Gender and the French Ski Industry, 1946–1960∗

Gillian Glaes
Carroll College

In spring 2009, the American magazine *Sports Illustrated* carried an obituary of Andrea Mead Lawrence, who had died at the age of seventy-six. Lawrence had competed at the 1948 Olympics at St. Moritz, Switzerland, at age fifteen and won the giant slalom competition at the 1952 games in Oslo, Norway. She remains the only American woman to win two gold medals in skiing in one Olympics.1 While her accomplishments suggest great athletic possibilities for women after World War II, only a few sports allowed women to compete, including riding, tennis, swimming, golf, and track. Lawrence’s endeavors demonstrate that the sport of skiing offered important new opportunities for women.

Almost from the inauguration of skiing as a modern sport, women and conceptualizations of gender proved critical in shaping the sport and culture of skiing and the ski industry. Skiing empowered women to participate at many levels, from events on local hills to international competitions such as the Olympics. As women like Lawrence grabbed headlines around the world, many women in ski-friendly countries, such as France and the United States, hauled their equipment up to nearby

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1 “For the Record,” *Sports Illustrated*, 13 April 2009.
resorts each weekend and took ski holidays with their husbands and children. In the twentieth century, French ski areas such as Chamonix became some of the best-known destination resorts in the world. After World War II, former members of the Tenth Mountain Division modeled American resorts such as Aspen and Vail after their French counterparts, demonstrating the international influence wielded by the French ski industry.\(^2\) Beyond participating in the sport, women also played an important role in shaping the modern ski industry as a leisure pursuit and a consumer commodity.\(^3\)

While conceptualizations of gender shaped the downhill industry, the sport of skiing provides an important case study in understanding critical social and cultural developments in France following its liberation from German occupation. In addressing the challenges of rebuilding its clientele, the sport became closely linked with youth culture, leisure, and consumption. Ski resorts accentuated youth and vitality, mirroring broader preoccupations with youth culture after the war.\(^4\) In Europe and the United States, important connections emerged after World War II between youth culture, recreation, and tourism, which the French ski industry simultaneously contributed to and capitalized on, as is reflected in its advertising.\(^5\) Skiing—which most enthusiasts pursued as a leisure activity rather than as a competitive sport—developed in conjunction with the reemergence of consumer culture. By encouraging families to take ski vacations and experience the physical liberation that accompanied downhill skiing, resorts contributed to the moral

\(^{2}\) See, for example, Peter Shelton, *Climb to Conquer: The Untold Story of World War II’s 10th Mountain Division Ski Troops* (New York: Scribner, 2003); Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).


\(^{5}\) Coleman, *Ski Style*, 6.
reconstruction of French youth, the family, and men and women, while also offering a vacation as an attractive consumer experience.\textsuperscript{6}

In doing so, the industry continued an important interwar trend of catering to men and women alike, working as hard to attract female skiers as it did to entice men back to resorts in the Alps and Pyrenees after World War II. Promotional materials and industry publications represented men, women, children, teenagers, and entire families enjoying themselves on the slopes, which was part of a new tendency to cater to young people as well as to adults.\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Le Ski} and other publications represented the ways in which mass media shaped cultural constructions of masculinity, femininity, youth culture, and leisure in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{8} But in promoting an activity that played a vital role in the French tourist industry as a whole, how exactly did magazines and advertisements portray, represent, and personify male and female skiers?\textsuperscript{9} To what extent did the ski industry pitch itself to women, considering that men still “held the purse strings” in post-war French families? What role did traditional femininity and masculinity play in determining the representation of men and women within the ski industry itself? In its advertisements, the U.S. ski industry often sexualized representations of female skiers.\textsuperscript{10} To what extent did this apply to French female skiers, and how did this reflect broader post-war trends in sexuality and gender identity? How did

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{10} Coleman, \textit{Ski Style}, 184-89.
conceptualizations of leisure and vacation factor into post-war advertising schemes?

This article evaluates the publication *Le Ski* from 1946 until 1960 to answer these questions, positioning the ski industry as an important sport and free time activity through which to understand gender roles, youth culture, leisure, and consumption in France. Although several scholars address sport culture in France from a variety of perspectives—from the Tour de France to sports stadiums—the ski industry itself remains virtually unexamined as a case study for understanding developments in postwar French gender roles or youth culture.⁷¹ Nor do scholars evaluate ski resorts in the French context when considering vacationing and leisure after World War II.²² Yet this industry made significant contributions to France’s international reorientation during the first fourteen years after the war. Along the way, female skiers conformed to traditional expectations of appearance, while battling the effects of natural elements such as the sun and the wind on their skin. Their male counterparts appeared strong and masculine on ski slopes all over France. Skiing and the ski industry contributed to the rejuvenation of French femininity and masculinity while shaping ideas about post-war youth culture, leisure, and recreation. *Le Ski* and similar publications reflected these important trends in French society after World War II. Because of its status as the official “industry” publication, *Le Ski* serves as means of investigating representations of gender in France following the war.

