

# Animators Go Looney Over Skiing

*When cartoons take a run at skiing, mayhem ensues.*

BY JEFF BLUMENFELD



Goofy does not live up to his name in what might be the most realistic instructional cartoon on skiing. Part of Goofy's "How To" oeuvre, *The Art of Skiing* shows viewers how to dress, load a chairlift and kick-turn, and even features an authentic yodeler on the soundtrack.

What is quickly learned from total immersion into the golden age of animation, roughly the 1930s through the 1970s, is that when Hollywood animators put characters on skis, they suspend the laws of physics. From the earliest cartoon depictions to a recent animated relaunch on HBO, skiing is primed for slapstick humor, visual punchlines and lots and lots of long freefalls.

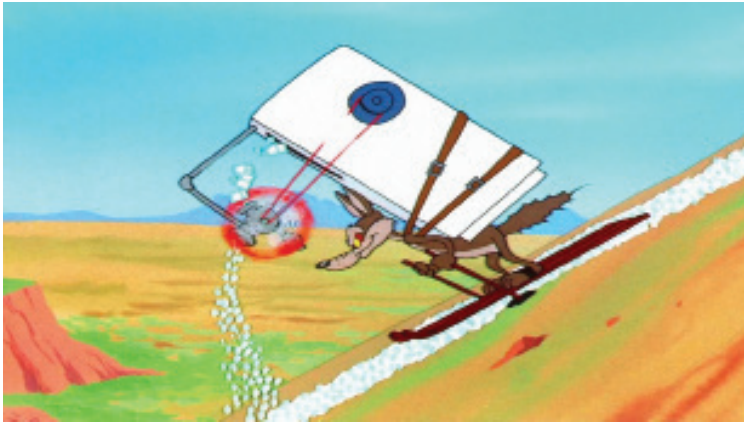
Popeye crashes off ski jumps. Wile E. Coyote falls off cliffs with an ice machine on his back. The Pink Panther is engulfed in a giant snowball, while Homer Simpson hangs from a chair upside down and is blasted by a frigid fan gun and fiery snowcat exhaust, to name just a few.

Each stunt is more gravity-defying than the next one, often relying on a host of products, usually from the Acme Corporation, makers of sticks of dynamite, intricate booby traps, and anvils and bank safes that

inevitably are dropped on unsuspecting heads.

And when viewed through 21<sup>st</sup> century goggles, some animation was so politically incorrect as to be downright cringeworthy, from Betty Boop resisting an unwanted suitor, to Tom from *Tom & Jerry* panting over a ski bunny, to poking fun at poor Mr. Magoo for his near-sightedness.

The sight gags are endless. There are drunken St. Bernards, skiers on the wooden runners of a rocking horse, a dachshund too long for a



A natural fit for slapstick humor, skiing syncs up perfectly for the misadventures of Wile E. Coyote, perhaps the most hapless victim in animated history. On the flip-side, the Pink Panther (right), ends up the victor, of course, when working at a ski resort in *Pink Streaker*.



A frequent foil in the Pink Panther universe, The Little Man attempts to learn the sport by reading an instruction book. Predictably, he's sent high into the bluebird sky off ski jumps, cliffs and moguls. It's just another day on the cartoon slopes.

single pair of skis riding atop two pairs of them, and characters sailing off ski jumps with parachutes.

You'll often see one of the most popular of all ski sight gags: downhill tracks on both sides of a tree, as if the cartoon character went through unharmed. (A tip of the hat to Charles Addams' famous 1940 cartoon "The Skier" in the *New Yorker* that set the gold standard.) But in cartoonland, no one is seriously injured. Like a classic clown bop bag, they bounce back up for even more indignities in the next scene.

Lucille Ball broke her leg skiing while starring in a TV sitcom, and her real-world accident (and her subsequent leg cast) was famously written into that season. "But in cartoons, characters get hurt, you laugh, and you move on to the next gag," A.B. Osborne, Professor of Animation at Georgia's Augusta University, explains.

What is it about skiing that appeals to cartoon animators? "It's a

visual sport and people get it immediately," Osborn says. "When someone is going down a hill on skis, you don't have to explain it. I never went skiing in my life, but I know what it is."

Hours viewing vintage cartoons online reveals a world where skiing was considered glamorous and a colorful theme for all manner of cold-weather comedy and conflict. Popularized in 1930 during the start of Hollywood's golden era of animation, these short-form cartoons ran before main features, then were eventually broadcast on TV. Many were inspired by vaudeville acts such as *The Three Stooges* and *Laurel and Hardy*, according to Robert Ito writing in the *New York Times* (May 29, 2020).

