

SKIER TALK

REMEMBERING A LEGEND

THE NEXT TIME YOU THINK YOU'RE TOO OLD, TOO INJURED OR TOO TIRED TO TAKE UP A NEW ACTIVITY, REMEMBER GEORGE BLAIR.

BY KAREN PUTZ

» It's fair to say that "Banana" George Blair was the most iconic water skier to ever grace the surface of a lake. A Guinness World Record holder as the only person to have water skied on all seven continents, a multitime national barefoot champion and star of ski shows throughout the world, Blair introduced millions of people to the sport as he defied time as the world's oldest barefooter.

Fellow Water Ski Hall of Fame inductee Ron Scarpa called Blair a close friend and spent a lot of time with him on and off the water. "Everyone who hung out with George felt his energy — whether it was a person he loved or a stranger," Scarpa says.

Unlike most long-term skiers, Blair did not get his start at a young age. He battled back pain since he was a teen due to spondylothesis, and in 1934, a fall from a moving train only worsened his condition. At the age of 40, he was recovering from spinal fusion surgery in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, when a ski instructor named Lyle Lee suggested he try skiing. It was a crazy idea given that Blair couldn't swim and was encased in a steel and leather brace.

But Blair soon learned to ski, and six years later, he tried barefooting for the first time. For the next 47 years, skiing was his passion. As a successful businessman who made his millions as a banker, inventor and photographer, taking baby pictures as the founder of Hospital Portrait Service, he was also one of the most generous supporters of the American Water Ski Educational Foundation, donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to help grow the sport.

Blair earned his nickname because he loved all things yellow. A fan dubbed him "Banana George," and the nickname stuck. From then on, Blair dressed from head to toe in yellow everywhere he went and passed out two tons of bananas each year.

Blair enjoyed his last barefoot run for a segment on *Growing Bolder* in 2008. He was 93 years old and recovering from a long bout of pneumonia but managed to barefoot on one foot as he sat within a ski handle mounted to the boom.

Blair spent his last few years in New York with his wife, JoAnne, enjoying another passion of his: jazz. He passed away on Oct. 17, 2013, at the age of 98.

"He embraced and embodied a great way to live life: to do what you can and suck up every ounce of life," Scarpa says. "George made the world a better place for many people."



BANANA GEORGE AT A GLANCE:

- Age 40 Learned to water ski
- Age 46 First barefoot set
- Age 64 Inaugural barefoot tourney
- Age 70 Learned to wakeboard
- Age 81 Barefooted behind a seaplane, drove a race car
- Age 82 Went skydiving
- Age 83 Learned to surf
- Age 85 Rode a bull
- Age 87 Appeared in *Sports Illustrated for Women*
- Age 93 Barefooted on one foot
- Age 94 Water skied on a sit ski

MEMORABLE MOMENTS WITH BANANA GEORGE

JOANNE BLAIR

GEORGE'S WIFE

"George was driving back to our Steamboat, Colorado, condo after a barefoot tournament. He was speeding (not unusual) when a police siren slowed him down to a stop. A state trooper appeared and sadly asked, 'Banana George, why were you going so fast?' George replied, 'I'm on TV tonight, and I was trying to get back to see the show. How did you know who I was?' The trooper smiled. 'I was at the tournament this afternoon, and you gave me a banana — follow me!' George had a police escort to the nearest bar, where he and the trooper enjoyed watching the show."

RON SCARPA

2011 WATER SKI HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE

"I skied in my first Barefoot Nationals in 1979 at the age of 15, and I met George there. Here was this 'old' guy over 60, and he was barefooting! At the banquet, he was having fun, goofing off and dancing. On his feet, he had a pair of clear, see-through clogs with a live goldfish swimming in each shoe. It was the disco era, and he was dancing with goldfish in clogs!"

KEITH ST. ONGE

TWO-TIME OVERALL WORLD BAREFOOT CHAMPION

"George was about 92 when I watched him barefoot for one of the last times on the boom. He was barely able to get up, but once he did, he could barefoot better than he could walk! He told me, 'Smile, love everyone and eat healthy.' He did all of those things naturally. We all need to remind ourselves to do those simple things in life."

TED EISENSTAT

GEORGE'S PHYSICIAN

"George was 72 when he came into my office. I told him he looked like he was in pretty good shape, and he said, 'Son, I'm in great shape; I'm the oldest barefoot water skier in the world!' Even after he broke his back for the forth time, he never felt sorry for himself or regretted anything he did. He just healed up and went back on the water. He was very competitive. George inspired so many people because he would never give up."

GORDY ANDERSON

PILOT, BAREFOOTER AND PERSONAL FRIEND

"I was a pilot on a commercial airline staying over at Sioux Falls, [South

Dakota], and I was reading the local paper by the pool, which featured an article on Banana George. The next day, I had 99 people on a 100-seat plane when the agent explained there was one guy left at the terminal dressed from head to toe in yellow. He walked on the plane and said, 'Good morning, Captain!' We became close friends, and I pulled him barefooting behind a seaplane at the age of 81."

ZENON BILAS

BAREFOOT CHAMPION AND COACH

"George and I took a trip to Beijing, China, to barefoot in a show. We were in the boat getting ready. George was thirsty, so he grabbed a bottle

of water, took a drink and cringed. 'It tastes like soap,' he said. The Chinese interpreter laughed. 'That's because it is soap!' He had grabbed a bottle of binding soap. I fell on the floor of the boat, laughing. When George went to ski, I could hear the engine sputtering — the boat was too slow for barefooting, maybe 30 mph. Eighty-five-year-old George did a great job despite the slow speed. He got up and barefooted with spray in his face."

LYNN NOVAKOFSKI

2009 WATER SKI HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE, PHOTOGRAPHER

"One thing I remember noting about George was when I was working on the photo montage for his 90th birthday. I watched a bunch of videos of him when he was on several of the New York talk shows: *Oprah*, *Good Morning America* and others, which had been about 15 years before his 90th. It was funny to me that here they were all talking about how amazing it was that this 'old' guy at age 75 was still barefoot water skiing. How amazing, I thought, that Banana George was still doing it at about the same skill level 15 years later at age 90!" **WATERSKI**



FROM LEFT: CYR ARCHIVE (2); CYR (2)