Founded in 1930 by the French Ski Federation, *Le Ski* was published every year from that point on, save for two years

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²² See, for example, Ovar Löfgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999). While Löfgren discusses packaged tours and beach culture, he does not consider the “ski vacation” in his analysis.
during the war. The publication celebrated its sixteenth year and fourteenth season in the fall of 1946.\textsuperscript{13} The magazine’s emergence corresponded with the sport’s growing popularity in the 1930s, especially during the Popular Front (1936–1939).\textsuperscript{14} Taking advantage of newly legislated paid vacation for all workers, ski areas offered “all-inclusive” vacation packages, which provided relatively inexpensive holidays.\textsuperscript{15} Yet the publication focused on several issues related to the industry, carrying stories on individual skiers, organizations that supported the sport, ski resorts in France and other countries, skier safety and equipment, recently published books, and the sport’s history. Companies that produced an array of products within and beyond the ski industry advertised in \textit{Le Ski}, as did organizations such as the \textit{Société nationale des chemins de fer Français} (SNCF).

In its earliest editions following the war’s conclusion, \textit{Le Ski} also reflected on what was referred to as “\textit{les années terribles}” or “the terrible years” of the war.\textsuperscript{16} The journal’s editor, G. Henry, used the 1948 Olympics in Switzerland to ponder France’s challenges in emerging from the German occupation and the war. Henry argued that the French Olympic delegation remained relatively small for these games because of the “difficulties” of the war years and ensuing recovery. Yet Henry also commented on France’s return to democracy and the pomp and circumstance surrounding the ceremony, in large part a celebration of the war’s end. After the Olympic movement’s suspension in 1940 and 1944 because of the war, the opening of the Olympics at St.

\textsuperscript{13} “Préface au Tome VI et à notre 14e saison (16e année),” \textit{Le Ski} 6 (1946): 1.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

Moritz symbolized a return to normalcy so desperately sought in France and throughout Europe.  

Advertisements in the early post-war years reflected the economic austerity and somber mood felt in France and Europe. Only in the late 1940s and early 1950s did advertising reveal a more opulent and robust economy and ski industry. Early on, many advertisements placed in Le Ski were hand-drawn, simple, and, out of necessity, economical, indicating the austerity of the period. Some sounded a melancholy tone. In one, a woman holding skis looks into the distance, suggesting the uncertainty and anxiety in French society following the Liberation (Figure 1; all figures appear at the end of the article). Her silhouette is incomplete, symbolizing the fractured nature of French national identity following World War II and the damage done physically and morally to the country and its population. In contrast, another advertisement from the late 1940s depicts a happy, well-off young couple on a well-appointed Air France flight, ostensibly heading to the mountains for a ski vacation (Figure 2). Rather than projecting tension, however, this image shows the hope and potential for post-war French society while emphasizing the regenerative powers of youth and vitality. The emphasis on youth became a preoccupation within the industry. By the 1960s, it was almost entirely associated with the post-war “youth culture” that had emerged not only in France, but also in the United States and other ski-friendly countries and, in turn, the international ski culture. In focusing on children, teenagers, and young adults, the ski industry literally depended on this demographic group and its social, cultural, and economic

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17 Ibid.
18 Le Ski 6 (1946–1949).
19 For example, see Robert Gildea, France since 1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35-92.
21 Ibid.
22 Coleman, Ski Style, 173-93.
potential to display the sport’s emphasis on health, vitality, and proximity to nature and the outdoors.\textsuperscript{23}

While the ski industry focused on youth and vigor, it also reestablished more traditional standards of French femininity and masculinity following the war. The occupation and liberation of France compromised French women in many ways. Skiing offered a way for its female participants to recapture the femininity stripped away by the public humiliation of those accused of sexual liaisons with German soldiers and officers.\textsuperscript{24} As the ski industry recovered, women who skied confronted and conformed to post-war ideals of how they should look and act on the slopes.\textsuperscript{25} While encouraging women to spend time outdoors and ski difficult terrain in mixed company, many articles and images stressed the importance of maintaining the proper appearance while on the slopes.\textsuperscript{26} For example, an article published in a 1946 edition of \textit{Le Ski} recommended that women and men alike consider functionality and fashion in selecting ski garments ranging from pants to sweaters and jackets. This advice reflected the ways in which the ski industry assisted French men and women in emerging from the austerity of the occupation to recapture ideas of “Frenchness” after the war.\textsuperscript{27}

Images and advertisements published in \textit{Le Ski} reinforced this outlook, linking clothing designed to withstand the winter elements to fashion trends. In October 1947, the cover of \textit{Le Ski} featured a photograph of two female skiers looking active yet feminine: well-dressed with sweaters that emphasized their figures, while their hair flowed in the breeze. An illustration of a female competitor at the 1948 St. Moritz Olympics emphasized the skier’s figure with a gabardine, three-band sweater nipped at

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 4-8.


