

The Firth Twins

Resilient sisters Sharon and Shirley Firth came from the Arctic to dominate the Canadian cross-country scene. **BY BOB WOODWARD**

In the 1970s, North American cross-country skiers were in search of role models. America's nordic hero quickly became Bill Koch, who won a silver medal in the 1976 Winter Olympics with a racing style distinctively his own. But before Koch made headlines, Sharon and Shirley Firth captured the imagination of Canadians.

Members of the Gwich'in First Nation indigenous peoples on their mother's side and the Loucheux-Metis on their father's side, the twins hailed from the village of Aklavik in the Northwest Territories. Their background and how they got started in cross-country skiing made for great copy. And it all began with their participation in the Territorial Experimental Ski Training Program, created by Catholic priest Jean-Marie Mouchet to get indigenous youth involved in winter sport.

"One spring day," recalls Sharon, "we were on a school recreation outing and the sport of the day was cross-country skiing. Shirley and I got the basic kick-and-glide down immediately and never looked back. Skiing became our lives. Coming from a family of hunters and trappers gave us a solid foundation: We were used to working hard and not complaining, which helped us to progress quickly."

Soon the twins were winning local and regional races. After being named to an elite national training program, they quickly claimed national titles, too. Their big breakthrough came at the 1968 Canadian Junior National championships, where both sisters medaled. Sharon and Shirley would go on to represent Canada in four Winter Games (1972, 1976, 1980 and 1984) and at four World Championships (1970, 1974, 1978 and 1982), with Shirley winning 42 Canadian National Championship medals and Sharon winning 37. Sharon's 26th place finish in the women's 5km race at the Sapporo Games remains the best-ever finish for a Canadian woman in that event, which was dropped from the competitive schedule in 1998.

"The Firth sisters were the first real cross-country skiing stars in Canada," says longtime Canadian coach Jack Sasseville. "In the 1970s and early 80s, they dominated female nordic skiing in Canada and were competitive with the best in the world. They set the bar."

After they retired, Shirley married Jan Larsson and



Sharon and Shirley Firth "helped to create an extraordinary period in Canadian skiing," says cross-country commentator Peter Graves.

the couple lived in Paris for 20 years, where she studied and lectured on indigenous peoples. The couple eventually returned to the Northwest Territories, where Shirley taught school, raised two daughters and later served as the executive assistant to the Speaker of the Northwest Territories Legislative assembly. She died at age 59 in 2013 after a battle with cancer.

At the end of her racing career, Sharon settled in Yellowknife. She came back eager to get on with life. "I volunteered for 18 years as a ski racer, and now I've put in 18 years at a real job," she says. Now 62, she has worked for almost two decades as director of an at-risk youth program that she created for the Northwest Territories provincial government.

The Firth twins were inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame in 1990 and into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 2015. In the case of the latter, they were the first indigenous women so honored. "Sharon and Shirley Firth were true pioneers of Canadian skiing," says cross-country racing TV commentator Peter Graves. "When I first I saw them ski in Inuvik, I knew they were destined for greatness. The twins helped to create an extraordinary period in Canadian skiing, a foundation of the racing culture we know today."

Sharon still has a competitive streak. Asked when it would be best to call her, she laughs, "Don't call me in the afternoon. That's berry-picking time on the tundra, and nobody gets between me and my berries." ❄️

In 2015, the Firth sisters were the first indigenous women to be inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame. Sharon accepted on behalf of herself and Shirley, who died in 2013.

