

Lake Placid Olympic Special ❄️ Hollywood Bowl Jumping ❄️ Roxy Reports ❄️ Mike Douglas

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The Roxy Ski Reports

For 20 years, ski reporter Roxy Rothafel told it like it is—often to the chagrin of resort executives.

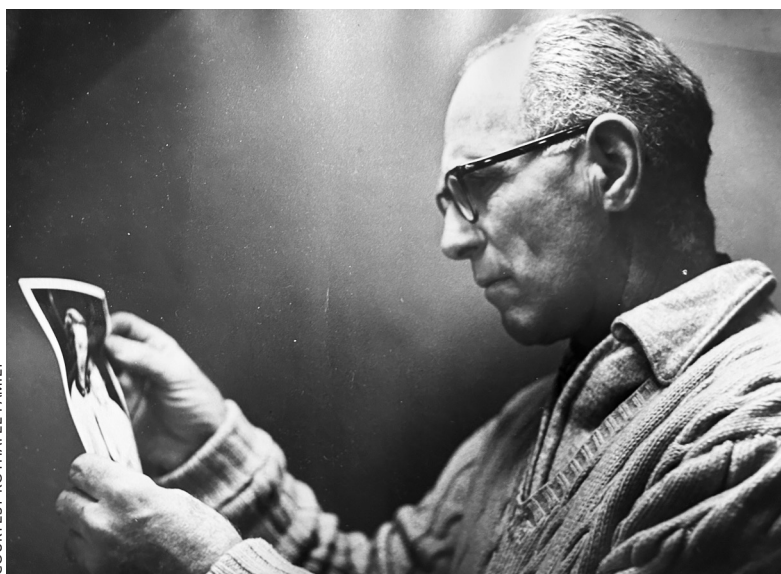
BY JEFF BLUMENFELD

Arthur “Roxy” Rothafel was, arguably, the most famous and trusted snow reporter in the United States from the 1960s to the early ’80s. In an era when radio and newspapers were the most reliable sources for snow condition reports, notoriously variable New England weather kept skiers guessing. Rothafel wondered about the value of reporting Wednesday snow conditions in a Thursday newspaper aimed at a skier arriving for first chair Saturday morning.

On a typical winter morning, Rothafel’s alarm sounded at 3:30 a.m., then he’d slip on a white terry cloth bathrobe, light a cigarette, pour instant coffee and by 4 a.m. would have contacted the foremost TV weathermen in the East. He received messages on his answering machine about snow conditions from a network of 70 “Roxy reporters” at the resorts—bartenders, snowcat operators, night watchmen, instructors and ski patrollers among them—who gave their take on what to expect on the hill that day. “I needed eyes and ears, lots of them, in 40 or more areas throughout the East,” Rothafel wrote in his unpublished memoir.

These resort insiders wore a bright round “Roxy Ski Reports” patch on their parkas that entitled them to free skiing—and nothing else, according to a profile by Julie Michaels in the *Berkshire Sampler* (January 25, 1976).

By 5:25 a.m. Rothafel had recorded up to 17 localized “Ski Reports by Roxy” for his broadcast clients, a network of powerhouse Eastern radio stations including WNEW in New York, Philadelphia’s WCAU, WBZ Boston and WDRC Hartford.



COURTESY ROTHAFEL FAMILY



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Top: Arthur “Roxy” Rothafel excelled as a journalist and media executive, but he later combined those vocations with his passion for skiing to launch the Roxy Ski Reports, a boots-in-the-snow assessment of current conditions.

Above: Izzy Slutzky (left) and brother Orville (right), co-founders of Hunter Mountain, New York, welcome Rothafel into the resort’s hall of fame.



Above: Rothafel (right) played semi-pro baseball. His father, a huge baseball fan, played sandlot ball and was given the tag “Roxy” by local supporters because they couldn’t pronounce his last name. The Roxy nickname stuck, and carried over to his son. Right: Rothafel (far left) was the ski school director at New Hampshire’s Belknap ski area in the late 1950s.



Rothafel departed his Rutland, Vermont, home by 7:30 a.m. for four to six hours of skiing at Killington, Mount Snow, Okemo, Pico, Stowe or Stratton, sometimes checking conditions at four mountains a day, running one or two trails from each summit.

In the afternoon he’d head home for his 3:30 p.m. drive-time ski reports, eat dinner, talk skiing with his son Art, get some shut eye and do it all again. He filed reports twice a day, six days a week, from December 15 to April 1 for two decades, from 1961 to 1981.

“I was a teen at the time, and I found my father’s work ethic, super-high level of integrity and sheer output to be extraordinary,” says Art Rothafel, 70, a B2B digital marketer based in southern California’s Villa Park.

Writes Morten Lund in *SKI* magazine (January 1969), “For more than 15 years [Ed. note: actually eight years by then], his daily broadcasts were heard by millions of ski fanatics and enthusiasts up and down the East Coast.” Lund continues, “Known for his integrity and journalistic style, it was often said of the gravel-voiced Roxy, ‘He tells it like it is.’”