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Le Ski} 6 (1948), cover.

the waist as well as a properly tailored pair of pants and well-coiffed hair (Figure 3). The skier’s clothing and appearance reflected broader 1940s fashion trends in France and throughout Europe. Yet these images did not conform to the brazen sexuality of their American counterparts. Advertisements depicting female skiers at resorts in the U.S. during this time used captions such as “Virgin Snow” with an accompanying image of a scantily dressed woman lying on her back on a ski slope, legs up in the air. While one might expect more prudish sexual mores in the American context, in this case, the roles reversed themselves as the French ski industry depicted the proper bourgeois woman while its American equivalent used overtly sexualized images in its promotions. This representation reflected the ways in which the industry assisted in restoring traditional and cautious notions of French femininity through advertisements and advice published in Le Ski.

By the 1950s, Le Ski and its advertisers continued to characterize the femininity of female skiers, but utilized images that accounted for a broader array of styles and approaches. While companies such as Palu Sports in the eighth arrondissement of Paris emphasized fashion over function, others such as Jantzen depicted women wearing pullovers and jackets that looked more functional than fashionable. Tunmer played off this tension between fashion and function by depicting a female skier gazing into a mirror at a woman skiing in the 1920s (Figure 4). While the 1952 model is wearing a baggier jacket than previously seen, the woman from the 1920s is wearing a skirt, a sweater, and interestingly enough, a tie. She does not smile and looks unsteady on her skis. This image suggests that women in the 1920s who skied were viewed as masculine and defiant, while skiing itself threatened their own femininity in an era when the flapper emerged with short hair and shorter skirts.

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29 Coleman, Ski Style, 186-87.
31 Ibid.
Yet the 1952 version—smiling as she contemplates her image—looks more comfortable on skis when conforming to 1950s standards in dress and appearance. While the reflection appears uncertain about her place in the ski industry, the 1952 version seems at ease with her place on the slopes, suggesting the successful rehabilitation of French femininity in the early post-war era.

Appearance on the slopes, however, encompassed more than just clothing. *Le Ski* published articles aimed directly at its female readers about proper skincare.\(^{32}\) The journal featured advice from the Elizabeth Arden Company that emphasized make-up as one of the central components of a successful ski vacation, along with the right skis and soft wool sweaters. Focusing on the elements to which women exposed their skin while outside skiing, women were encouraged to “redouble their vigilance in (their) daily skin care.”\(^{33}\) Overexposure to the sun at high altitudes remained a preoccupation during the 1950s, and the Elizabeth Arden Company encouraged women to use sunscreen in order to protect their skin against nature’s most vicious elements—wind and sun. Yet again functionality and fashion intersected as articles exhorted female skiers not only to apply sunscreen, but also to use the tinted variety, which would allow them to wear make-up on the slopes while also protecting the skin. Never missing an opportunity to promote appropriate products, one article cautioned women with sensitive skin that after a day on the slopes, their skin might feel like it was on fire, in which case they could reach for refreshing and calming “Eight Hour Crème.” In making the transition from the slopes to the bar

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for the requisite *après ski*, female skiers could quickly apply the “*Pat-à-crème*” to achieve the perfect balance of tint and coverage while hiding imperfections and evening skin tone (Figure 5). Just as women by the mid-1950s could wear a wider variety of clothing, the Elizabeth Arden Company emphasized the necessity of looking “sporty” and “young” as well as feminine by the mid-1950s. This suggests a broader social emphasis on youth and vitality beyond the ski industry, which specifically targeted its female clientele.\(^{34}\)

At the same time, however, this advice remained functional and practical with little emphasis placed on overt sexuality. Whereas illustrated advertisements in the U.S. featured women in heavy make-up and little clothing, in *Le Ski* very few advertisements and articles promoted explicit sexuality for female skiers, thereby retaining the post-war era’s cautious tone. The cosmetics and clothing industries each targeted men as well as women, revealing the ways in which advertising within *Le Ski* displayed masculine as well as feminine identities. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, images in the magazine represented physically fit, strong men. The defeat and occupation of France robbed those living in the metropole of physical strength and questioned the virility and masculinity of French men. In the 1969 documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity*, for example, one French man comments on the shame and anger he felt in seeing French women with German soldiers during the Nazi occupation of 1940–1944.\(^{35}\)

