

Greater Miami Ski Club

From 1955 to 2005

Christopher Ranch

Our ski site would never have existed were it not for Mr. Christopher, who began building Christopher Ranch in the 1940s as his family home. Unfortunately for him, he was never able to gain approval for the zoning since the site is located directly in the flight path of Miami International Airport. His loss was definitely our gain. The 426-acre Lake Christopher is now home to the Greater Miami Ski Club (GMSC). As the club enters its 50th year, take a look back at a few milestones in the club's history.

Founding of the Club

The club was founded in 1955 and chartered in 1956. In those days the club was isolated from hectic city life, surrounded by a large dairy farm and two miles away from the western edge of Miami's sprawl. The club's initial focus was on family entertainment. Not a weekend would go by without picnics and family fun around the lake. Part of that included show skiing. Members performed in Miami for the first time on July 4, 1956, and went on to do shows in Cuba and Colombia. In 1958 and 1959, their performance at the Orange Bowl Regatta was televised nationally. GMSC presented professional shows at Miami Marine Stadium through the early 60's.

1957 marked a major turning point. The club had no permanent ski site and had to arrange for different ski facilities each weekend. That all changed in August 1957 when Rene Bennington helped the club obtain its first lease at Lake Christopher. Not only did this provide the club with a place to call home, but it allowed GMSC to truly develop.

Shift to Competitive Skiing

The club's first tournament was held in 1956 and co-sponsored by the University of Miami Ski Club. In 1958, GMSC affiliated with the American Water Ski Association. Focus began shifting in the early 60's from show skiing to competition, and it's never turned back. In 1961, the club presented the First Greater Miami Open and has held a major American Water Ski Association-sanctioned tournament every year since. Major tournaments in the early years included the Southern Regionals in 1962, First Group 1 Western Hemisphere Invitational in 1962, Nationals in 1966 and in 1976, and the 1978 Southern Regionals. Members also made significant contributions to the water skiing community. For example, club member Leo Bentz developed the first Ski Nautique and Jim Selmas contributed the omnipresent colored loop slalom rope.

Stillman Bell was President of the American Waterski Association and Sergio Bezsonoff served as President of the Colombian Waterski Federation.

The Lake Christopher Purchase

In the 1980's, Goya was ready to expand its headquarters and warehouse. Since the club was renting space for its clubhouse from Goya, members soon faced homelessness again. GMSC members Pete Fay and John Karnes averted disaster by convincing the corporations that owned the lake to sell the land beneath the water for \$25,000. While this provided the water, it didn't include land from which to access the lake. With the area around the club growing and land selling fast, John Karnes placed a deposit on the lot where the north lot is located. Unfortunately, club members voted not to buy it. This time disaster was averted by Ed Hickey and George Levien, who suggested interested members purchase shares for \$5,000. This closed the deal and the lot was ours in 1981. It took 10 years and lots of hard work for club members to build the clubhouse. Thanks to Bob Miller's efforts in organizing the project, the building was dedicated to him in 1991.

Today's Club

The first four decades formed the basis of our club as it exists today, but this past decade has secured its position as a world class ski site. The club hosts three tournaments a year, including at least one World Record capable tournament. In fact, Andy Mapple tied the world record of 1 at 43 off in Miami's tournament in 1998. He's hardly the only champion. Among active and honorary members, the club boasts an Olympian; Pan Am competitors; World Record Holders; World Champions; US National Champions; National Champions of Latin America, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Denmark; and Hall of Famers.

The courses are in better shape than ever, thanks in no small part to the efforts of Ed Brazil. In the past couple years we've added a second clubhouse and ramp, boat docks have been replaced, the starting dock has doubled in size, and the guest docks and picnic areas have been updated. We even have a web site.

Many GMSC traditions continue to this day. The club's longest active members – Pat and Bill Alderman since 1958 – help keep us in touch with our roots. We've hosted disabled ski days, youth group outings, and kids' days. We have monthly barbeques, an annual dive trip – thanks to Will St. Laurent – and the Officers' Installation Banquet – thanks to George Levien. We can only hope that the next 50 years are as successful as the last.