the absolute necessity arose. He also liked to dive off a high ledge at the local reservoir into four feet of water, just for the excitement of it. "When the other kids told him he'd break his neck, he'd just tell them he knew what he was doing," continued Adolph. "Pretty soon, they were all doing it, too."

Rudy, Adolph concluded, was from a very early age what might today be called a "thrill junkie." "A lot of people, when they think of Rudy, automatically recall first and foremost that he could be very funny, a real smart aleck. That's not what I think of, and that really, to me, wasn't the core of his personality. It was that perpetual search for the next big thrill that really defined my brother. School and pretty much everything else was secondary to adventure. That's really what made him tick. As a kid, he hadn't figured out yet how skiing could be his ticket to bigger things, but he wasn't going to make that mill his life. If there was anything in this world that scared him, it was that. That he'd have to live a life limited by that mill."²⁰



Rudy came into the world on April 7, 1918, the fourth of eight children born to Sophie and Charles Konieczny. His parents had emigrated to Massachusetts in the early part of the century from the central European cities of Warsaw and Prague, respectively, and retained certain "Old World" notions of proper behavior for good Catholic youth. As a result, they were frequently driven to distraction by Rudy's antics. "My father had a very low tolerance for nonsense, and he was pretty strict with all of us," recalled Adolph. "Rudy would never rebel against my folks in obvious ways, but he'd do little sly, humorous things that gave him a feeling he was getting away with something."²¹

As youngsters, Rudy and Adolph were frequently enlisted by their father to assist him in doing chores on the farm. "Rudy really made a game out of that," his brother remembered. "My father would ask us to help him move hay across the farm on a large wagon, for instance, and he'd be red in the face pushing from the rear. I'd push as hard as I could from one front side, and Rudy would pretend to be pushing with every ounce of strength from the other. Of course, I knew he was really coasting, and every once in a while he would shoot me a wink. Lucky for him, my old man never caught on, and I was no snitch. But that was Rudy."

Rudy didn't get away with everything, though, such as the time he lent his bicycle to his father, conveniently failing to mention its lack of brakes. That

incident did not end happily for Rudy, who didn't feel like sitting on his bike again, or on anything else, for a week. "Sure, my father would whack him every once in a while when a point really needed to be made," Adolph continued. "That's the way it was done back then. Rudy could take that. What he really hated was when my mother would try to drag him to church. He was good natured about it because he knew better than to challenge her, but he'd generally end up sneaking out the side door when the priest wasn't looking, and would head straight for Greylock with Greeny, Roy, and Gardner. He wasn't much for religion, or for sitting still, and I think eventually my parents understood through their exasperation that it just wasn't in him to change."

Understanding that his growing and relentless search for adventure required the constant indulgence of others, Rudy soon cultivated a notoriously charming and effective power of persuasion. It was a skill, his brother recalled, that Rudy did not always use to unselfish ends. "When I first learned to drive, he talked me into splitting the cost of an old jalopy with him," remembered Adolph. "I knew it would be me who kept it gassed up all the time. . . . One night Rudy had a big date, and didn't bother to check the fuel gauge. He ran out of gas in the middle of a downpour, and his evening went downhill from there. The girl was really upset, and he ended up doing a lot of walking in the rain. [Apparently, even Rudy's superior abilities to persuade had a limit.] When he finally got home, he just heaved his sopping wet jacket on the bed to wake me up, and that started quite a riot. But damned if he didn't almost convince me that his running out of gas was somehow my fault."²²

Adolph pointed out, however, that whatever tension might have developed over the course of a year between the brothers was swept away each winter on Greylock. Rudy would mentor his younger brother precisely and enthusiastically on the finer points of ski racing, refusing to allow Adolph to make a single concession to the fact he had the use of only one arm since birth. "He helped turn me into a pretty good racer," Adolph admitted, and the race results published at the time prove it.²³ Though he never won an official race, the younger Konieczny made creditable showings in several Thunderbolt downhill with the benefit of Rudy's encouragement. "I didn't take all of his advice, though," Adolph asserted. "He once told me that it made sense to go into a deep tuck and *schuss* [ski straight without making turns] the entire last, steep section of the Thunderbolt. 'Don't worry about how much speed you build up,' he told me, 'the run-out is short, but it's uphill. You'll stop. I always do.'" Adolph's retrospective comment on that advice was a long pause, followed by the words, "yeah, right."