### PANDEMIC ANTIDOTE

Watching ski cartoons from a couch is the perfect antidote to a cranky Covid-19 lockdown. According to CartoonResearch.com, the earliest references in titles to ski themes

are from the *Mutt and Jeff* shorts. Among the 292 animated cartoons produced from 1916-1926 that depict skiing are *On Ice* (1918), *Mutt and Jeff in Switzerland* (1919), *The Frozen North* (1919), *The Far North* (1921), and *Any Ice Today* (1922). American cartoonist Paul Terry's series of animated short subjects based upon *Aesop's Fables* included ski scenes in *On the Ice* (1924), *An Alpine Flapper* (1926), and *Cracked Ice* (1927).

Those shorts are unavailable, so I wasn't able to confirm their ski content. The earliest cartoon depiction I could confirm is *Krazy Kat's Snow Time* (1932). When Krazy tries to jump in his skates over a row of barrels, he misjudges the distance and crashes into the last barrel, breaking it into slats, two of which stick to his feet as skis. He slides uncontrollably down the pond, jumping over small snow mounds. A snowman unzips his "snow" suit, revealing a skeleton inside, and tosses the snow back

at Krazy, who grows into a giant snowball.

*Betty Boop & Pudgy in Thrills and Chills* (1938) is one of the least circulated or known of all the *Betty Boop* episodes. According to Cartoon-Research.com, Betty tries to get on a train to the mountains, but her way is blocked by a freckle-faced male doofus who demands, “Hey pretty girl. Give me a kiss and I’ll let you in.” He then stalks her for more than six minutes. He eventually saves Betty and her dog Pudgy from peril. The dastardly interloper finally gets his kiss—from the dog. Politically correct it’s not.

Goofy’s *The Art of Skiing* (1941) is one of the most definitive ski cartoons in animation history. This was the first in Goofy’s acclaimed “How To” catalogue of shorts in which the character tackled a recognized sport. Walt Disney Productions animators even retained a professional yodeler to provide an authentic soundtrack.

In the cartoon, Goofy explains

how to dress for the day’s activities—including devising his own challenge of putting on trousers when his feet are already in skis. Finally reaching the summit by way of a chair lift, he demonstrates a kick-turn, and how to get up when fallen. He lands backwards and skis in reverse, which, of course, eventually leads to him going off a ski jump—except Goofy forgets to lace his ski boots, which separate his skis from his feet shortly after take-off. He manages to get hold of both of them, using the skis as glider wings to maneuver between mountain peaks, then finally crash-lands through the window of his own room at the ski lodge. Goofy falls instantly sound asleep, to close out the perfect day on the slopes.

One of the cleverest of all sight gags, which channels Rube Goldberg, appears in *Fast and Furry-ous* (1949) a Warner Bros. Looney Tunes *Road Runner* cartoon that shows a resourceful Wile E. Coyote strapping a full-size refrigerator to his

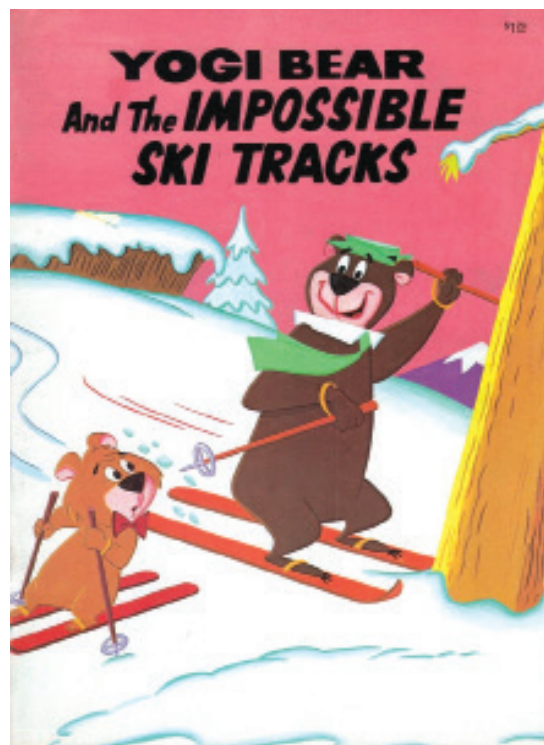
back, then feeding ice cubes into a meat grinder to create a strip of skiable crushed ice. It works great—until he skis off a cliff.

Back in the 1950s, any infirmity was seemingly fair game. In *Magoo Goes Skiing* (1954) the opening sets up a gag to follow, as the severely near-sighted Magoo calls out to a mountain peak with his best attempt at a yodel—but is disappointed to hear no echo. The fact that he’s serenading a picture on the ski lodge wall rather than a real mountain is the explanation. Magoo really intends to go skiing—but of course he picks up a St. Bernard along the way (another ski resort stereotype) whom he thinks is his nephew Waldo.

