

Passing of "Banana" George Blair

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"Banana" George Blair, 1915 - 2013

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There are not many people who could learn to water ski at the age of 40 and expect to end up in the Water Ski Hall of Fame. George Alfred Blair did, and most of the journey was completed on his bare feet. Blair, affectionately known as "Banana" George for his love of bananas and the color yellow, died Thursday in New York City. He was 98 years old.

Blair was a successful New Jersey businessman in 1955 when he experienced his first exposure to water skiing. He had gone to Florida to recuperate from a fusion operation on his back and he had watched the action at a nearby ski school in Fort Lauderdale. The instructor, Lyle Lee, encouraged the visitor to try the sport, but Blair protested that he was in a back brace and was fearful of re-injury. "I've seen you get out of your chair and I've seen you walk," Blair said Lee told him. "If you can walk, you can ski." Using a training boom on the towboat, Blair got up on skis, back brace and all, and his life wasn't the same since.

"For 13 years I had been in excruciating pain," Blair once recalled. "I could do nothing without pain, and now suddenly I was water skiing. It changed my whole life."

His wife and four daughters, who all learned to ski before returning to New Jersey and sharing their new sport with their friends, shared Blair's excitement. Soon the Blairs opened two ski schools, one in Red Bank and the other outside Edison, near New York City. They operated the schools successfully for more than 20 years. The family also put on ski shows regularly and competed in three-event tournaments and ski racing marathons, but George's real romance with the sport began when he learned to ski on his bare feet at the age of 46.

His barefoot acts soon became the star attraction of the ski shows in which he also flew the flat kite, performed on a three-foot stool atop a disk and skied on hydrofoils.

Blair's costumes were his favorite color yellow, and as he skied off the course at the end of the show, he ate a banana, which he concealed in his costume. A fan painted a banana and the words "Banana George" on a shirt for him and thus began a trademark that would become known to water ski observers throughout the world.

Blair's expertise as a barefooter was demonstrated eventually on all seven continents, the final one Antarctica where he barefooted on Whaler's Bay in 1986, a feat that earned him a place in the Guinness Book of Records and enabled him to become water skiing's premier international ambassador.

His skill was demonstrated in hundreds of shows at Florida's Cypress Gardens. He accompanied Cypress Gardens' skiers to many countries and visited others on his own. In all, Blair estimated he put on exhibitions in more than 45 countries, including a visit to the Soviet Union in 1988, a year after recuperating from a back fracture sustained while practicing barefoot jumping.

Blair championed the cause of water skiing through his membership and generous support of the American Water Ski Educational Foundation, the American Barefoot Club and USA Water Ski. His peers in the American Barefoot Club elected him Man of the Year in 1982, 1986 and 1988.

He won his share of tournament titles in barefoot competition, especially in jumping. He held the national jumping record for the Veterans Division at 34 feet.

Born Jan. 22, 1915, in Toledo, Ohio, Blair did not permit his preoccupation with water skiing to prevent him from maintaining an active interest in a number of successful businesses, including banking, real estate, photography and the entertainment industry.

He also has become something of an advertising figure with his barefooting. At the time of his induction in the AWSEF Water Ski Hall of Fame in 1991, a full-color General Mills ad showing "Banana George" in action had just appeared in magazines with a total readership of over 124,000,000. The ad featured a caption "Kids like this eat Cheerios."

Note: Portions of this article are reprinted from "Banana" George Blair's AWSEF Water Ski Hall of Fame biography.

This posting courtesy of USA-WS