“Rudy had that racer’s mentality of total invincibility,” his brother concluded, “and it showed in everything he did, down to his personal motto: Never worry about falling down a mountain; you’ll always stop at the bottom.”²⁴

Before long, the hard work began to produce results for Rudy. He quickly developed, without formal instruction (other than a pointer here and there from Dartmouth’s legendary skiing coach Otto Schniebs, who would sometimes talk with the local kids after a competition), into one of the strongest and most fearless racers in New England.²⁵ He missed the 1937 Eastern Championships when they were relocated to the Nosedive at Stowe, Vermont, because of a lack of snow on the Thunderbolt, but he began the next season by winning the 1938 New Year’s Day race on the Pittsfield Forest Shadow Trail.²⁶

Rudy had by that time developed such powers of concentration that he would almost go into a trance before a race. Adolph recalled waiting in the warming hut above the Thunderbolt for the start of a competition, and noticing that his brother was staring off into space. He asked Rudy if he was okay. Rudy just smiled, put his index finger to his lips, and went back to his thoughts. “He was visualizing, long before that became standard preparation for most racers,” said Adolph. “Racing was his life, and he took it seriously . . . It’s hard to explain, but Rudy was both incredibly intense and incredibly happy at the same time. I guess it’s as simple as the fact that he was flat out doing what he loved. He was going for it.”²⁷



On Sunday, January 16, 1938, it all came together for Rudy Konieczny. Under perfect conditions in the qualifying heats for the 1938 Eastern Downhill Championships, Rudy set the course record on the Thunderbolt. The years of practice and risk up and down the face of Greylock had paid off. His time of 2:57.4 bested the records previously set by Durrance and Schauffler, and it changed his life forever.²⁸

Suddenly, young Rudy Konieczny was famous in eastern U.S. skiing circles. Even the *New York Times* reported on his feat, and the local newspapers went wild for the new record holder.²⁹ In gushing prose, the *Berkshire Eagle*’s Norman H. Ransford wrote: “A modest and popular 19-year-old boy, Rudolph Konieczny of Adams, and his sensational officially recorded time on the new Thunderbolt ski run are providing . . . many colorful anticipations for the Eastern Downhill Championship race on the trail. . . . Chances are widely

conceded this new and slim young figure in Berkshire skiing may win or place close to the top in the season's biggest race, notwithstanding the fact that it will bring into competition some of the leading ski runners in the world. . . . All Adams and its environs are quietly pulling for 'Rudy' to make a good run in the big test."³⁰

Almost overnight, Rudy became a symbol, a crucible for the hopes of people throughout the Berkshires who—after enduring nearly a decade of Depression—wanted something to cheer about. "There were things going on here that went well beyond skiing," said Adolph. "You have to understand that the emotional depth of the hopes placed on Rudy also stemmed from who Rudy was racing against."³¹

It was the Ivy League college kids with a little more money and opportunity who always seemed to win the races. "Now here comes a local mill kid who sets the record on the Thunderbolt," continued Adolph. "That gets a lot of area people thinking about their own place in the world, and it's possible that Rudy started to feel a bit like it was up to him to win not only for himself but for everyone else, too."

