

MUST-SKI TV

Skiing was a handy punching bag when television searched for laughs.

BY JEFF BLUMENFELD

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

To research how skiing has been depicted on American television over the years, author and ISHA director Jeff Blumenfeld traveled to New York City to visit The Paley Center for Media archives, a permanent collection containing more than 160,000 television and radio programs and advertisements. He also interviewed Robert Thompson, Professor of Television and Popular Culture at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, and watched dozens of TV series—from *I Love Lucy* to *Charlie's Angels*—on YouTube. He focused solely on episodic TV shows (weekly series).

In an upcoming issue of *Skiing History*, he'll take a look at skiing's portrayal in feature-length movies.

It was one of the most famous broken legs in modern American history.

When comedian Lucille Ball suffered a leg fracture during a skiing accident in Aspen in December 1971, the mishap gave new meaning to the Hollywood term “break a leg.” Rather than cancel the fifth season of *Here's Lucy*, the accident was written into the script, with the funny redhead performing in a wheelchair and full-leg cast. The first episode, “Lucy's Big Break,” aired September 11, 1972 on CBS-TV.

It was the beginning of the end for Ball's brilliant form of slapstick comedy. Sure, there were small gags that Ball could safely perform without further injuring her leg, but according to Geoffrey Mark Fidelman, author of *The Lucy Book* (Renaissance Books, 1999), this was the point where the Lucy character was “finally allowed to age.” In an effort to turn lemons into lemonade, publicists for the show pitched the media on printing x-rays of her fractured leg, adding insult to injury.

While we can all name our favorite ski scenes in Hollywood theatrical films—yes, we're looking at you, James Bond—it was television that entertained us most in the pre-Internet era. From time to time this “vast wasteland,” as a former FCC chairman called it,

would focus its gimlet eye on skiing, often giving the sport a black eye.

For comedy writers in New York and Hollywood, the sport was the butt of jokes for countless vintage television shows, especially as skiing increasingly became a part of mass culture in the 1950s. From *Topper* to *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to *The Brady Bunch* and *Cheers*, you were either going to be injured or embarrassed or both if you dared to ski.

Certainly, Vinko Bogataj's famous *Agony of Defeat* “yard sale” on ABC-TV's *Wide World of Sports* didn't help sell many lift tickets (*see sidebar*). Hollywood's incessant search for laughs used skiing as a handy punching bag. “I can think of nothing better than skiing as the basis for physical comedy. It's an entire environment waiting for slapstick. The sport is the equivalent of slipping on a banana peel,” says Robert Thompson, Professor of Television and Popular Culture at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, and co-author of *Television in the Antenna Age: A Concise History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

While he has skied on a tiny two-lift hill called Four Seasons Golf and Ski Center in Fayetteville, New York, and enjoys cross-country skiing, most of what Thompson knows about skiing is through its depiction on TV.

“Skiing has lots of comedic possibilities: First is gravity, which works against the skier more than an athlete playing on a horizontal



After Lucille Ball broke her leg while skiing in Aspen in December 1971, her accident was written into the fifth season of *Here's Lucy*.



On a 1963 episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, Rob Petrie (played by Van Dyke) practices before his first ski trip...but still returns home injured. Wife Laura (Mary Tyler Moore) doesn't buy his explanation.

playing field. There's romance involved: You go away to ski. It's not something to enjoy in your backyard. There's also a conspiratorial nature to a ski vacation."

Thompson recalls an episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* called "Don't Trip Over That Mountain" (1963) in which Rob Petrie, played by Van Dyke, promises his wife Laura (Mary Tyler Moore) he won't get injured on his upcoming two-day skiing trip. It's his first-ever ski trip; in fact, the scene opens with Rob on skis practicing in the living room. No problem. His pal Jerry Helper (Jerry Paris) is going to teach him. What could go wrong?

You already know what's coming: Rob sustains a full body sprain due to a four-person collision with a billy goat, then does all he can to keep his injuries from his wife rath-

er than endure a bunch of I-told-you-so's. Upon his return, Laura discovers him covered in bandages, which Rob vainly tries to explain is his "ski protection." Lots of talk about breaking a leg, sprained wrists, broken ankles and cracked ribs, which the canned laugh track thinks is simply hilarious.

Thompson also points to the 1984 *Cheers* episode titled "Snow Job." Sam is heartbroken over the death of his Uncle Nathan in Stowe, Vermont, where he must travel for the funeral. But his girlfriend Diane knows he's really going on a ski weekend with his buddies to pick up a few "snow bunnies," as he's done before.

In the 1998 *Frasier* episode called "The Ski Lodge," a farce of ill-intended, romantic room visitations unfolds throughout the night, cul-

minating in Frasier lamenting that despite a five-way love "triangle," which included a swimsuit model and gay ski instructor, no one was lusty for him. "There's a Las Vegas quality to it," says Thompson. "What happens in the ski lodge, stays in the ski lodge."

In 2009, *TV Guide* ranked "The Ski Lodge" episode 31st on its list of the 100 Greatest Episodes, as if TV comedy writers needed any further encouragement to spoof the sport. "Skiing represented overindulgence, recklessness, things you're not supposed to do as a responsible adult," says Thompson.

Brady Bunch (1969 to 1974) was a comedy about a woman with three daughters who marries a man with three sons. "*The Brady Bunch* introduced us to things middle class people could [now] do that we couldn't do before, like traveling to Hawaii, or going skiing," says Thompson. In the episode titled "Father of the Year" (1970), housekeeper Alice, played by Ann B. Davis, practices for a family ski trip by skiing on a hay-lined ramp in the backyard.

