

## ELDER STATESMAN OF THE SLOPES



Frank Borrego of Sonora has a job plenty of twentysomethings would love – teaching skiing at Dodge Ridge. At 87, this longtime high school teacher is one of the oldest ski instructors in the U.S. It’s how he defines “retirement.”

*Photo by Ben Hicks*

**By Amy Lindblom**

Sixteen years ago, at age 71, Frank Borrego went back to his first love. After spending four decades inside a classroom, Borrego took his teaching talents up to the mountains and became a Dodge Ridge ski instructor.

Borrego, who turned 87 in October, casts off any hint that what he does is unusual. He loves skiing, he loves teaching, and he has been physically fit all his life. So, he figured, why not combine all of this into something he enjoys.

“I’ve always been active,” he says. “Being active and fit keeps your mind active and fit.”

Since 1992, Borrego has been the elder statesman among a cadre of younger ski and snowboard instructors at Dodge Ridge. His enthusiasm and dedication to the art of teaching and the sport of skiing draw praise from his employer and co-workers.

“He’s such a professional, and his kindness to the skiing public and our other employees is something we are very proud of,” says Sally Helm. Frank and Sally Helm own and operate Dodge Ridge Wintersports Area, one of a handful of family-owned ski areas left in the United States.

Borrego learned to ski at Dodge Ridge in 1954 when he was 32, the year after he was hired to teach business at Sonora High School.

“I was single, and there wasn’t much to do in Sonora on the weekends,” Borrego says. “Plus I was successful at it, and success breeds success.”

Over the years, he saw the sport evolve from 8-foot-long wooden skis and woolen pants to the short, shaped skis and waterproof clothing of today. He learned and taught technical changes in skiing ranging from the wedel and schuss to the wide-stance parallel.

As a gatekeeper during the 1959 North American Ski Championship races in Squaw Valley, Borrego saw skiing legend Stein Ericksen. A year later, he took the Sonora High acapella choir to the Squaw Valley Olympics.

In the 1970s, when he was in his 50s, he took up running, completing mostly 10-kilometer races and a few half-marathons. In 1984, he succumbed to what halts many runners – knee damage. Today he stays fit with regular trips to the gym (he weighs almost exactly what he weighed in high school) and skiing.

But his real enjoyment comes from teaching others to love the sport to which he has devoted himself the past 53 winters. Borrego is one of the oldest ski instructors in the United States, according to Corby Fisher, Dodge Ridge Ski School director.

Says Fisher: “Frank is one of those people who is just so vibrant and full of life.”

“He’s there to teach,” notes Gary Howell, a former Dodge colleague. “Some instructors would rather ski than teach, but not Frank. He’ll even get down on his hands and knees to show people how they need to move their feet. He loves getting people excited about skiing.”

Born and raised in the southern Colorado town of Aguilar, Borrego is a fifth-generation Spanish American and the seventh of eight children. Each summer his parents loaded everyone into the family car and headed for the sugar beet fields and vegetable farms north of Denver, where they picked crops. They lived on farms, stayed together as a family and worked fiercely hard.

“I made a penny a pound,” Borrego recalls. The family’s pooled earnings from picking green and wax beans amounted to about \$8 a day.

After the summer growing season ended, he and his family went back to Aguilar, where Borrego’s father went to work in the coal mines. Of the eight brothers and sisters, Frank was the only one to graduate from high school.

“I would no more have thought of quitting school than flying to the moon,” he says.

After high school he attended junior college, but when the war broke out, he took a job with the Department of War in Washington. He was one of the few men who could type 85 words per minute, so his skills were in high demand. In September 1942, with the country fully involved in World War II, Borrego was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Force and served in Hawaii.

After the war, Borrego earned his bachelor’s degree at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 1949, he began his teaching career at 50-student Adin High School, northeast of Redding, Calif.

“It was a one-horse town and the horse died,” says Borrego, who spent four years there. “I was running out of money so I knew I had to find a bigger town.”

In 1953 he was studying for his master’s degree when he was offered a job at Sonora High School. There, from 1953-1979, Borrego taught business and Spanish classes, and served as leadership and activities advisor, even ski club advisor for a few years. He was inducted into the California Association of Activities Directors’ Hall of Fame in 1992, and was honored by the same group in 1998 for lifetime achievement.

Borrego met his wife, Mary Jo, a teacher at Sonora Elementary School, a few years after moving to Sonora. The Borregos have two grown children and five grandchildren.

After Borrego left Sonora High, he taught for four years at Central Catholic High School in Modesto, then eight years at Summerville High in Tuolumne before finally retiring “for good” in 1991. He enjoyed his volunteer work at Interfaith but found it wasn’t enough. He liked being outdoors and loved skiing, so teaching his favorite pastime seemed a natural choice.

These days – five days a week, all winter long – Borrego can be seen from the chairlifts at Dodge Ridge directing a group of five to nine students. He leads them down the slopes with his fluid turns, encouraging them along the way with his contagious smile and calm commands.

“He just loves putting on that uniform,” Corby Fisher says. “He has a great time teaching and skiing, and he is such a big part of our staff.”

Borrego doesn’t know when he’ll retire from skiing, if ever.

“If I don’t stay active, I’ll get dull,” he says, “and I don’t want to be dull.”

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