Many of the most fervent hopes for Rudy's success were harbored by members of the army of Berkshires "ski townies," of whom Rudy was now the undisputed leader. They, too, had learned their skills without coaches and raced on equipment not nearly as good as the gear used by their collegiate rivals. They had also seen firsthand how the college stars would often congratulate each other on the medal stand after a race but ignore Rudy, which the locals regarded as an intentional snub of their hero. "He'd laugh it off," recalled Adolph, "but I think it hurt him a little. Everybody wants the recognition of his peers."³²

Many years later, the competitive but usually affable Dartmouth star Dick Durrance told an interviewer that "collegiate skiing [in the 1930s] *was* skiing in this country."³³ That statement appears to reveal a conceit—whether conscious or not—that the Berkshire townies believed permeated the ranks of both college skiers and the large-circulation newspaper reporters who lionized them, when it came to their regard for locals like Rudy. On the other hand, Rudy's brash reputation and recklessness on the slopes did nothing to win him friends among the college racers. "I liked Rudy. He was a sharp kid, very amusing, but it wasn't hard to get rubbed the wrong way by him when we competed," said Bob Meservey of Dartmouth. "He knew the Thunderbolt like nobody else, and it made him a little cocky when we raced there. Did he have a chip on his shoulder? Who knows? Maybe we put it there."³⁴

Another former Dartmouth Ski Team star from the prewar era, Charles McLane (who also holds the distinction of being the first enlisted member of the Tenth Mountain Division) suggested a different explanation. "This wasn't a class thing. The colleges were filled with skiers from middle- and working-class backgrounds, in addition to those from well-to-do families. There was just a wonderful camaraderie among the college competitors because we all knew each other from the various university winter carnivals, parties, sing-alongs and the like. The locals like Rudy—and every ski area in New England had them—mistook the familiarity the college racers had with one another for an exclusionary attitude or aloofness that simply did not exist."³⁵ Meservey concluded the debate by staking out the middle ground, stating that in general, "over-awareness of each other's feelings was never one of [most] competitive skiers' failings (or mine)."³⁶

One racer who both appreciated Rudy's skills and understood his personality was the great Austrian skier and two-time U.S. National Downhill Champion, Toni Matt. So friendly did they become that after a race on the Thunderbolt, Matt stayed at the Konieczny farm, which reminded him of his own family's home in the Alps. "Toni Matt's friendliness kind of reinforced our perception that the college guys looked down on the townies, no matter how nice Rudy tried to be," said Adolph. "I mean, if a truly great European skier like Matt could accept Rudy as an equal, how could the college guys not? That's one of the reasons we all wanted so badly for Rudy to do well against them."³⁷ After the Thunderbolt time trials, hard as it was for some of them to believe, the country's best university skiers sensed that the local kid formerly of Adams High might just be the favorite going into the big race on his home mountain.

Rudy spent the next two weeks before the 1938 Eastern Championship training intensively, but the pressure and distractions steadily began to build. That was especially the case after he received his "Class A" racing certification from the U.S. Eastern Amateur Ski Association, placing him in the same category as Durrance, Schauffler, Matt, and the other greats of the sport. "Just because I happened to win New Year's and last Sunday, they expect me to win every time," he lamented to the newspapers, referring to local ski racing fans who were disappointed over his nasty fall in a preliminary heat. "An ordinary skier [like me] can't do that."³⁸

His self-effacing words were counterbalanced by the multitude of local spokesmen lauding his record. "We think he's a great little skier who's going places," Thunderbolt Club president Henry Neff told reporters. "Best of all,

it can't spoil him. He's a grand little guy, who refuses to get a swelled head."³⁹ Even Durrance jumped on the bandwagon, perhaps employing a little psychology of his own. He was quoted in the *Berkshire Eagle* as having told friends "he doubts Konieczny's time will be beaten," referring to Rudy with somewhat faint praise as a "particularly competent skier."⁴⁰

As Rudy struggled to stay focused, he could not possibly have known that his life was strangely on a collision course with international politics. Over the next seven years, the ill winds from Europe that would soon blow across New England and into Rudy's life would affect nearly every living soul on earth. That February, however, Rudy Konieczny and the skiers of Adams got an early look at the coming storm.



