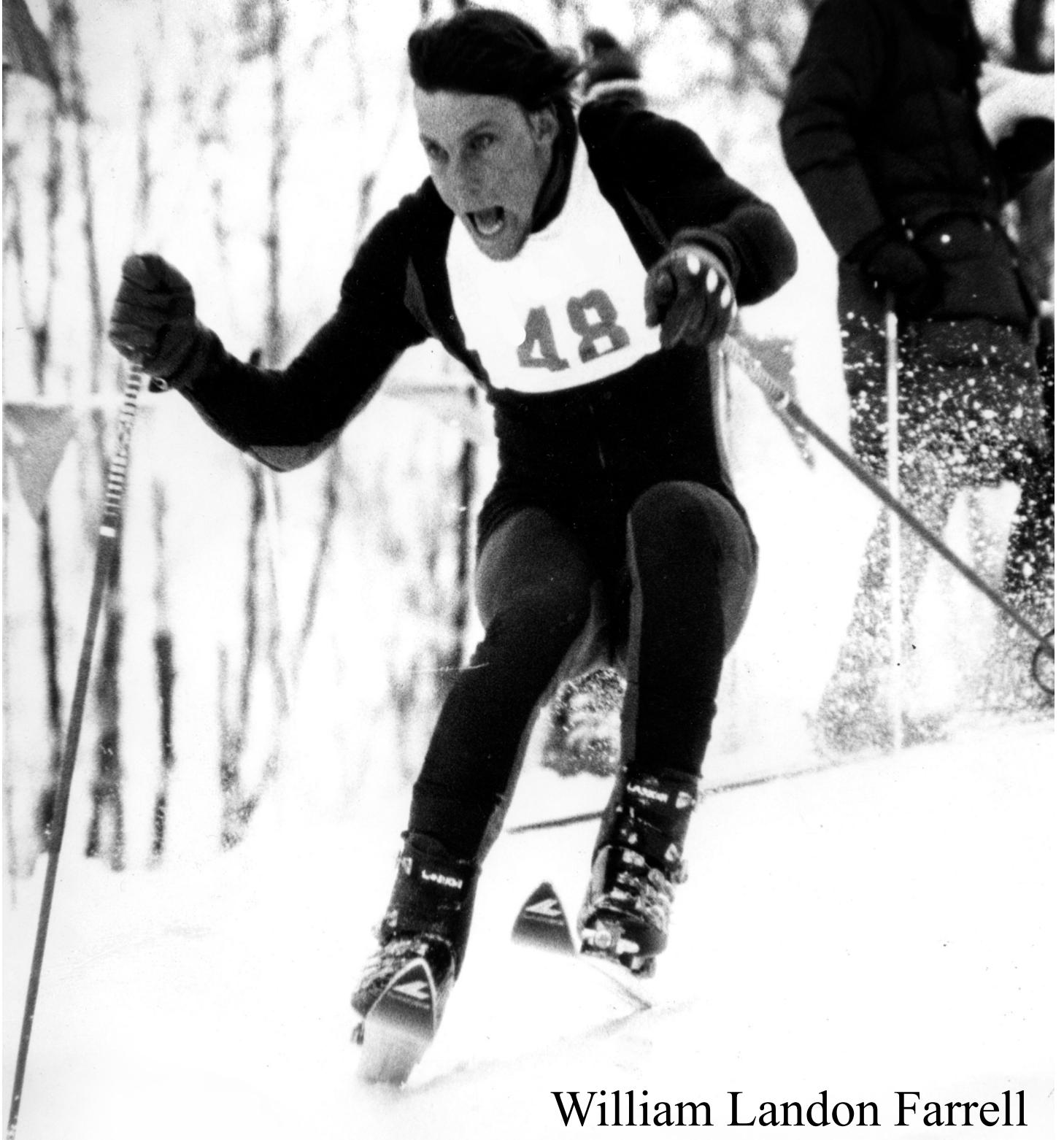


WHEN BRONZE WAS AS GOOD AS GOLD



William Landon Farrell

Back in 1972, I was a 22 year old student/athlete at Johnson State Teachers College in northern Vermont. At the time, Johnson had one of the most successful Alpine Competition programs in North America. This was due in part to Tom Watson's (IBM) support of the program along with the coaching and recruiting effort of Johnson's revered (and often controversial) Alpine coach, the late Erle Morse.

