

Interview With Peter Teal
2nd WTA President, 1972-3
3/29/2018

Peter Teal: Let me tell you a little of my background with skiing.

Mark Metzdorff: Please do.

T: I never skied until I went to Dartmouth College, then I skied there every winter, and I was up there for 6 years, college and medical school. When I left there I went to Denver for my internship and we skied there every other weekend, we were on call every other weekend, so when I was off we skied at all the resorts within driving distance of Denver, Arapahoe and Winter Park. Then I went for my orthopedic training to Minneapolis, which doesn't have much skiing.

M: What year was that?

T: It was 1960 that I went to Minneapolis. I was there for 6 years; 5 years of training and one year of practice and then moved to Billings, Montana, and I joined Dr. Berg, an orthopedist there and he was an avid skier. One of my first years there I went to Aspen to ski with the Rocky Mountain Traumatological Society. That was a group that held a meeting every winter in Aspen. I went to that meeting and was surprised that everyone walked in, signed their name and walked out. They had speakers but no listeners! And they had dentists and internists and all kinds of specialties that weren't involved with trauma. I learned that they had a long waiting list to join that society, and I went to them and said to them why don't you give me that waiting list and I'll start another society? And they said, no we can't do that. So, I went back to Billings and thought about it and thought well, I'll just start my own skiing/orthopedic society, and I called Bob Volz. I've known Bob since I was 12 years old; he grew up in Lincoln, NE and I grew up in Omaha, and we went to the same summer camp up in Minnesota. I saw him in Denver when I was an intern there and maintained the friendship. So, I called Bob and he said that he'd been thinking about doing the same thing, starting a society. Now, when I thought about it I thought, well, it'd be a great chance to go skiing, exchange some information, give some papers and deduct the expenses. Bob was a little bit more studious and selective in his approach to it, and wanted to be sure that we had a scientific society with a strong papers being given, and it was his idea to open it up to all trauma surgeons, whether they were orthopedic or general surgery or traumatologists. So, we had back and forth telephone calls again and again and again, and we had our first meeting in Vail, and there must have been 8 or 10 of us. Now I don't remember what year that was, but I guess you know that.

M: Well, it would have been 1971. It's our 50th Anniversary coming up in 2020, so it would have been 1971.

T: That sounds about right. At any rate our first meeting was minimal, and we only met for a long weekend, we didn't have week-long meetings then. It was several years later that the resorts started demanding a week or nothing that we went to a week-long. We incorporated the organization in

Denver. I explored incorporating in Montana but it was a lot cheaper in Denver, in fact I think we got somebody to do it for nothing. The first members there, I don't remember all of them, but Fred Chang was one who was a stalwart member. He was a surgeon from Kansas, I think Topeka; and Kevin Ryan was one of my classmates, those guys were both classmates, and he was a radiologist from California. And Bob was there, he brought several people from Denver. I think one of the biggest things that made this a success was the quality of members because Bob brought in, I forget the brothers' names, there were three of them that were trauma surgeons in Denver, maybe Denver General, do you know that?

M: Maybe the Moore brothers? Gene, Fred and John?

T: It was those guys and then we had a professor from Texas. A trauma surgeon.

M: There is some lore in the organization that the Rocky Mountain Traumatological Society that you mentioned was not friendly with Denver General, and not welcoming to some of the trauma surgeons from Denver General. Do you remember anything about that?

T: I don't remember anything about that but that's amusing because their meetings were so minimal. Many came, signed the registration and didn't even go in the auditorium.

M: Well, I'll have to talk to Gene Moore about that. It may be that he knows exactly what happened.

T: The Moore brothers, they were big in the organization.

M: Still are.

T: You know them?

M: Oh, yeah

T: They were always making a fuss, mooning people, they had their own rules

M: They kind of set a tone for the organization which still resonates, I think, a little bit. It's not quite as wild-west as it used to be but it's still about having fun.

T: Yes. Then we began having more presentations. We started out giving a few papers but very soon we got serious about it. We had pretty long sessions in the morning, seems to me we hit the ski hill about 10:00. Then we had sessions beginning again at 4:00. Usually there were several parties so people got to know each other. We met at Vail for two or three years before we started branching out.

M: The first three meetings were at Vail.

T: One of the early meetings was at Park City, there was no snow. It was a terrible winter, we told everybody to bring their tennis racquets! We met and the night before the meeting it started

snowing, and by the time we were on the ski hill we had at least a foot of fresh powder. It was one of the best skiing meetings we ever had and there were very few there because of the snow conditions.

M: That's interesting. That's a little bit of Western Trauma magic happening there, it sounds like.

T: Yeah, that was a nice boost.