The fascist Nazi regime, which had taken power in Berlin in 1933 on a platform that stressed the doctrine of Aryan racial superiority, placed enormous emphasis on developing and demonstrating the physical pre-eminence of German athletes. These supposed gods of sport were invariably portrayed as tall, muscular, and blond, with carved, Nordic features.⁴¹ The two leading proponents of this Nazi doctrine of eugenics, the wild-eyed, dark-haired, and mustached Chancellor Adolf Hitler and his diminutive and polio-scarred propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, themselves seemed to provide stark proof that persons of Teutonic ancestry vary widely in their physical traits and abilities. Nevertheless, Goebbels utilized the theory of Aryan superiority as the cornerstone of his ubiquitous propaganda program, and was in constant search of athletic champions from the Reich to tout as the proof behind Hitler's racist rants.⁴²

In the early years of Hitler's rule, Goebbels was presented with several such opportunities. In 1930, German boxer Max Schmeling won the vacant heavyweight championship of the world. Six years later, having lost his title and considered past his prime, Schmeling traveled to New York to face an undefeated and heavily favored, up-and-coming African American fighter named Joe Louis. In a shocking upset, he pummeled Louis, providing a propaganda bonanza for the Nazis. Despite the nontitle nature of the 1936 fight, Goebbels was again enabled to proclaim Schmeling the model of the Aryan superman, against whom members of "inferior" races stood no chance in honest competition.⁴³

Unfortunately for Goebbels, Schmeling remained unwilling to play the role of Nazi idol, and refused the constant urging of both the propa-

ganda minister and Hitler himself to join the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Worker's Party). Schmeling further infuriated the rabidly anti-Semitic Nazi leadership by refusing to fire his Jewish American manager.⁴⁴ Eager to find more malleable sports stars to exploit, Goebbels turned his attention to the Olympics. The Nazi regime had been given the opportunity by the International Olympic Committee to host both the 1936 Winter and Summer Games, and in February of that year the world's greatest winter athletes traveled to Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps to compete.

The reporting of the Winter Games by the American press was less than flattering toward the Nazis. Correspondent Westbrook Pegler compared the atmosphere in Garmisch to activities behind the front lines in a war, so pervasive was the presence of Nazi symbols and men in military uniforms. The burliest members of Hitler's feared "Black Guard" handled security for the events, primarily through overt physical intimidation meted out with self-important enthusiasm.⁴⁵

Still, Goebbels got in large part what he wanted out of the international forum. Whereas the United States led the field in the 1932 Winter Games held in Lake Placid, New York, with six gold medals and twelve medals overall, the German games four years later were dominated by athletes from the "Aryan" nations of northern Europe, with Norway, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, and Austria finishing in that order in the medal count. These were also the first games to feature an alpine skiing event, the downhill and slalom combined. Goebbels had to have been thrilled that Germans Franz Pfneur (coached by the great Austrian ski stylist Toni Seelos) and Christl Cranz took the gold for the men's and women's divisions, respectively.⁴⁶ The American alpine ski team, led by Dick Durrance, made a respectable showing without collecting a medal.

The Berlin Summer Games in August were an equally sycophantic show of reverence for Hitler and Nazism, with the German team doing its part by winning an astonishing eighty-nine medals. The United States was a distant second with fifty-six, followed by Hungary with just sixteen.⁴⁷ Amid this utter domination, however, was the realization even among the Nazi elite that the games had been commandeered by African American sprinter Jesse Owens, who captured four gold medals and earned appreciative ovations from the German sports fans.⁴⁸

Following the embarrassment suffered by the Reich as the result of Owens's performance at the 1936 Summer Games and Schmeling's refusal to endorse

the Nazi regime, the propaganda minister apparently concluded that winter sports (in which mainly Caucasian athletes from cold weather nations compete against one another) were simply the safest and most promising vehicles for his crusade to identify proof in athletics of the Aryan super race. Thus, although there are no surviving records in Germany revealing exactly who in the Nazi hierarchy chose to permit their tour of the United States to proceed only a few weeks prior to the Reich's highly anticipated annexation of Austria known as the *Anschluss*, a team of world-class skiers from Bavaria arrived in the United States to compete against North America's best in late January 1938.⁴⁹



