

VAULT

THE MAN WHO BROUGHT SURFING TO MONTANA

PAIPO SURFING IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY SPORTING INTERESTS OF DAVID RIVENES OF
LITTLE MILES CITY. HE'S ALSO BIG ON LUGE, TAE KWAN DO AND AGE-GROUP WRESTLING

BY **RAY KENNEDY**

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Come one, come all! See ferocious little hellions no higher than your knee wrestle like grizzlies! Thrill to the riptide excitement of water polo! Marvel at the deadly grace of tae kwan do, Korea's answer to a kamikaze attack! Gasp at the spine-tingling suspense of the horseshoe pitch! Feel the pain of the infamous, gut-wrenching race-walk! And look out! Here comes that slambang free-for-all—team handball! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

Like a carny barker at full bellow, David Rivenes of Miles City, Montana has been delivering his spirited pitch to the world for most of his 68 years. A sideshow unto himself, he is the irrepressible promoter of an impossible dream: "Getting everyone interested in all the sports that no one is interested in."

A tall order, but then Rivenes (rhymes with marines) comes on like a one-man invasion. Typically, the fact that he had no idea what the luge was didn't deter him from helping to introduce the sledding event to the U.S. No obstacle is insurmountable, he contends, no mountain too high to climb. Not even the one in Montana on which he built an Olympic-size luge

course that has everything but, alas, snow.

And there was no stopping Rivenes last summer when he staged a surfboard championship right there in Miles City, a cowpoke town that hasn't seen anything resembling a wave since the fat lady did a belly flop in the local swimming hole. "The difficulties only make the job interesting," says Rivenes. "The problems only make the results seem more worthwhile."



ORIGINAL LAYOUT

Problem No. 1, he says, is expanding the vision of a nation that has been focused on a handful of traditional sports for so long that it's blind to the joys inherent in other games. That myopia doesn't hamper the talented few who might excel at baseball, football or basketball, he says, but where does it leave the multitudes who fail to make the cut?

On the sidelines, usually, and while Rivenes applauds the recent surge of interest in participant sports, he feels it's only the beginning. Among other pursuits, his work with juvenile delinquents has convinced him that the benefits derived from sports are far too valuable for America to settle for anything short of fun and games for everyone. "If someone wants to play, let's help them," he says. "If they don't know how, let's teach them and spread the enjoyment around."

Ever the patriot, Rivenes believes that one of the long-range dividends of his efforts will be Stars and Stripes forever. He explains, "I am of the opinion that American boys and girls are the strongest, quickest and smartest in the world. Yet for too long now we've been seeing the Russians and East Germans beating our pants off in sports we've never even heard of. Moreover, they've been learning our games while we've been confining ourselves, concentrating too much on school sports. If Americans get involved in any sport at the grass-roots level, they can beat anybody in the world. They've only got to discover events like luge and team handball."

Which leads to problem No. 2: getting the show on the road. To shout "Play ball!" is one thing; to organize the forces that make the play possible is quite another. And that is Rivenes' forte. For all his maverick ways, he is no backwoods Barnum thumping his drum in the wilderness. He works within the system, or rather plows through it with a winning mix of "sweet-talking" and "ramrod-ding." One measure of his success is that he once ascended all the way to the presidency of that formidable bureaucracy, the Amateur Athletic Union. And who would dare label as far-out a man who in 1966 was honored at the White House by President Lyndon Johnson as Fitness Leader of the Year?

From peewee boxing and the Junior Olympics right up to the U.S. Olympic Committee, Rivenes has his hand in. Name a sports committee, and he is either on it, has bypassed it or will invent it. That snowy head among the well-tanned, for example, that pale countenance etched by the icy Chinook winds, is Rivenes vice-president of the World Surfing Federation. "Why should Californians have all the fun?" he wants to know.

Or Austrians, for that matter. As vice-president of the International Luge Federation, during his swings through the Alps, Rivenes has free run of a 100-room castle, a gift from Count Wohlgemuth. In Seoul he was whisked to meetings with then South Korean Prime Minister Shin Hyon-hwack by limousine and motorcycle escort, a style befitting a member of the executive committee of the International Tae Kwan Do Federation.