Before the internet changed everything, typical ski reports on radio and in newspapers focused on a range

of subjective conditions, rated poor to excellent. Rothafel would have none of it. “If it was glare ice, he’d tell listeners to stay home, but if the Northeast was about to experience an epic snowfall, he wouldn’t hesitate to say, ‘Drop everything and head north,’” says his son.

Born Into Showbiz

Rothafel was born in the coal-mining town of Forest City, Pennsylvania, the son of Samuel Lionel Rothafel. (The original spelling—red apple in German—was later changed to Rothafel.) Sam Rothafel was brought to New York by his German-Jewish immigrant parents at age three, in 1886. After serving seven years in the Marine Corps, Sam settled in Forest City where, in 1908, he founded a theater showing live acts and movies. He acquired the nickname “Roxy” while playing baseball, because his fans couldn’t pronounce Rothafel.

The senior Rothafel went on to found a booming chain of movie theaters, some of them called the Roxy, including the famous theater at Radio City in Manhattan, which opened in Times Square in 1927. He also hosted a massively popular variety radio show. His son Arthur inherited both the

nickname and a talent for radio programming.

First Pair of Skis

Young Rothafel owned his first pair of skis while a cadet at New York’s Peekskill Military Academy in the late 1920s, used only when fresh snow on the academy pond was too deep for ice skating, he wrote in his memoir.

He began his professional career in 1932 as a reporter for the *New York Times*, first in New York, later in Europe. From 1939 to 1941 he was under contract at various Hollywood studios as a screenwriter, then served in World War II and came out as an army captain six years later.

What followed was an even more impressive resume: In the 1940s, Rothafel served as station manager of WFEA Radio in Manchester, New Hampshire; then from 1948 to 1950 he served as an executive assistant and sales program coordinator for CBS Television in New York, working on such iconic shows as *The Goldbergs*.

Starting in 1950, he spent 12 years as general manager of WLNH in Laco- nia, New Hampshire. In the late 1950s Rothafel was director of the ski school at New Hampshire’s Belknap Mountain

ROXY TELLS IT LIKE IT IS



How do you keep snow reports honest? Well, you hire these spies, see . . .

BY MORTEN LUND

Roxy, as skiers know him, is Arthur Rothafel in real life. He's a special assistant to Senator McIntyre of New Hampshire, and in the Winter he runs a whirling merry-go-round called Roxy's Ski Report, which goes out over 10 Eastern stations twice a day from December 15 to April 1, no holds barred. Roxy has three full-time skiers running from area to area all week long, plus a secret reporter at each major Eastern area, plus a few night watchmen who can give the substance of the conditions at midnight. What Roxy's radio show adds up to is a unique service for skiers.

Roxy himself is no spring chicken, but he still loves to ski; as a matter of fact, he was head of the ski school at Gunstock, New Hampshire

(then called Belknap), for a year and has taught skiing over a number of years. Right now, what with being based in Washington, Roxy has a long ride to the ski country, but he does it. His reports emanate from Stowe, Laconia, Stratton or wherever he may be. Basically, the system calls for Roxy to get on the phone twice a day to each one of his 10 stations and tell it like it is. What you hear is pure Roxy.

He leaves Washington every Thursday night.

"The Senator has been very good about this," said Roxy, sitting back in his chair as he told me about his little network of spies. (I toyed with the idea of calling this piece *The Man Who Stayed Out in the Cold*.) Roxy is a some-

what pixy-faced, well-tanned, lean fellow who admits he doesn't ski hell-for-leather any more.

"You are in the best of all possible worlds, aren't you?" I asked. "In Action City on weekdays and up in ski country every weekend?" Roxy smiled deprecatingly. I fired my first hard question.

What is the way this thing works?

Roxy: I think the key to it all is the immediacy of it; the veracity; the truth, and the fact that it is coming directly from ski country.

I get up every morning at four o'clock from about December 15 to April 1. By five o'clock I've called my sources and I'm writing out a script for each of the 10 stations.

What are your sources?

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SKI, JANUARY 1969



COURTESY ROTHAFEL FAMILY

Left: At home in the media world, and a great interview, Rothafel naturally attracted coverage by the era's top ski journalists, such as *SKI*'s Morten Lund. Above: With a strong newspaper and radio following, Rothafel soon attracted sponsors, including Schaefer beer.

“Roxy was rarely wrong and often knew more about oncoming storms than the resorts. A huge fan of skiing, he was never malicious. He wanted listeners to be sure their expectations were met when they took that first chair.”

Recreation Area (now Gunstock Mountain Resort) until it was taken over by Penny Pitou, the first American to win an Olympic downhill medal (in 1960). For two years in the mid-1960s, Rothafel was an executive assistant, speechwriter and advisor on military affairs for Sen. Thomas J. McIntyre (D-NH), who served on the Senate Armed Forces Committee.