They were known as the German Universities Skiing Team of Munich. The elite group—which had already won the Intercollegiate Championship of Europe—featured German intercollegiate downhill champion Kurt Riehle, intercollegiate jumping champion and downhiller Franz Machler, intercollegiate cross-country and combined champion Walter Ringer, British downhill and slalom champion Xavier “Haver” Kraisy, and intercollegiate Langlauf jump champion Richard May. Captain Karl Ringer, Gerri Lantschner, Siegfried List, the late-arriving star Ulrich “Ulli” Beuter, and a promising young downhiller, University of Munich Ph.D. candidate Fritz Dehmel, rounded out the squad.⁵⁰ They arrived in America five days prior to the 1938 U.S. Eastern Alpine Championships, the race Rudy Konieczny was favored to win.

At a Manhattan dinner given in the team's honor by the German Ski Club of New York on February 1, 1938, it was announced that the Bavarian skiers intended to compete by invitation in several upcoming North American ski tournaments, including the Bates and Dartmouth Winter Carnivals. No mention, however, was made of the Eastern Championships on the Thunderbolt, which coincided with the Bates College event over the coming weekend.⁵¹

Nevertheless, eight members of the German team arrived in Pittsfield and began practicing on Mount Greylock early that week.⁵² The day they first appeared on the hill, resplendent in their sweaters featuring the German Eagle and Nazi Swastika across their chests, was the last day for young Rudy as race favorite. Noting that the “German Aces” had arrived in Massachusetts seeking the Eastern U.S. downhill title, the *New York Times* reported on February 5, 1938, that “the course record . . . set recently by 19-year-old Rudolph Konieczny, is likely to be shattered by one of the big stars in the field.”⁵³ The first thing broken by the German skiers, though, was American confidence.

According to those locals on the hill, the German team arrived sporting an arrogance that made even the haughtiest collegiate racer appear downright friendly in comparison. During practices, the German stars used assistants to caddy their skis up the Thunderbolt, permitting them to arrive at the top of the mountain fresher than their American rivals. And when they skied, it was nearly flawlessly, faster than anyone had ever skied on Greylock.⁵⁴

Those U.S. racers who watched the Germans' displays of skill in practice seemed psychologically beaten before the event began on February 6. Greeny Guertin recalled that Rudy's self-assurance was shaken for the first and only time in his memory. "He said to me, 'Jeez, Greeny, I don't even feel like racing. We can't beat these guys.' I said, hey, they could have some bad days, too, you know," but neither really believed he had a chance to win.⁵⁵

For Rudy, things went from bad to worse. First, he suffered a serious ankle sprain in a fall during a weekday practice run.⁵⁶ Then, of the fifteen names of the top-seeded racers placed into a hat to determine starting order, Rudy's name was pulled first. With the unenviable task of leading off among fifty of the world's best downhillers, Rudy fell hard on the icy, uneven course and lost precious time favoring his injured ankle. He finished sixteenth, not bad in the larger scheme, but disastrous considering the circumstances. The huge crowd of local fans who lined the bottom of the course was crestfallen.⁵⁷

"I can't say that the pressure got to him," said Adolph. "But again, he carried a lot of folks' hopes with him into that race, as well as his own big dreams. That's a lot of weight to put on the back of an inexperienced, nineteen-year-old kid with a bum ankle. But Rudy made no excuses. He'd have none of that."⁵⁸

The day belonged to Germany's Fritz Dehmel, who—as predicted—broke the three-week-old course record. No one expected, however, that Rudy's mark would be eclipsed by a remarkable thirty-one seconds. Ted Hunter and Edward Meserve (Bob's older brother) of Dartmouth finished a distant second and third.⁵⁹ Rudy's time was still good enough to best such skiing luminaries as Williams College captain and future Tenth Mountaineer Tommy Clement and Australian slalom champ Tom Mitchell, but according to his younger brother, Rudy remembered only the dashed expectations and all of those racers who finished ahead of him. Unfortunately, that is also what many of those who rooted for him would remember, and Rudy knew it.

