



That was then: Charlie, Christopher and Jeremy with their mother. Far left: The boys' father, Jimmy. Left: Charlie and (right) Jeremy in action

# The extraordinary Palmer-Tomkinson dynasty

It's said they learned to ski before they learned to walk. Four British ski champions in one family. No other clan has dominated British skiing like the Palmer-Tomkinsons – and almost certainly never will. 'Jimmy' Palmer-Tomkinson – who skied in the Winter Olympics of 1936 and 1948, when he was captain of the British team – would alone have made the name legendary. And did.

Jimmy was, with Peter Lunn, Britain's greatest pre-war racer. But he was tragically killed on January 7, 1952 – aged just 36 – on a training run preparing for the British



Christopher Palmer-Tomkinson

Championships just before he was due to ski in the Oslo Winter Olympics. Who could have guessed that all three of his bereaved sons – each schooled on the playing fields of Eton – would, in turn, go on to become British champions themselves?

When Jimmy, British Champion in 1939, and vice-president of the Ski Club of Great Britain, was killed in a "one-in-a-million" accident, Charlie, the eldest son, was 11. Christopher was nine. And Jeremy just seven.

Arnold Lunn, then manager of the British

ski team, wrote in the *British Ski Year Book*: "It was the thrill – and the peril – of speed which fascinated him... the old cliché, 'wine of speed' will not do, for Jimmy was never intoxicated with speed. He might find a schuss as exhilarating as a champagne cocktail, but his ecstasy was always disciplined... The risks which he took were carefully calculated." On

a personal note, Lunn added: "I never heard anybody make an unpleasant or deprecatory remark about Jimmy... He was incapable of an ungenerous thought or an

unchivalrous action."

Palmer-Tomkinson himself, who was married to the Swiss women's ski champion, Doris Friedreich, once wrote amusingly about ski racers: "In the Grand National, a man who can't ride, or a horse that can't jump, is a menace; both are now refused entry. At bridge or poker, the man who plays out of his class is a fool and probably ends up in the bankruptcy court. At Wimbledon, a certain standard is insisted upon and even then, several qualifying rounds are necessary; the

same applies to golf and many other sports. But in skiing, for some unaccountable reason, you have only to hurl yourself down the hill minutes after everyone else to be considered extremely sporting. This is of course nonsense, because there is no obvious merit in being sporting about losing when you know from the start that you have no chance of winning. Conversely there is nothing unsporting in recognising that the competition is above your class and refraining from entering."

Peter Boumphrey, a member of the British ski team in 1938 and 1948 – both captained by Jimmy – wrote (in the *Kandahar Review*) of skiing with him: "Before you knew where you were, you were probably skiing half as fast again as you'd ever skied before, and frightening the life out of yourself." He added: "All that was gone now. We have lost our captain... his place can never be filled. Few Englishmen of the future will ever better Jimmy's standard of modesty, courage and chivalry in ski racing."

Also writing in the *Year Book*, Herbert Ingram was quoted thus: "He took enormous pleasure in the fact that his three sons have inherited his skill and love of speed on ski." And how! 📺







By 1961, Charlie was declared “the undoubted hero of the British Ski Racing Week at Mürren”. Said The Times ‘special correspondent’: “He became the Downhill and Giant Slalom champion, was first in the Roberts of Kandahar and second in the Duke of Kent Cup.

“Palmer-Tomkinson is not only a superb skier, but he has the right attitude to racing. Like his father... he races for fun.”

In the Roberts of Kandahar race, “Palmer-Tomkinson, racing at an average speed of just under 40 mph (very fast in those days on wooden skis) won in the excellent time of 1 minute 52.4 seconds, just half a second ahead of the Aga Khan.”

Fast forward another year, and we read: “*Astonishing performance by skiing champion* – Palmer-Tomkinson wins by more than 8 seconds.”

And this in the freak year that “deposited the snow on Zurich and North Cheam instead of the Alps”. His victory was achieved “with little or no training this winter”.

But Charlie himself was wrestling with inner demons. “I wonder why I do this sport at all” he once said, “and make myself feel so ill before each race. I tighten my boots, have another Ovomaltine. Time passes agonisingly slowly. My heart sinks yet lower as I see the helmeted throng of racers having last minute attention paid to the bottom of their skis, hear the voice of the starter counting down the seconds to yet another racer’s departure, and hear the bell ring as he slips through the gate to begin his perilous descent.” But the “old warhorse” went on to ski for Britain in the 1964 Innsbruck Winter Olympics, and says, modestly, today: “We were just a bunch of gifted amateurs with the right parents in the right place at the right time.”

In 1962, the middle brother - Christopher – began to make headlines. “*Title remains*

*‘I wonder why I do this sport at all, and make myself feel so ill before each race’*

Charlie Palmer-Tomkinson in 1967



Champions in the making (left) – Charlie, Christopher and Jeremy and (above) Charlie at full pelt

in the family” was one. “The 1962 British Ski Championships were expected to be a needle match between Charles Palmer-Tomkinson, the holder, and the Aga Khan, but first one and then the other just failed to clinch a victory...

