April 6, 2005

John Paul II: Lifelong skier

With the passing of Karol Wojtyla, the sport has lost its most exalted devotee. A lifelong skier, the pontiff sneaked off to the hills as long as his health permitted. He was shot in 1981, which enforced a temporary layoff, and quit for good after the 1987 season, nine years into his papacy.

During his decades as Bishop and Cardinal of Krakow, beginning in 1962, Wojtyla spent two weeks each winter at Poland's largest resort, Zakopane (site of the 1937 FIS championships), lodging in a local convent. The sisters reportedly still have a pair of his leather ski boots.

In his youth, and into middle age, Wojtyla had a reputation as an earn-your-turns kind of guy. An indefatigable hiker and kayaker, he scorned lifts and preferred to climb on his hickory skis. In his 20s, he was an athlete, standing 5 feet 10.5 inches at 175 pounds, but suffered a number of injuries that caused him to stoop in later years.

When churchly duties cut into his recreation time, Wojtyla modernized, acquiring a pair of 195cm Head skis and taking his place in the lift line. He preferred to ski off-piste, and was quoted as saying "It's unbecoming for a cardinal to ski badly." He made his last runs at the Italian resort of Terminillo, a short commute from the Vatican.

Here follows a short piece from the March, 1979 issue of SKI.

The Vatican Skier

A Pontiff whose non-papal piety runs to the mountains, Pope John Paul II's next ski descent has already been labelled the 'Schuss of the Fisherman.'
Vatican life has its protocol—and Vatican officials are not known to enjoy surprises. It was therefore with some astonishment that they greeted Pope John Paul II's pronouncement, just seconds after his inauguration as the 264th successor to St. Peter and Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, that "I will ski again when they let me."

The Polish Pope's comment to a well-wisher came as he descended into St. Peter's Square to meet his new people—and, so far as the former Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was concerned, it was in earnest. The Pope, his energies now devoted to papal affairs of state, would be missing out on those winter vacations he had regularly taken in Poland's Tatra Mountains.

There was, he supposed, some consolation—the Pope would at least be able to see the ski mountains of Terminillo, 20 miles to the north of Rome, from the windows of the papal apartments. He hadbeen known to slip away to those mountains, called the Valley of the Head Skis, on occasion during Vatican conferences in Rome. The Pope, at 58, is an excellent skier—those who have skied with him call him "a pair of Head skis.""He has skied so much in his life that he could be confused with him call him the "Daredevil of the Tatras.""

Karol Wojtyła is a humble man who confesses his one luxury in life has been "a pair of Head skis." His ski socks are initialed "K.W.", embroidered not so much in priestly affectation as to insures his getting his socks back from the laundry.

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BY JOHN HOWARD

WILL POPE JOHN PAUL II SKI AGAIN? SAYS WOJTYLA. "WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME NOT.

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