Dehmel accepted his medal as Eastern U.S. Alpine champion, and together with his teammates departed in a private touring car waiting near the victory platform. With that, the Germans disappeared into the fading

Berkshire mountain light. It was unclear at the time whether there would ever be a rematch, but one can imagine Joseph Goebbels laughing back in Berlin when he got the news. The headline in the *New York Times* the next day read, "Dehmel Annexes Eastern Ski Race."⁶⁰

The last that New Englanders saw of the official German Team was their appearance at the National Ski Jumping Championships in Brattleboro, Vermont. During that event, there were several attempts to pull down the Nazi flag as it flew alongside the banners of the other competing nations at the bottom of the jumping hill.⁶¹ "The people of New England knew who these guys were, and what that flag stood for," said another of Rudy's skiing buddies and a future Tenth Mountaineer from Adams, Frank Prejsnar. "Who could blame them?"⁶² Joe Dodge, the legendary manager of the Appalachian Mountain Club's camp at Pinkham Notch, New Hampshire, reportedly refused the Germans permission to stay at the Tuckerman Ravine Shelter.⁶³

Interestingly, the perceptions of the western American skiers regarding the German Team were decidedly different from the initial impressions of most New Englanders. Ralph Lafferty, a member of the University of Oregon Ski Team and another future Tenth Mountain Division officer, remembered meeting the Bavarians on their swing through the northwestern United States and Canada, and was taken by their gregarious nature. "They were drinking beer and singing all the time when they stayed with us out here, jabbering away in German that we somehow understood," he recalled. "They even staged some performances as a singing group. It's possible that they relaxed once they acclimated themselves, won some races, and got away from the political stuff that was so prevalent in the first days of their trip. As far as we could tell, they were just a bunch of skiers having a good time, and we liked them."⁶⁴ Fritz Dehmel similarly made friends on his return back east, racing in the National Championship that March at Stowe, which was won by his teammate and an equally enthusiastic partier, Ulli Beuter.⁶⁵

Ralph Lafferty remembered that he maintained correspondences with Machler and Kraisy for a while, until the Second World War intervened. "After that," he said, "I never heard from those guys again."⁶⁶



Following the disappointment of the 1938 Eastern Championships, Rudy and Greeny dedicated themselves to reclaiming the Thunderbolt as *their* mountain. They also began to take their leadership roles more seriously.

After much debate, the two broke from their respective clubs and formed a new one, the now legendary Ski Runners of Adams. Among other goals, Rudy and Greeny wanted to establish a team that young, local skiers could afford to join. The other area racing clubs charged up to twenty-five dollars a year for membership, a small fortune in the midst of the Depression. Joining the new Adams team cost nothing but dedication.⁶⁷

They also wanted a fresh start. Now that they were the undisputed cocaptains of their own squad, it was woe to those teammates or competitors who attempted to beat them on the Thunderbolt, whether climbing up or racing down. "The Ski Runners of Adams were definitely fun loving," recalled Adolph Konieczny, "but their attitude was that they wanted to win every time down the hill. This was their lives. They worked to earn money to train. They trained to become better racers. And they raced because they loved it. No steady girlfriends. No cultural pursuits beyond a favorite radio program. Just ski racing. My brother became more intensely focused than ever."⁶⁸

In his handmade Peter Limmer ski boots and top-notch Groswood skis, which he had for months saved his mill salary to purchase, Rudy finished second in the 1938 Massachusetts Championships to Peter Garrett of Yale. A year later, he placed second to his friend Toni Matt in the 1939 Greylock Trophy Race, with Greeny Guertin coming in third.⁶⁹ No one dared suggest, however, that even a maturing Rudy might still be half a step behind the upper echelon of the world's best skiers. "He was too proud for anyone to risk his reaction to something like that," said Adolph. "He'd give you the shirt off his back, but for that, he might have popped you one."⁷⁰