Although he frankly admits, "I still don't know a damn thing about it," Rivenes suspects that "tae kwan do is the way the Koreans spell karate." Knowing such details isn't important, he insists. "If you can promote one sport, hell, you can promote them all. The administration is all the same. You don't have to know how to spell it or pronounce it to promote it."

Not surprisingly, problem No. 3 is finding the time to cope with problems 1 and 2. At an age when most men are enjoying retirement, Rivenes is going in more directions at once than the bronc riders at the annual Miles City bucking-horse sale. He still runs a title insurance business out of his home, a converted barn filled with the mementos of a barnstorming sports evangelist. But he's rarely there; his all-consuming occupation—and showcase for his populist view of the world—is KYUS-TV.

There are 212 television markets in the United States, and KYUS (after cayuse, the Indian word for range pony) is 212th. "We're the smallest and most unique TV station in the world," he says proudly, "and we guard that distinction jealously. Who in the hell wants to be the next-to-smallest?"

Anyone who has no taste for hustling 18 hours a day, seven days a week. Located on a ridge outside of town, just beyond a cattle guard at the end of a dirt road, KYUS is housed in an aluminum shed the size of a tennis court and features one color camera, a secondhand transmitter and all the homey clutter of an attic. "Five of us—my wife, Ella, me and three young fellas just out of broadcasting school—run the place," Rivenes says. "Our range is 75 miles on a good day, next door on a bad one. I'm on a lot because I work cheap."

Rivenes signs the station on at 6:30 a.m. ("Well, it's a honey of a day") and is still there at long day's end, sweeping up after the midnight sign-off. In between, Ella handles the paper work, plays host to David's cast of puppets on their children's show and supplies the sound effects, muffled hoofbeats being a specialty. She also assists Rivenes in his multifarious roles as newscaster, reporter, cameraman, engineer, meteorologist, ad salesman, set designer and all-round troubleshooter. How do they keep up? "With great difficulty," says Rivenes. "We average about four hours sleep a night. But it's enough."

It has to be. The station, which Rivenes built in 1969 with a \$300,000 loan, has never made a profit. The insurance business keeps the family afloat and helps free Rivenes for the six weeks of the year he is on the road promoting sports. His credo: "If you can't be rich, have fun."

And so he does, down-home fashion. On his popular newscasts he thinks nothing of saying, "Hold it a jiff," and strolling off to adjust the camera or answer a jangling telephone. To see Rivenes in action, in fact, is to understand why a man who can charm the warts off a hog's back, as they say in Big Sky country, has no trouble managing the old mules of the sports Establishment.

A kind of electronic Will Rogers, Rivenes has to be the only anchorman who appears in an old wool sweater and corduroys and, while idly patting the head of a companionable basset hound,

ad-libs the news from scribbled notes stuffed in his pockets. Once, in announcing the appearance of a blind preacher at the Baptist church, he added, "I was down there, by the way, and I think it's worth the trip just to see his Seeing Eye dog, a fine black Labrador."

Bulletins about bull sales, community sing-alongs and Boy Scout obstacle races may not displace 60 Minutes, but Rivenes insists that "what we provide—unlike the syndicated junk that most local stations put on—is what the FCC wants: real public service television."

An NBC affiliate, KYUS carries the usual network fare, but Rivenes also produces three hours of daily local programming that reflects his fascination with the simple pleasures of man at his leisure. "We can't afford AP and UPI wire services," he says, "so we dig up our own stories. Anyone who wants us—we go. Spelling bees in country schools, a billiard tournament in a local pool hall or high school basketball, that's our beat."

Anglers drop by to show off the prize trout they haul out of the Yellowstone River. Ranchers' wives bring cookies and demonstrate their favorite recipes with an assist from Chef David, whose specialties are corn flakes and milk and a salad that consists of sticking a banana through a pineapple ring. "What they do at KYUS may not be professional," says a local saddlemaker, "but David's been hokey for so long now that he makes it work. It's terrific!"

Best of all, perhaps, is the coverage of the Rivenes productions that have made Miles City the world capital of neglected sports, an achievement as unlikely in its origins as it is in its locale. Never an athlete himself, Rivenes was the nearsighted kid who grew up to be the manager of the Gallatin High School football team. After a brief fling as a dude ranch operator, he became a range manager for the U.S. Government and later specialized in selling title insurance to ranchers. He first became interested in amateur sports when his three daughters took up swimming, and after helping two of them become national junior champions, his immersion was total.

