

Comedian, politician Sonny Bono dies in ski accident

The U.S. Congressman was known in the '60s and '70s as half of the Sonny and Cher duo

By Brendan Riley
The Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. — He played the fool as part of Sonny & Cher during the 1960s and '70s, and his very name became something of a punchline when he was first elected to Congress.

But Sonny Bono had gone a long way toward shedding his image as a bell-bottomed buffoon when he died in a skiing acci-

dent Monday. He was 62.

"Sonny was becoming a much more important leader than people realize," House Speaker Newt Gingrich said.

Bono, an avid skier, slammed into a tree while on the slopes with his family at the Heavenly Valley Ski Resort on the Nevada-California state line, 55 miles south of Reno.

He had skied on ahead into the woods off the main trail to try out the fresh powder in an area that is not officially out of bounds but is more hazardous. He struck a tree squarely, ripping off the bark.

He died on impact of serious head and neck injuries, officials said.

Bono — who had skied at the resort for more than 20 years — was alone at the time. Investigators said there was no immediate evidence that drugs or alcohol were involved.

Unaware he had not made it down the hill, his wife, Mary Whitaker, and their children, 6-year-old Chianna and 9-year-old Chesare, waited for him at the bottom. The wife reported him missing when the resort closed about 4:30 p.m. His body was found about two hours after that, but his death was not made pub-

lic until after midnight.

His death came less than a week after Michael Kennedy, 39-year-old son of the late Robert F. Kennedy, slammed into a tree and died while playing football on skis in Aspen, Colo.

Bono evolved from playing the fall guy to his sharp-tongued wife on "The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour" to a politician in demand for his GOP fund-raising speeches peppered with Hollywood anecdotes.

He was elected to Congress as a Republican representing the Palm Springs area in 1994.

"The last thing in the world I

thought I would be is a U.S. congressman, given all the bobcat vests and Eskimo boots I used to wear," Bono said in 1995.

Fellow Republican Rep. Jim Saxton of New Jersey remembered Bono as someone who meant business. "He had to work hard just to get past the perception that he was just a funny guy," Saxton said.

"He earned respect by being a witty and wise participant in policy-making processes that often seem ponderous to the American people," President Clinton said. "He made us laugh even as he brought his own astute perspective to the work of Congress."

Recent deaths prompt questions, concerns about ski safety

More measures may be taken to help prevent head injuries, such as mandatory helmet use

By Chris Newton
The Associated Press

After Patrick Baldwin heard that Michael Kennedy fractured his skull and died in a ski accident, he bought his 11-year-old son a helmet.

"It makes us all aware that this is a dangerous sport," said Bald-

win, 46, of Holliston, Mass., as he stood on the slopes at Stowe Mountain Resort in Vermont. "Through his death, it will make skiing a safer sport."

The deaths of Kennedy and, on Tuesday, Sonny Bono have raised awareness of the sport's dangers and could lead to certain safety measures, such as mandatory helmet use. Both men died of head injuries.

The issue already was under consideration by the American

Medical Association. Last month, an AMA committee report said youngsters should be urged to wear ski helmets.

On Tuesday, Dr. Carolyn Ferree, chairwoman of the committee, said the two high-profile deaths may prompt the nation's largest organization of doctors to rethink the issue and perhaps press for legislation requiring helmet use, even among adults.

Bono died after hitting a tree Monday at a resort on the Neva-

da-California line.

His death came less than a week after Kennedy, the 39-year-old son of the late Robert F. Kennedy, slammed into a tree while playing football on skis in Aspen, Colo. A coroner said a helmet might have helped Kennedy survive, but it would not have prevented his spinal and neck injuries.

Head injuries account for 2.6 percent of all ski accidents, according to an AMA report based on ski mishaps at Sugarbush, Vt.,

from 1981 to 1997. Using an estimate from Sugarbush that was multiplied by the estimated number of ski visits nationally, the AMA concluded there were 135,000 accidents and 3,537 potentially serious head injuries during that period.

Of those head injuries, 77 percent were mild concussions; less than 1 percent were fatal.

By the AMA's estimate, two skiers, on average, die of head injuries each year.

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