While recovery from the war involved physically reclaiming French bodies from deprivation and starvation, it also entailed psychological reconstitution. The ski industry contributed to “re-making” the French man by promoting him as strong, healthy, capable, happy, and financially stable. Whereas men in occupied France had experienced significant difficulties in providing basic necessities

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for their families, after the war the ski industry projected images of French men who earned enough for increasingly expensive pastimes such as skiing.  

In a Henry Ours advertisement from the late 1940s, for example, the male skier is wearing a sweater called the “Vitesse,” the so-called garment of choice for downhill ski champions at the 1948 St. Moritz Olympics (Figure 6). This emphasis on winning—together with the skier's robust, manly appearance—demonstrated the re-masculinization of French men. The trappings of economic expansion, including well-made equipment and clothing, enhanced this impression. Another Henry Ours advertisement suggests a French man’s ability to protect and assist the woman next to him, as he is depicted as taller, wider, and stronger than his female counterpart. This representation continued into the 1950s when yet another advertisement depicted a strong and highly stylized French man racing down the slopes, with form and equipment improved by arch supports.

To encourage families and young people to take ski vacations, the SNCF, ski resorts, tourism associations, and even other countries employed a variety of tactics. An SNCF advertisement from the early 1950s featured an adolescent female skier racing down the slopes in a functional, yet stylish, sweater on a sunny day at a French ski resort. While she might have traveled to the resort with her family, the possibility remained that she traveled by train with her friends for a weekend of skiing. In the early 1950s, the SNCF ran advertisements in Le Ski promoting discounts, such as a thirty percent discount for weekend tickets to France’s major ski destinations and a twenty percent reduction for tourist tickets. Tag lines such as “Ce soir dans le train, demain matin sur la neige” and “Le train est le moyen le plus pratique” encouraged

36 Ibid.  
38 Ibid.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Ibid.
skiers to consider train travel, especially the overnight train, as a way to maximize their time on the slopes. By the early 1950s other ski-friendly countries started to advertise their own resorts in Le Ski, which suggests that the French economy had recovered enough that foreign resort operators believed that French skiers possessed both the means and desire to travel beyond their own borders to pursue the sport. While Switzerland as a historically neutral country was one of the first countries to place advertisements in the journal, former adversaries such as Italy, Austria, and Germany followed suit by the 1950s. One advertisement proclaimed: “Pour vos vacances d’hiver choisissez l’Allemagne, vous reviendrez satisfaits!” (Figure 7) The idea that Germany and other countries that emerged from the war physically and psychologically damaged suggests that they not only viewed France as a viable market, but also that they themselves had undergone economic recovery, which revived their domestic ski industries and their international marketing budgets. This suggests that the ski industry contributed to and reflected an expanding economy while pointing to greater European reconciliation and integration by the 1950s. The French ski industry responded directly to competition from neighboring countries, reminding skiers of the twenty-eight ski stations in France. As one advertisement explained: “Penser ski et vacances c’est penser montagnes de France.”

The magazine Le Ski reveals that skiing was more than just a past-time in post-war France—it revealed important domestic developments. While women pursued skiing with the enthusiasm of their male counterparts, they remained beholden to more traditional and less sexualized notions of femininity than their American counterparts. By the 1950s, however, an increased

42 “Tonight on the train, tomorrow morning on the snow” and “The train is the most practical way.” Ibid.; Le Ski 9 (1955–1957).
44 “For your winter vacation, choose Germany—you’ll come home satisfied.” Le Ski 9 (1955–1957).
45 Ibid.
emphasis on youth and youth culture loosened these standards a bit, allowing for a wider interpretation of how female skiers might interpret and represent femininity at ski resorts in France. Yet a closer look at the ski industry’s post-war trajectory reveals that it followed France’s broader economic recovery quite closely, growing and developing by the 1950s within the “thirty glorious years” of economic expansion. Economic recovery, however, was not just localized in the French industry. By the 1950s, Le Ski’s advertising records reveal that Italian, Austrian, and German ski industries viewed French skiers as potential clients and endeavored to reach them through targeted campaigns. Skiing and the ski industry, therefore, constitute an important means through which to understand and measure concerns, anxieties, and advances in the French economy, society, and culture in the post-war era.
Figure 1. *Le Ski* 6 (1946–1949). Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 2. Le Ski 6 (1946–1949). Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.