M: Fred Chang was the president that year, 1977.

T: He was a classmate at Dartmouth. That's about all I remember.

M: That's a really good bunch of information, some of which we haven't heard before, so it's very interesting to hear. One of the principles of our group now is not just science, but family fun and fellowship and that sort of thing so I'd be interested if you have any insight as to early features of the organization that made it so.

T: There was a lot of social interaction because it was a small group and we all knew each other from before the meeting.

M: You mentioned having some dinners together; was that at restaurants or was that at the resort?

T: That was at restaurants, there'd be a cocktail party that everybody was invited to, it was a family affair. People would split up to go to different restaurants and some would go to one restaurant and a bunch to another one. I can't remember, we had a President's Dinner it seems to me that everyone was invited to.

M: Do you recall any events on the ski hill? What was the skiing like on a day-to-day basis, were there races or Nastar?

T: We had Nastar races every year

M: From the beginning?

T: No, it seems to me it might have been eight or ten years after we started. We started having one day when we funded a picnic on the hill after the Nastar races.

M: Well, that tradition continues, of course

T: That's good.

M: Bob Volz mentioned something about a relay race on the hill that was a feature of early meetings, do you recall anything about that?

T: Well, I barely remember that. I'm sure I participated but I can't remember much.

M: He said it had something to do with an inner tube, you had to ski down and pass it on to the next person.

T: I don't remember that.

M: We were thinking about doing that at the 50th Anniversary week celebration if we can figure it out.

T: Sounds like that'd be fun. Now, when we started this, as I said, Bob was instrumental in making it academic and we had a rule that you had to give a paper every three years, or something like that, do they have that still, or submit a paper?

M: Members in good standing had to submit an abstract every three years; but that went away, I think, in the early 90's because we had so many abstracts being submitted that there was no problem getting a quality program. It's still a requirement in applying to be a new member that you have to submit an abstract within three years of your application; it doesn't necessarily have to be accepted.

T: What about board certification?

M: Board certification has been required from the beginning. We have some professionals who are not physicians, but they are in a different category. What do you think about how the organization grew and changed; when was the last time you attended a meeting?

T: It's gotta be 20 years ago.

M: I've been coming since 1986 and I've never had the pleasure of meeting you, I don't think. That was my first meeting and it was the second time the WTA was at Sun Valley. Rudy Klassen was president.

T: I was there at Sun Valley.

T: Klassen was from Minneapolis. He broke something at one of those meetings, his ankle or something.

M: Well, it's probably in our registry of injuries. Did you ever have an injury at one of the meetings?

T: Not at the meeting, I've ridden down the slope in one of those toboggans, but not at a meeting.

M: There was kind of a transition period between the early years and the later years when the Journal of Trauma got involved and the organization became more academic. Do you remember anything about that?

T: I remember the change when they started publishing the papers; I realized that this organization was moving out ahead of me!

M: You were in private practice your whole career, I gather. When did you retire?

T: Yes, I was. I retired when I was 65 and then went to work for the VA for 10 years and really retired when I was 75. I'm 85 now.

M: Are you still skiing?

T: I wish I were! I'd love to ski again but I can't stand the altitude.

M: So, you think it was about 20 years ago that you attended your last meeting?

T: I would think so.

M: Why did you find your activity diminishing in our organization?

T: Well, the skiing became more and more tough for me, I'd get just exhausted doing it. A whole week of skiing was just too much.

M: One of our challenges now is that we had a founding principles that this organization would be multidisciplinary, and we have fewer and fewer specialists that are not general or trauma surgeons.

T: It was Bob Volz' push that he wanted it to be not just orthopedists, but anybody involved with trauma and I think that was good for the organization and it brought in a lot of people, and a lot of academic people.

M: We still recruit, to see if we can get some orthopedists, or neurosurgeons or ENT types.

T: That's a problem, that one group dominates and others in that specialty want to come and participate. When I originally thought about it, I thought let's make it sectional, divide the country up into quarters or something and get members from the east coast, central plains and west coast; but that didn't work out. East coasters didn't want to come out here.

M: You spend the winters in Tucson. Isn't that where Bob Volz is as well?

T: Yes; I see him frequently. I went out to lunch with him a couple weeks ago and he mentioned another old friend of his was here who he had mentored. Bob asked him if he remembered the three things that he needed to do to be a good physician, and he said yes I do. Well, what were they?, Bob said. He replied first that the patient's needs must come first. Second you told me to stay current with the literature, and thirdly you told me to keep my pants zipped!

M: Hmm, good advice throughout the ages I'd say!

T: Yes, I think so, still works!

M: Give him my best. It's been a pleasure talking with you and we'll speak again I hope.