Store owner Art Simmons also lent a hand in trying to help Rudy develop into a more poised and experienced racer. Late in the 1938 season, he drove Konieczny three hours north to Stowe, Vermont, to compete in the Nationals against Dehmel, Beuter, and the American college stars, so that the young racer could experience a world-class competition on the Nosedive run at Mount Mansfield.⁷¹ (Rudy, who raced with low expectations owing to his lack of familiarity with the course, was indeed disqualified for unintentionally cutting through a control flag.)⁷² In a letter written some sixty years later, David Burt of Stowe, who would later become one of Rudy's closest army buddies, gave his recollections of that event at which Rudy played a very unassuming role: "As a high school boy, seeing so many 'A' racers was a vision; there were the Durrances, there was Ted Hunter, Al Beck, and [the Townsend brothers from the University of New Hampshire]. Who won I don't recall but I do remember seeing a table full of racers at a supper, post race, put on

by our local ski club in the basement of the Congregational Church, and the . . . lean, almost frail looking (at first sight) Rudy was there. . . . There was nothing in those days to hint that before long Rudy would be one of the people I most admired.”⁷³

At long last, at the Massachusetts Downhill Championships held in January 1939 on the Thunderbolt, Rudy and the Ski Runners of Adams enjoyed a day in the sun. Facing a strong field that included a Dartmouth team led by Olympian Ted Hunter and coached by Walter Prager—the Swiss racer and technical innovator who had succeeded Otto Schniebs—Rudy, Greeny, Gardiner, Roy Deyle, and the rest of the Ski Runners took home the team trophy.⁷⁴ That satisfying hometown victory was celebrated before six thousand ski racing fans and hundreds of jubilant local supporters. For Rudy, however, even this memorable achievement proved bittersweet. The tuck and schuss approach on the last section of the Thunderbolt, which he had urged his brother Adolph to adopt, may have done him in. Describing the race, the *Berkshire Eagle* reported: “Hardest luck of all hit Rudy Konieczny, 20-year-old Adams ‘A’ skier, who ran in extremely fast time to a point 10 yards from the finish line. Then misfortune smacked him squarely in the face, as his ski caught in a rut of the steep embankment and he pitched forward, convoluting in a whirl of arms, legs and skis. Fighting to collect himself, he regained his feet and stumbled across the rope to place eighth. It was a heart-breaking finish, that cost him at least 20 seconds and a place much nearer the top of the list. But Rudy became justly elated when it became apparent that the Ski Runners of Adams . . . had won the team competition.”⁷⁵

It is unclear whether Rudy’s disappointing spill cost him the individual title, won by Ted Hunter, but his breakneck performance as captain of the team champions was impressive enough to refocus the attention of the American Federation of International Skiing (the sport’s national governing body) on him. The Federation informed Rudy that a top-five finish in the 1940 FIS qualifying race, or a win in the Massachusetts or Eastern Championships, would likely secure him a spot on the U.S. National Team and perhaps a shot at competing in the next Olympic Games.⁷⁶ It was electrifying news, but it surely put the pressure back on.

The 1940 Massachusetts Championship was run on the Thunderbolt on February 18, one week prior to the Eastern Championships. It proved a bitter disappointment for both Rudy and his teammates, all of whom had practiced for a full year in anticipation of defending their title and sending one of their own to the national team. In conditions termed “excellent” by most, Rudy

had been expected to contend for top honors. Instead, he inexplicably crossed the finish line in twenty-fourth place. Though Greeny Guertin placed well, the Ski Runners of Adams lost the Massachusetts state title to their Dartmouth archrivals by a wide margin.⁷⁷ The local boys and their rooters were devastated.