“Instead, Christopher Palmer-Tomkinson, Charles’s younger brother, is the new champion.” It was the first time that brothers had finished first and second in the championships.

Today Christopher is philosophical about the family’s extraordinary skiing prowess. “I know my father was killed, but like all sports, skiing has its dangers. The three of us are all still here, and still alive, and we’ve had fun and a great innings. We’re all quite old now, and no-one cares a fig. I was the least significant of all of us.

“We brothers did sometimes race together, and yes, there was some rivalry. I always liked to try to beat Charlie, but both my brothers had more chance to ski than I did. Charlie was a farmer, so he didn’t go to the office, and Jeremy was a soldier, so he didn’t either. I worked in the city and only got two weeks’ skiing a year. I won the championships in 1962 in Davos, but then I broke my leg (in eleven places). So I do have an unbroken record in the championships –

I only raced once, and won once! We were all in the British team.

“Our mother was a beautiful skier, but we were hill-billies – one-eyed skiers in the land of the blind. We all had reasonable skills, though we skied a bit differently from each other. Actually our sister Sarah was the best of us. She just wasn’t very competitive. Jeremy was probably the most competitive. And each of us probably thought we were the best skier!” Jeremy himself says: “Christopher came into the arena like a burst of light but he wasn’t there the following year - sadly his racing career was eclipsed when he broke his leg.”

In 1965, in Val d’Isère, Jeremy became the fourth Palmer-Tomkinson to win the British championships. And he went on to win it three times. The Times wrote: “J. Palmer Tomkinson... is the fourth member of the family to hold the title, following in the footsteps of his father and more recently his two older brothers – in all a remarkable family record.”

The Daily Telegraph announced that he later “received a flattering accolade” when he was accepted for training with the French national team, who then dominated Alpine skiing. “Nothing is more calculated to bring Palmer-Tomkinson to concert pitch for next year’s Olympics at Grenoble.”



*‘He came within a second of dispatching Jean-Claude Killy from the slalom. Had the British champion succeeded, Killy would not be the world champion he now is. Even the French, once they had got over the fright, were impressed.’*

Times report on Jeremy Palmer-Tomkinson, 1966.




‘We’re still here, still alive, we’ve had fun and a great innings’ Christopher Palmer-Tomkinson (right).

At the World Championships in Portillo, Chile, in 1966, he came within half a second of dispatching Jean-Claude Killy from the slalom and was actually ahead of him at the half way stage. Had the British champion succeeded, claimed the Times, “Killy would not be the world champion he now is. Even the French, once they had got over the fright, were impressed.” Says Jeremy: “Honore Bonnet, the great French coach said later he thought he would never be able to forgive me!” But Killy became a close friend – and is to this day. In Annecy this month, at the re-launch of Killy’s skiwear company, he spoke warmly of the two men’s friendship. “Ah, Jeremy... such a wonderful guy.”

Jeremy went on to ski in the 1968 Grenoble Olympics. Being in the army, he says, enabled him to keep really fit. “Being a good skier was all very well” he says. “But if you weren’t superbly fit you couldn’t really compete.” Jeremy switched to the luge, representing Britain at three Winter Olympics in 1972, ‘76 and at Lake Placid in 1980, when he carried the British flag. He was also a ski stunt man in the James Bond film *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*.

“We were jolly lucky really to have parents who adored skiing” he says. “Of course I’m proud of the family skiing heritage, but when we all started in 1946, I hated it. As the youngest, I was third hand – I had third-hand skis, third-hand boots, third-hand ski trousers – I was always wet, cold and miserable. There were virtually no lifts back then, and we had to walk up. My father used to carry me up on his shoulders. When I had a big prang, I’d come out of my boots and I’d be walking around in the snow in my holey socks. I was much happier building tunnels in the snow - which usually collapsed.” At this, Charlie’s wife Patty laughs: “He came out of his boots because he insouciantly didn’t bother to do them up properly!”

Patty and Charlie’s son James – (brother of Santa, the writer, and Tara) says: “Had I been part of my father’s generation I would probably have wanted to compete for the British championships, but it never really entered my head. I think my parents discussed it, but I’m grateful they didn’t send me down that path. These days in order to be a successful racer you have to spend weeks training and put in the hours. I am

much happier enjoying the off-piste. I do enjoy some amateur racing like the Inferno, and sometimes a Masters’ race. I love flying downhill, but I don’t care what my time is. I would rather have a really good run and not worry about the clock than an average run that happened to be faster than some of the other competitors.”  **Arnie Wilson**



**After an inaugural run last year, James Palmer-Tomkinson and his wife Sarah are keeping the family skiing traditions alive with their own ski company, PT Ski ([www.ptski.com](http://www.ptski.com)), operating exclusively in Klosters, the family’s home-from-home resort: Says James: “I too feel terrifically lucky to have been born into a skiing family. Skiing has brought me so much pleasure. I love introducing others to the sport – particularly children. And I really enjoy seeing others grow to love the off-piste and watch them progress. That’s what I am aiming it with PT Ski.” The company has accommodation in seven highly rated hotels and chalets, including the four-star Alpina, Vereina and Silvretta Park hotels.**

**For more information:**  
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