She skis about three feet forward before falling, complaining, "Your snow has splinters in it."

SPOOKS AND SKI BUNNIES

One of the earliest skiing references in TV comedy was the series premiere of *Topper* (1953-1955) starring Leo G. Carroll. In an episode titled, "Topper Meets the Ghosts," staid banker Cosmo Topper (Car-



"What happens in the ski lodge, stays in the ski lodge." In this 1998 *Frasier* scene, psychiatrist Dr. Frasier Crane (played by Kelsey Grammer, in the blue robe) misses out on a five-way love "triangle" that unfolds overnight.



Housekeeper Alice (the actress Ann B. Davis) practices on a hay-covered wooden ramp in the backyard prior to a ski trip on *The Brady Bunch*. She fell and wound up with splinters—an un auspicious start to the family vacation.

rol) and his wife Henrietta, played by Lee Patrick, move into a house haunted by its previous tenants – the mischievous, sophisticated ghosts George and Marion Kerby (played by Robert Sterling and Ann Jeffreys) and their spectral, alcoholic St. Bernard, Neil—who are visible only to Cosmo. George and Marion were killed on a skiing vacation, another black eye for the sport.

In a 1979 episode of *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981), called “Terror on Skis,” the government hires the Angels to find people responsible for killing the president’s special aide in Vail, Colorado. The Angels go undercover as —what else?—ski bunnies. It’s a ridiculous storyline, but lots of great gunplay, yellow one-piece suits, giant Russian fur hats, fake backdrops, stunt skiers, and visual ID for Scott goggles, Head apparel, and the Vail logo on network television.

A ski resort death also figures into a 1988 episode of *Murder, She Wrote*. In “Snow White, Blood Red,” someone is trying to kill the “World Cup Ski Team” at the fictional Sable Mountain ski lodge. One member of the team winds up hung in a shower naked, dead from a crossbow arrow. Lead character Jessica Fletcher, played by Angela Lansbury, is attacked by snowmobile, but of course survives to solve future murders.

The writers of the *Ellen Show* took pot shots at the sport in 1995 with “The Therapy Episode.” Ellen, played by comedian Ellen DeGeneres portraying a flippant Los Angeles bookstore manager, is stuck on a chairlift with two friends, sees



In 1979, the U.S. government hired the *Charlie's Angels* team to go undercover—disguised as ski bunnies—and track down the villains responsible for killing a presidential aide in Vail, Colorado.

the chair ahead fall off, and thinks she’s going to die. As her life flashes before her, her male chairmate suggests they have sex on the lift so his “seed” would live on.

SATURDAY NIGHT SPOOF

Comedy writers on *Saturday Night Live* had a field day in 2002 with a cold open titled, “Mormon on the Slopes,” a spoof of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. Dan Aykroyd and Will Ferrell try to convert racer Amy Poehler, while on downhill skis. “Would you like to be a Mormon?” they ask. Aykroyd suggests she could be one of his wives. Poehler responds, “Get out of here.”

As recently as 2015, in the episode of *Black-ish* “Martin Luther S-Küing Day,” lead actor Anthony Anderson, who plays advertising executive Andre “Dre” Johnson, takes the family skiing to “try to break down the color barriers on the slopes.” His son faces discrimination when he’s asked to sit in the back of the resort shuttle

bus. Not because of the color of his skin, but because he’s a snowboarder. “We’re all just people with wood strapped to our feet sliding down a mountain,” he complains.

On the Internet, ski lift malfunctions are likely to go viral—after the Gudauri, Georgia, lift accident last season, the *Washington Post* on March 16, 2018, ominously warned readers, “Don’t watch this video of a malfunctioning chair lift if you ever plan to ski again.” But all in all, skiing is no longer maligned on the tube. It isn’t that sinful anymore, it’s not the court jester of sports, it’s less conspiratorial, and for that, those who love the pastime are grateful. ❄️

Jeff Blumenfeld founded Blumenfeld and Associates PR in 1980 and is recipient of the 2017 Bob Gillen Memorial Award from the North American Snowsports Journalists Association. Editor of *ExpeditionNews.com*, he’s a Fellow of The Explorers Club and chairs its Rocky Mountain chapter.

THE AGONY OF DEFEAT

As bad as Lucy’s broken tibia was for the sport, perhaps the single most damaging televised ski scene to waft across the ether was the opening sequence of *ABC Wide World of Sports* wherein Slovenian jumper Vinko Bogataj was seen cartwheeling through space.

During the 1970 International Ski Flying Championships in Oberstdorf, Germany, he suffered a nightmare fall down an icy in-run, barrel-rolling over the lip into the crowds, a scene that would play endlessly for years during the opening of each telecast. As host Jim McKay intoned each week, the inevitable companion of “the thrill of victory,” was the “agony of defeat.”

Since that disastrous run, Bogataj, the father of two daughters, has owned a special place in American sport. At an April 25, 1981, 10th anniversary celebration of the show, Bogataj received a standing ovation in a banquet room filled with athletes such as Peggy Fleming and Muhammad Ali. Today, he resides quietly in his hometown of Lesce, Slovenia, where he likes to paint landscapes.

For all who saw it, Bogataj’s fall, which he survived with just a mild concussion and a broken ankle, became the poster child for the catchphrase “agony of defeat.” In a later interview through a translator, he said the difference between victory and defeat in sports is very slight. “All sportsmen should know that.” —J.B.



GETTY/ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES

Slovenian ski jumper Vinko Bogataj cartwheels into the crowd in a scene that was replayed weekly, for years, during the opening sequence of *ABC Wide World of Sports*.