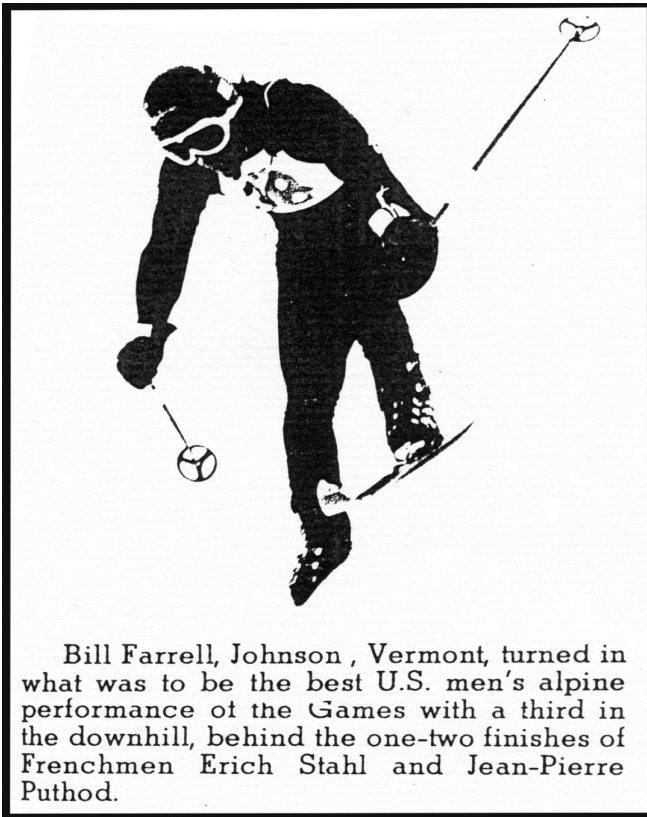
While my achievements as a collegiate downhiller had been sporadic due to injuries, a series of unexpected podium finishes and wins in early February of 1972 gave me a last-minute opportunity to represent Johnson State College and the United States as a member of the FISU (Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire) World Championships team in Lake Placid, New York. I received a late night call from Erle Morse after finishing a local cross country ski race in Guilford, Vermont. Erle told me that while I would be a full fledged member of the FISU team, the selection committee would only allow me to compete in the downhill event and not the giant slalom or slalom.

I quickly packed my equipment, drove through the night and upon arriving at Whiteface mountain, I began my course inspection and the downhill training runs. Later that evening, I was issued my official U.S. Team uniform consisting of a white tennis sweater and a pair of navy blue stretch pants. From the Lake Placid Club, our U.S. delegation marched into the opening ceremony. There, I became overwhelmed, not only by the sheer numbers of international athletes and their coaches (some had just recently returned from the Sapporo Olympics) but also because the temps were in the single digits (Fahrenheit) and my official U.S. Team Issue white tennis sweater and navy blue stretch pants were no match against the down-filled parkas that most of the other teams were wearing.

The following day was the final non-stop training run and to my complete surprise, I placed second, only 0.01 seconds from the leader Erich Stahl, a medical student at the University of Grenoble. Here I was, a once-mediocre collegiate skier who had battled back from injuries and academic setbacks and I was now surrounded by an army of technicians representing the very manufacturers of the skis, boots and bindings that I was using. The day before, none of these equipment reps even knew who I was and now I was on the cusp of winning a medal in a world championship.

On the morning of Monday, February 28th, I rode the chairlift up to the start of the downhill. During my lone long ride up Whiteface Mountain, I questioned how I had suddenly gone from a modest student/athlete to a potential world champion medalist. I thought about the struggles I had in coming back from five (yes five) broken legs in my skiing career and the bitter disappointments of missing entire competitive ski seasons. I also reflected on the financial sacrifices that my parents and many others had made as well as the guidance that my coaches and mentors contributed allowing me to pursue my career as a ski racer. And finally, I made a vow to the Almighty that there was no way that I was going to blow this opportunity.

As I entered the starting gate, my fingertips became numb. There was an eerie calmness in my mind and when my shins hit the starting wand, everything seemed to be coming at me in slow motion. At the large roll midway on the course, I decided to risk holding my tuck position longer than I should have and in my greed for more speed, I became launched into air much farther than I planned during training and landed well below my intended line. Nevertheless, I salvaged the run and ended up in third place winning a world championship. bronze medal.



Bill Farrell, Johnson, Vermont, turned in what was to be the best U.S. men's alpine performance of the Games with a third in the downhill, behind the one-two finishes of Frenchmen Erich Stahl and Jean-Pierre Puthod.

Unfortunately, I never got to attend the medal awards ceremony that evening to receive my bronze. Soon after the official results were posted, I needed to drive back to Johnson State College, with Johnson's assistant coach, John Hussey, where I handed in an overdue lab report. The next day we drove over to Burke Mountain and competed in the New England Small College Conference Ski Championships. Because Johnson's ace technical skier, John Goodhue, remained at the FISU games for the slalom and our fresh-

man "Boomer" Mumford was competing in the Junior National Championships, our college squad was short handed. There, as an unaccomplished 4th seeded slalom skier, I was able to place third which turned out to be necessary to secure the title for Johnson by the narrowest possible margin.

Later that week, I drove back to Lake Placid to participate in the closing ceremonies. Once again I donned my official U.S. Team Issue white tennis sweater and navy blue stretch pants and as I was leaving my room, I noticed a small box on the foot of my bed. Inside was my bronze medal with a handwritten note that said, "*Bill, Nice Job...Erle*".

William Landon Farrell is a videographer, writer and producer living with his wife Shelly in Keene, New Hampshire.

