



BOOK REVIEW:

Ryan Rodgers. *Winter's Children: A Celebration of Nordic Skiing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 448 pages. ISBN: 978-1517909345.

It is impossible to understand the United States without understanding its sports, yet the existing research into this topic often prioritizes the US sports trinity of baseball, basketball, and American football over less stereotypically “all-American” sports. However, Ryan Rodgers’s recent book *Winter's Children: A Celebration of Nordic Skiing* makes an effort to fill this gap in the research on American sports history.

Rodgers is an avid cross-country skier who lives in Duluth, Minnesota, meaning that he has first-hand experience with the sport and a good background for writing the history of skiing in the US. The book has a natural emphasis on the Midwest, where cross-country skiing was first brought to the US in the nineteenth century by immigrants from Nordic countries, and where the sport eventually enrooted and perpetuated. The story starts with an anecdotal situation: in Wisconsin in the mid-nineteenth century, the tracks in the snow left by a skiing Norwegian immigrant were mistaken by puzzled locals for the footprints of some strange monster. These people had never seen skis before! While snowshoes had been adopted from the Indigenous peoples by European settlers, American snow, so to say, was clean from ski tracks until the arrival the Norwegians, the Swedes, and later the Finns to the Midwest. Yet, as Rodgers skillfully demonstrates in his book, this snow has been gradually crisscrossed by many ski trails left by many people.

Winter's Children makes clear that it was not quite easy for skiing and skis to become a part of North American life. While the Nordic immigrants practiced this activity, mainstream US society and other non-Nordic immigrant groups at first saw skiing, and especially ski jumping, as exotic, a spectator show not unlike the circus. It took time to entice Americans to the ski track, yet slowly but steadily skiing was enrooted in the new country. Rodgers’s book skillfully and carefully chronicles the rises and falls of this winter sport from the nineteenth century till today. Rodgers writes about many practitioners and enthusiasts of skiing—some professional athletes and many amateurs—but besides detailing prominent skiers and ski jumpers, Rodgers also pays tribute to ski makers and ski sellers, who are no less deserving of inclusion in the history of skiing in the US. He puts into the limelight numerous ski contests and races, winter carnivals, ski clubs, and ski resorts, some that are very much alive and some that vanished a long time ago. Overall, the author outlines a long and glorious journey from Gullick Laugen—the above-mentioned Norwegian immigrant who caused a panic in a little community in Wisconsin by leaving the first ski trail—to such skiing superstars as Jessie Diggins, who won the gold at the Winter Olympics in 2018.

As the title of the book suggests, Rodgers focuses on *Nordic* skiing, so he particularly concentrates on those who have brought skiing to the

United States. This makes *Winter's Children* especially precious since Nordic Americans and their contribution to the new country are regrettably often overshadowed by other, larger immigrant groups. Rodgers, however, brings to the fore the Norwegian Americans, Swedish Americans, and Finnish Americans, their rich cultures and identities, and their importance in the social fabric of the Midwest and the United States in general. Although the book centers somewhat more on Minnesota and Norwegian Americans, the author does not leave other skiing states behind, and equally pays attention to other skiing Nordic people in the US. Rodgers particularly explores the concept of Norwegian *idrett*, seen as community building through sports, and he also examines the Finnish national trait of *sisu* (stubbornness, strength, determination), expressed by Finnish American athletes such as the famous "Flying Bietilas" of Ishpeming, Michigan.

In his book, the author also particularly highlights the challenges that skiing has faced and is currently facing in the United States. For instance, he illustrates the obstacles American girls and women had to meet and overcome in order to engage in skiing as a professional sport. The twenty-first century has its own problems for skiers, ranging from climate change and consequent shortages of snow to the negative effects of the Covid pandemic and financial troubles (mundane but always relevant). Some battles are yet to be won. Rodgers, however, expresses hope that the future can still be bright for skiing, and that the great legacy of the daring Nordic immigrants in the Midwest and throughout the US will live and be perpetuated by many different US inhabitants.

Winter's Children is a genuine compendium of skiing and ski culture in the United States and is richly illustrated with photographs, posters, and other visuals. The book has the taste of crisp snow and the feel of fresh winter wind. It is a great ode to skiing in all its variety, and I can highly recommend this book for anyone interested in winter sports and for any scholar exploring Nordic Americans.

Roman Kushnir
Independent Scholar