In 1950 Rivenes attended his first national AAU convention and he hasn't missed one since. In no time he began seeking out the championships that no one seemed to want. And just like that, Miles City was resounding to the ring of horseshoes and the clank of barbells. Bicyclists whirred

down Main Street like swarms of locusts while long-distance swimmers splashed endlessly to and fro in the town swimming lake, a dammed-off bend of the Tongue River. Far from being a detriment, the remoteness of the setting was an irresistible lure for the athletes, just as Rivenes suspected it would be. He says, "Everybody thinks, 'Wow, nobody is going to go to a two-bit town in Montana to compete, so I'll just sneak in there and pick up a cheap national championship.' Thing is, everybody thinks that nobody is going to show up, so everybody does and we have some high old times. And we have some really great competitions."

Seeking to get more of the local youth involved, Rivenes and Ella volunteered to coach boxing and wrestling at the Pine Hill School, a state reformatory for boys in Miles City. At his request, he worked with the "bottom of the barrel," the kids whom the school deemed most incorrigible. "It's a cinch," says Rivenes. "None of them has ever been better than anyone at anything except stealing, but find one sport they're good at and the change can be astounding."

When one 17-year-old reprobate allowed that he knew something about water polo, Rivenes appointed him coach of the Miles City girls' team and, just like that, he became a model of decorum and deportment. To help coach track, Rivenes imported guest stars like Bob Schul, the 1964 Olympic gold medalist in the 5,000, and Ron Laird, the former U.S. race-walking champion. Occasionally, one of the delinquents would take off in a race and hightail it out of town. But Rivenes takes pride in the fact that the escapees' code of honor was such that none of them would dare steal David's cherished 1953 Buick Skylark convertible or any of the four other aging cars he has collected.

Those inmates who did cross the finish line often did so with class. Among the many honors won by Rivenes' charges, the Pine Hill race-walkers won the national AAU team championship in 1968 and the girls' water polo team, led by their born-again teen-age coach, triumphed in the 1964 National Senior Women's championship.

The Riveneses, both of whom traveled extensively as managers of various AAU teams, were themselves rejuvenated by the competition. "When we saw how much fun it was," says David, "we decided to go after bigger things." Things like a Montana take-over of the U.S. Winter Olympic team.

Combing through an Olympic handbook before the 1968 Games in Grenoble, they decided that something called the luge would be a good place to start. Says Rivenes, "We sweet-talked the U.S. Olympic Committee into bringing over five European lugers to coach us and help build a 1,200-meter track outside of Missoula. It was a wonderful track."

Trouble was, no snow. Tons of the stuff fall on Montana every winter, of course. But because of what Rivenes calls a "freakish climatic shift," nary a flake landed on their wonderful luge track. Undaunted, he flew his fledgling lugers to the Alps, which were in the throes of an unseasonable warm spell. Again, no snow. As a result, when the 10 U.S. lugers assembled in Grenoble, few had ever been down a full-length course before.

That included Kathy Roberts, the team's top woman luger, the daughter of the Riveneses' next-door neighbors and one of six team members from Montana. David's parting instructions to Kathy as she readied herself for her first run were, "Try not to get yourself killed, because I have to go back to Miles City and live next door to your family." Despite being "terrified," she placed 13th, the best finish ever by a U.S. woman luger.

Rivenes was elected AAU president in 1972 and during his two-year term was instrumental in having the organization restore Jim Thorpe's amateur status. "Compared to today's student-athletes," he says, "Thorpe was a rank amateur." Rivenes also furthered his concept of nurturing today's grass-roots athletes into tomorrow's Olympic champions. He says, "Instead of teaching our young wrestlers high school and college rules, we felt they should be learning the international rules used in the Olympics."

The result was age-group wrestling for boys from five to 16. The first national championship, held in Miles City, natch, in 1971, attracted 187 entrants. The second year, 780 wrestlers competed, and the third, 1,200. "It's so big now we've had to break it up into four regional tournaments," says Rivenes, whose 12-year-old grandson is the terror of the 105-pound class. "Last year we had Montana kids touring in Russia, Mongolia, Germany and Japan."