Rothafel's marriage to Hope Ogden, who had three children from a previous marriage, lasted 12 years, during which time they co-owned a small women's fashion boutique, the North and South Shop, in Laconia and a second store in Portsmouth. Both

operations lasted about 10 years before insolvency, says his son.

Rothafel and Hope later remarried for two years, then divorced once again. He remained with his new partner, Marolyn S. Sawyer, a teacher, for the rest of his life.

Spies Who Went Out in the Cold

Typical ski reports at the time drove Rothafel crazy. A resort might pad its snow report that day as “very good,” which might have been true at the summit, though down lower it was slush, or worse. And what kind of weather was expected to blow in at noon? “If the operators weren't downright lying, they

were doing a good job of accentuating the positive,” he wrote, according to Lew Cuyler's story in *Ski Area Management* (September 1983). As far as base depth reports on radio or in print, Rothafel famously quipped, “What good is a 22-inch base if you've got 24-inch rocks!”

That's where his on-hill scouts came in. He required his reporters to be experts who could ski the entire mountain, instructing them to record candid descriptions as if they were talking to a close friend. He'd combine those reports with weather forecasts from meteorologists such as Don Kent, known as Boston's first TV weatherman, and Joel Myers, now 84,



COURTESY ROTHAFEL FAMILY



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Left: A colorful parka patch indicated a skier was on duty and would soon file a Roxy Ski Report. Above: Belknap Ski School Director Rothafel (center with sun glasses) with his lineup of instructors.

a Penn State instructor of meteorology and founder of AccuWeather in 1962.

Once his narratives were complete, Rothafel would hit the airwaves. “Some ski areas perceived Roxy as a threat who could financially ruin their weekend if the ski report wasn’t stellar,” says his son.

The younger Rothafel continues, “Roxy was rarely wrong and often knew more about oncoming storms than the resorts. A huge fan of skiing, he was never malicious. He saw himself as a champion of the little guy. He wanted listeners to be sure their expectations were met when they took that first chair.”

Morten Lund noted in *SKI* that while Roxy gained the trust of skiing enthusiasts, resort marketing executives were not similarly enamored. “They preferred to label icy conditions as ‘frozen granular’ or ‘mixed granular.’ Roxy called it ‘ice!’” Lund reported.

Piss and Vinegar Man

In 2003, ski journalist Jay Hanlon wrote in the Eastern Ski Writers Association’s 40th anniversary book, *From Lifeline to Byline*, “Roxy was ... a piss and vinegar man, an individual who brooked no argument, took no flap and called ‘em as he saw them.”

One day, Rothafel “read Killington’s morning report and it was glowing,” Hanlon continued. “So he set sail for the mountain. What he found was

boiler plate. And so he reported it that night or next morning. Preston Smith [Killington’s owner at the time] was infuriated and tried to discredit Roxy ... they withdrew his ticket to ski Killington.

“Which didn’t bother Roxy at all. He continued to go back to Killington, insisting on paying for his ticket, and he would report whatever conditions he found versus what Killington was putting out. It did not take long for Killington and a number of other resorts to clean up their act. All this to Roxy’s credit,” Hanlon wrote.

End of an Era

By the late 1970s, Rothafel could see the writing on the wall.

Over time, ski areas became so infuriated with his “tell it like it is” reporting that they mounted an organized campaign to kick him off the air and boycotted his advertisers, most notably, Schaefer beer. Eventually the resorts were successful, according to Lund’s *SKI* story.

What’s more, with improved grooming, boiler plate could be turned into skiable frozen granular overnight. Snowmaking, which Rothafel called in his memoir, “the greatest thing to happen to skiing since gravity,” could turn around skiing in a single day.

Looking back at Rothafel’s impact on skiing, meteorologist Joel Gratz,

founder of forecasting site OpenSnow, says, “At OpenSnow, we’re using technology to figure out where it snowed and how the snow is skiing. Roxy beat us to it by 50 years.”

Adds Rick Kahl, former editor of *Skiing* and *Ski Area Management* magazines, “He was a welcome alternative source on conditions during the era of ‘good to excellent’ snow reports.”

No longer able to ski due to a bad hip, in 1981 Rothafel retired to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to focus on golf, photography and his beloved German Shepherd, Gar.

He died in 1994, just past his 85th birthday, bequeathing his body for medical research. It was a fitting end to a fiercely independent career dedicated to helping skiers get the most for their hard-earned money and limited leisure time. 🐾

Learn more about Rothafel by viewing Art Rothafel’s tribute site, SkiMember.com.

Jeff Blumenfeld, a resident of Boulder, Colorado, is vice president of ISHA and immediate past president of the North American Snowsports Journalists Association (NASJA.org). A frequent contributor, he last wrote about the 50th anniversary of Larson’s Ski & Sport shop in the November-December 2024 issue.