

# Bonne Bell Ski Team Rang Up Cosmetics Sales

Jess Bell's lipstick racers dazzled the ski world. **BY JEFF BLUMENFELD**



Jess Bell (center in hat) often entertained New York fashion editors, providing an opportunity to field test his skin-protective cosmetics. The late team captain Karin S. Allen is third from right in the yellow outfit.

Revlon or Estee Lauder or Helena Rubinstein can have their high-fashion models. Their runways. Their heavily purple-shadowed eyelids and rouged cheekbones. Cleveland businessman Jess A. Bell, Sr., had a different idea when, in 1959, he succeeded his father at Bonne Bell, the family cosmetics business.

As major stores and ski area shops slowly warmed to his line of ski lipsticks, sunscreens and high-altitude creams (an alternative to pasty-white zinc oxide), Bell tossed in the women, called “girls” back then. They would come to be known as the Bonne Bell Ski Team.

Reported Anita Verschoth in the November 22, 1971, issue of *Sports Illustrated*, “Bell’s beauties all look as if they had just dropped in from the wholesome house next door. ... The emphasis is on a sort of dewy-cheeked outdoor look, complete with creamy tan and snowy teeth.”

Bonne Bell Cosmetics was founded in 1927 by Bell’s father, Jesse Grover Bell, who had been selling cosmetics door to door in Kansas. After moving to Ohio during the Depression, he made his products on a hot plate in his basement and continued door-to-door sales. The com-

pany was named after one of the elder Bell’s daughters.

Beginning in the 1950s the company actively pursued the outdoor market, developing sun blocks, heavy-duty moisturizers and lip protectors for skiers, hikers and joggers. While more elegant cosmeticians fought over big-city sales, Bell’s tagline resonated with resort-bound skiers: “Out there you need us, baby.”

In 1973, as its celebrity sales reps were storming ski country, Bonne Bell introduced a lip pomade called Lip Smacker, aimed originally at skiers, then later at pre-teens. According to *Women’s Wear Daily*, “Lip Smackers achieved cultural icon status as the first flavored lip item on the market.” Lip Smackers started with strawberry, green apple and orange-chocolate flavors. By 1975, the brand made news with a Dr. Pepper flavor.

Jess Bell, a graduate of Valley Forge Military Academy and Baldwin Wallace College, served as a paratrooper in both World War II and the Korean War. He defied the common image of a cosmetics industry giant. A fitness buff, he scaled Kilimanjaro, ran marathons, swam to keep in shape and served on the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

His Lakewood, Ohio, offices were smoke-free long before that became common, and he pioneered the idea of an office fitness center. He offered incentives to employees who exercised regularly, lost weight or quit smoking.

**"It was 90 percent hard work, and 10 percent glamour"**

### Avalanche of Applicants

Georgia Lesnevich Haneke, a photographer and horse-woman from Heber, Utah, was on the Bonne Bell Ski Team from 1971 to 1974. She recalls that the selection process was fierce, with "thousands of applicants." She asked her stepfather, a classmate of Jess Bell, to provide an introduction.

She flew to Bonne Bell headquarters, and 48 hours later Bell offered her a salary of around \$12,000 per year, all expenses paid, and free ski equipment. She credits her acceptance to "good looks and skiing ability." But it was no walk in the park. Her responsibilities included selling cosmetics, visiting retailers, straightening stock, filling out sales reports, going to ski resorts and pre-running NASTAR courses.

"It was 90 percent hard work, and 10 percent glamour," she says. "Sure, it was a sales job, but I felt like a mini movie star. You'd walk into a retailer or hotel or ski resort and when the Bonne Bell Ski Team girl arrived, they treated you like royalty. Everyone knew who you were and what you represented."

The late Karin S. Allen, team captain, told *Sports Illustrated* in 1971 that being on the team was better than being Miss America.

Allen moved to Woodstock, Georgia, following 40 years with the company in roles that also included international sales training. She passed away in August 2021, shortly after sharing her Bonne Bell experiences with us.

"Jess was brilliant," she said. "The Bonne Bell Ski Team was made up of surfers as well as skiers, and was a great marketing tool for attracting new customers. The other cosmetics salespeople showed up in mink coats and high heels. Instead, our girls were athletes. There were about 10 of us at any one time, working across the U.S., and we were all skiers.