Skiing, and its alluring enthusiasts, has always offered plenty of opportunities for romantic entanglements. Incongruously, Popeye appears far from the sea in *Ski-Jump Chump* (1960), jealous that his sweetheart Olive Oyl is falling for Frenchman Gorgeous Pierre, the



Scooby Doo and the gang travel to a resort in the 2002 episode *There’s No Creature Like Snow Creature*, which features American Olympic bronze medalist Chris Klug playing himself.



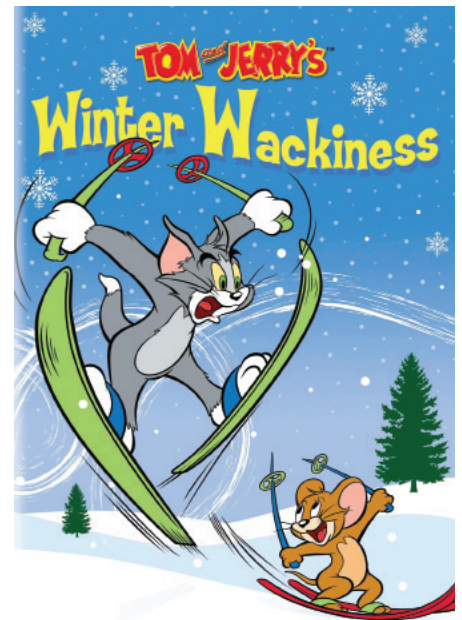
With Yogi Bear and buddy Boo-Boo Bear residents of “Jellystone Park,” having them slap on skis for an episode or two fits in perfectly with their winter wilderness habitat.



In *Magoo Goes Skiing*, the character faces many of the typical props in skiing cartoons, including mountain goats, going airborne and a St. Bernard dog coming to the rescue.



Wile E. Coyote frequently uses the services of The Acme Corporation in *Road Runner* cartoons, in what inevitably turns into Rube Goldberg-inspired plots.



Tom and Jerry take their battles to the slopes for several episodes, including *Winter Wackiness* and *The Ski Bunny*, which brings them to the Swiss Alps.

greatest ski jumper in the world. The sailorman, of course, eventually wins his sweetie back with the help of some spinach-fueled courage.

## MEET THE FLINTSTONES

Things get sticky for the modern Stone Age family when Fred Flintstone and his pal Barney Rubble appear in *The Flintstone's Here's Snow in Your Eyes* (1962). The first primetime animated show on television was a sly take-off of *The Honeymooners*.

Fred and Barney are off to Stone Mountain Ski Resort for a Loyal Order of Water Buffalo Lodge convention. Because none of the members' wives have been invited to go along, Wilma and Betty stoically remain at home—but their stoicism quickly evaporates when they learn that the resort is also the site of the Miss Winter Carnival beauty contest.

More recent favorites include the *Pink Panther Pink Streaker* (1975) wherein the famed big cat works at a ski area and unintentionally bedevils the Little Man character who is trying to learn to ski from a book appropriately titled, *How to Ski*. In *Tom & Jerry The Ski Bunny* (1975), set in the Swiss Alps, Tom competes against his mouse buddy Jerry for the af-

fections of a female kitten dressed as a ski bunny.

No less of a show than *The Simpsons*, the longest running American sitcom of all time, headed to the mountains. In *Little Big Mom* (1999) the family visits Mount Embolism, where Homer must decide which double diamond trail to descend. “The Widowmaker? That one is for the ladies,” he says. The Spinebuster trail he calls “boring,” before deciding to take the Colostomizer run. The hapless character soon cries, “Oh my legs, this is the worst pain ever.”

## CARTOONS ON THE REBOUND

Cartoons are coming back. One reason is Covid-19, which translates to a nationwide captive audience of homebound kids, along with adults who are primed for some feel-good nostalgic screen time. In fact, *Looney Tunes Cartoons*, a revamp of the classic Warner Bros. series that had its glory years in the 1940s and 1950s, premiered on HBO Max in May 2020.

Darryn King, in the May 17, 2020 *Wall Street Journal*, wrote “Animation has seen a 22 percent surge in viewership during lockdown, more

than any other category, according to *Reelgood*, a website that analyzes streaming viewer behavior patterns. This is likely because of the huge demand for content for children stuck at home, but it is also possible that the art form, liberated from real-world constraints, is suitably escapist entertainment right now.”

These catastrophic cartoons convey just what skiing has been trying to overcome for decades, to be known as a relatively safe, healthy, family endeavor rather than as risky business. But where is the entertainment in that?

Then again, as ski resorts develop their Covid-era protocols for next season and require advance reservations, among other restrictions, if you find yourself skiing less, maybe what you need are more ski cartoons in your life. 🐿️

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