Mad as it may seem, there is also a long-range method to Rivenes' introduction of the surfboard to the prairie. He is a representative of the General Assembly of Sports Federations, which will

stage the first World Games in Santa Clara, Calif. in 1981 as a means of having sports like table tennis, softball and, Rivenes hopes, surfing, considered for inclusion in the 1984 Olympics. To qualify, at least 28 countries must be engaged in the sport, and Rivenes says, "It wouldn't look good for the U.S. if only Californians were involved in surfing."

Hence the first annual Montana paipo championship, a Hawaiian word which, Rivenes says, has to do with a freshwater sport in which the competitors paddle their surfboards in three positions—lying down, sitting and kneeling. Built for salt water, the boards imported for last summer's inaugural in Miles City were less buoyant than Rivenes; they submerged to three inches below the surface. But no matter, says Rivenes. "Everyone just had to paddle a lot harder. Our all-round champion was a beautiful 13-year-old Indian girl, Lisa Big Horn. It was wonderful."

As for team handball, a cross between basketball and soccer, Rivenes distributes an instructional videotape of the European game, which he believes the U.S. could dominate in a jiff if only more coaches would get to work on those grass roots. To counteract tough sledding on the luge front, Rivenes is pushing a new program based on his discovery that the race is won or lost in the first 100 yards. For next to nothing, he preaches, "We could build 400-meter starting ramps everywhere in the U.S., hold competitions and then send the most promising lugers off to Lake Placid for further training on its full-length course."

Rivenes obviously needs no starting ramp. He rolled through a Miles City supermarket one recent morning like a celebrity dervish, grabbing sale items for a commercial with one hand, jotting down news tidbits from shoppers with the other. Back at the station, he conferred with one of his engineers, a teen-ager on loan from the reform school, stacked the groceries in front of the camera, cued a Sousa march on a children's phonograph and then used his wristwatch to time his 30-second spiel for "foxy shoppers." He said, "We used to have one of those big fancy studio clocks, but it fell and broke."

Rivenes and his staff drink malted milks that are supplied by a local diner in exchange for commercial time. He has the same trade-off arrangement with a tire company that heats the station with propane gas, and with a mechanic who attends to his cars. The bartering doesn't help the station's cash-flow problems, but Rivenes claims there are compensations. "Ella and I don't

have to worry about getting sick or dying. We're too busy and we can't afford it."

In fact, folks say that David has never been more spry or quicker on his feet. Except perhaps for the time the five-foot rattlesnake he was milking on camera got loose and he lit out like one of the Pine Hill boys heading for Canada. "Nothing we do is prepared," he says, which is obvious, especially to those viewers who were watching the night the roof sprung a leak during a rainstorm and he had to interrupt his weather forecast for a breathless flash. "We've got a flood in the station!" he cried, and then began noisily mopping up while his trusty basset hound, seeking higher ground, hopped onto a chair.

After the supermarket spot, Rivenes was off again, squeezing in interviews with tourists on the street between coverage of a boxing tournament and a practice turn on the fluegelhorn he plays on the kiddie show. Then, as a warmup for the evening news, he broke out his lariat and ran through a few tricks he learned in his dude ranch days.

Retirement? The question shocks him. "Why, we've just got a license for a second station, KOUS, in Hardin, Montana. We thought it might be fun to take on the competition up there and just run them ragged." Another impossible dream? "Impossible? Just look around. All of this is impossible. Who ever said it wasn't?"

Presumably the same people who question what may be Rivenes' maddest scheme yet. Pained by the thought that the magnificent bobsled run built in Innsbruck for the 1976 Winter Olympics stands idle during the summer months, he plans to officiate at the wedding of two sports: Behold the death-defying skateboarders rocketing down an Alpine slope! "I'm told that the minute we organize the event we'll have 5,000 entrants from Los Angeles alone," Rivenes exclaims, eyes rolling at the sheer ecstasy of it all. "Imagine someone on a skateboard barreling down those straightaways. It'll make the luge look like kid stuff. Now all we have to do is...."

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Come one, come all!