

JAMES G. SYLVESTER

By Lou Abel

Jim Sylvester was a man of dedication, integrity, and skills. Although handicapped from childhood polio, he learned to water ski himself, and introduced his 5 children to the sport. To my knowledge, at least three were involved in competition. His son Bruce was the first boy from the Eastern Region to jump 100 feet, in about 1960 (@ 5' - 28 mph!) His daughter Betsy competed in Mixed Doubles, with me and later with others. His youngest son Roger was also a competitor.

Jim started contributing to the sport from the beginning, forming a ski club, sponsoring meets, and becoming a Judge and Regional Councilman. Eventually he became a National Director and a 3-term President of AWSA. Most prominently, he was Chairman of the Technical Committee at a critical time. Since old ski ropes of Manila hemp and new polyethylene were both too stretchy for advancing slalom performances, Jim's Committee sought improvement. His professional business was a material-testing laboratory, and he seized the opportunity to utilize the lab to thoroughly test numerous potential ski ropes of various sizes, materials, strand numbers and configurations. Jim's knowledge of both the sport and materials characteristics led him to consider not only minimizing stretch, but how to optimize the rate of recoil, as well as permanent set, splicing facility and abrasion resistance. Based on these and other combined criteria, and the extensive testing, the clear advantage was for polypropylene. With Jim's assessment and strong advocacy, this became the new standard ski rope, and it had a strong positive impact on the slalom event that was dramatic and far-reaching. With only minor changes, polypropylene has served us well for 40 years since.

So, James Sylvester was not only an activist contributor, he pushed the frontier of water skiing in a new direction. The change was so beneficial, and from so long ago that we have come to take it for granted, and few skiers today realize this or appreciate the man who nearly single handedly made it happen.

Finally, the Sylvester family originally established this prestigious perpetual trophy as a memorial, in consideration of losing Jim prematurely to a terminal illness, and to present some recognition of his accomplishments within the time he had. We are all indebted to Jim for his vision and determination to advance our sport.