With just six days in which to help himself and his team to put the disastrous loss behind them, Rudy plumbed the depths of his resolve. "He poured all the determination he had into rallying the guys and motivating himself," Adolph remembered, "for what he figured was probably the make or break race of his career."⁷⁸

Conditions on the Thunderbolt the Sunday of the 1940 Eastern Championships were even better than they had been the week before. Eager to regain the pride that their humbling defeat in the state championships had stolen, the home team decided to throw all caution to Greylock's icy wind. This time, they did not disappoint. Former U.S. Olympian and future Tenth Mountain Division officer Robert Livermore took home the individual trophy, but Rudy finished eighth among one of the most talented fields ever to race for the eastern skiing crown. It was enough to lead the Ski Runners to the Championship over a tough Dartmouth squad, which that day featured stars Bob Meservey and Jack Tobin, and Dartmouth's future team captain, a handsome and dedicated racer from Wisconsin named Jake Nunnemacher.⁷⁹

Once again, Rudy had failed to win an individual title. For the second time in the course of a year, however, he had led the Ski Runners to a major championship. His shot at securing a spot on the U.S. National Team was tenuous, but he was most definitely still in the running as he stepped up his preparations dramatically for the FIS National Championship to be held that March in Sun Valley, Idaho, a three-day train ride away. "He believed he could race his way onto the team," sighed Adolph. "With Rudy, though, fate kind of always seemed to intervene in a very disappointing way."⁸⁰

On March 3, 1940, the star-crossed Rudy took off at full speed on a Thunderbolt training run. Well down the hill and running flat out in a deep crouch, he was shocked to come upon another skier who should not have been on the course. Rudy attempted to negotiate one of the most dangerous sections of the trail while trying to avoid the interloper, but in the end opted for a slide into the trees rather than a collision. He lay in the woods for some time before anyone heard his calls for help. The resulting leg fracture ended his season, and his shot at the U.S. National Ski Team.⁸¹

Deep gloom set in, at least for a few days. That is, until Greeny Guertin went out a week later and broke *his* leg while simply walking on skis at the

bottom of the Thunderbolt. "It was pretty comical, seeing the two of them on crutches together," said Adolph, "and it got Rudy laughing at the irony of it all. But I think that we all kind of secretly worried that we were coming to the end of a very special time." Factors beyond the control of its members were conspiring to bring down the curtain on the Ski Runners of Adams.

The Nazis were now waging full-scale war and well on their way toward conquering nearly all of Europe. Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France—the ancestral homes of many Berkshire skiers—had already been brutally over-run, and bombs were falling on London. The Olympic Games were canceled in 1940, and there was little hope for the resumption of international sports competition anytime soon. For the first time in their young lives, many of the local Berkshire racers began to recognize the triviality of sport in comparison with the threat of world war.

"By that time, with Germany on a rampage and the Japanese doing the same, most folks in the Berkshires thought our involvement in the war was inevitable," recalled Adolph. Recruitment drives by the U.S. Armed Forces were stepped up appreciably in the summer of 1940, and a lot of young men in the Berkshires, including Rudy and Roy Deyle, decided the time had come to join up. "They figured," said Adolph, "that it was better to choose the branch of service in which they wanted to serve now, rather than being drafted into one they didn't want to serve in later."⁸²

On September 25, 1940, a headline in the *Berkshire Eagle* declared, "Skiing Star . . . to Join Army." The article detailed the decision of Rudy Konieczny to enlist in, of all things, the army's Coast Artillery unit.⁸³ Both he and Roy Deyle had made the difficult decision to trade the mountains for the windy beaches of New England.

Perhaps the frustrations and personal disappointments of the past few ski seasons had convinced Rudy that he needed a break from the racing circuit. Maybe he wanted time away from Adams, where some remained disenchanted over his perceived racing failures. It was even possible that Rudy had tired of constantly being ignored by the large-circulation sports-writers who had already begun the subtle process of writing him out of the history of New England skiing in favor of collegiate racing heroes. If these or other motivations were at work, though, he wasn't saying. Whatever Rudy's reasons, the article concluded with a simple, declarative sentence that landed heavily on the hearts of many Berkshire readers: "Konieczny's signing up for soldiering means the breaking up of an unusual group of young skiers known as the Ski Runners of Adams."⁸⁴