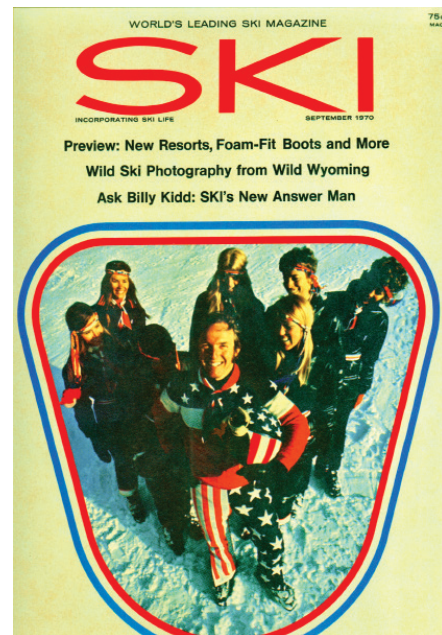
"Jess used to say, 'You're healthy and wholesome, toasty and brown, and you're killing your skin,' in reference to girls who went into the mountains or out in extreme weather with no sunscreen protection," Allen said.

"When I look back on my career, I consider it to be the most amazing job you could ever have. Jess Bell was generous, loyal and supportive. We could not have had more fun in our working lives. There wasn't a morning when my feet hit the floor and I wasn't excited to do the job."

### "Sign Me Up"

Nancy Stofer Brehm, a retired schoolteacher in Saugatuck,

To promote Bonne Bell sunscreen for men, Bell hired Billy Kidd, fresh off his 1970 combined world championship.



While not a part of the Bonne Bell Ski Team, super model Cheryl Tiegs received an early start modeling for the company and introduced Bonne Bell's "Purse 'n Parka" lipstick combination in this ad to appeal to skiers.

Michigan, remembers what it was like being around the Bonne Bell Ski Team for five years, pitching the brand on campus. "As a young college student working at Bonne Bell part-time, I felt the members of the team were the epitome of cool," she says. "I loved skiing as a sport and was envious they were getting to ski around the country. I thought to myself, 'If this is a job, then sign me up.'"

Team member Bettie Simms Hastings, a retired Indiana horse farm owner now living on a ranch near Telluride, remembers, "It was a great job before skiing became so commercial and corporate. It was all fun. How many people are hired to go to different ski areas and be paid to have fun skiing with people?"

She especially liked her Captain America-like outfits and skiing in films by Willy Bogner, Jr. Another highlight was meeting Robert Redford while traveling through the airport in Denver. "He would look you right in the eye while he talked," she recalls.

Mission accomplished, the ski team was disbanded in the mid-1970s. According to Karin Allen, the promotion

saturated its target market. “We expanded to nearly every ski area in North America,” she said. “Our efforts eventually evolved to focus on international sales and the higher volume U.S. cosmetics retail business, which paid the bills.”

Jess Bell died of heart ailments in 2005, at age 80.

Bonne Bell Cosmetics was sold to Markwins Beauty Brands in 2015. Markwins closed the Bonne Bell headquarters, laying off 91 employees, according to Cleveland’s *The Plain Dealer* (Jan. 30, 2015). Those nostalgic about the brand’s 90-year run can still find Ten-O-Six astringents, moisturizers, and deep-pore cleansers (now known as Formula 10.0.06) on Amazon and at Walmart. Lip Smacker lip gloss and lip balm is sold on Amazon and in Dollar General stores. Lipsmacker.com invites kids to become “Balm Squad” artists.

Bettie Hastings adds, “The independence we had to do the job, the travel, and meeting people at ski areas, skiing everywhere, and having capital F-U-N. I don’t think sales reps today have the same freedom. Younger friends don’t know about the Bonne Bell Ski Team, but I’m proud to still be called a Bonne Bell girl ... especially at my age. It was a wonderful chapter in my life.” ❄️

ISHA board member Jeff Blumenfeld, a resident of Boulder, Colo., is president of the North American Snowsports Journalists Association (NASJA.org). He is author of *Travel with Purpose: A Field Guide to Voluntourism* (Rowman & Littlefield).



To sell cosmetics, Jess Bell rang up sales by promoting a dewey-cheeked outdoor look, complete with creamy tan and snowy teeth.



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