



THE SWAGGER IS BACK

New England Ski Journal profiled Ragged Mountain in the Spring 2015 issue. Read the feature:

goo.gl/ZbnHRG

By Tony Chamberlain

Heading into the 2016-17 season, the knocks on skiing will be precisely what they have been for six decades: too expensive, too elitist, too hard to learn.

And for about the same time, the ski industry has been banging heads against the wall trying to figure out the key to snowsport's most troubling question: How to expand market share or grow the skier/rider base?

Ben Wilcox, general manager at Cranmore Mountain Resort, defined the problem last year this way: "For years we've just been taking market share from each other. But we have to find a way to bring new skiers and riders in, to find ways to break down the barriers that keep us from bringing new skiers in."

Well, across the state in Danbury N.H., the operators of Ragged Mountain are taking a new shot at an old problem. They call it Mission: Affordable, and the stated purpose of the program is to redefine the value line for New England skiers and snowboarders.

"You always hear of the person who wants to try skiing or boarding because it looks like fun, and a good way to have fun outdoors in winter," says Mark Fisher, executive VP of Ragged's parent company, Pacific Group Resorts. "So they go up for a day, don't really learn well enough in that time to really enjoy the sport, and they spent a whole lot of money. So they never come back."

To Fisher, those two elements — time and cost — have been the two largest impediments to skiing's ability to widen its draw and bring in new participants. Thus, aside from the fairly static number of skier visits in the course of a year (roughly 50 million nationwide), ski areas have been in the business of trying to steal market share from one another.

But to Fisher, the Mission: Affordable program addresses both issues: to bring new skiers into the sport at an affordable price; and to teach them well enough so that, rather than forget the one-and-done initial experience, they bridge over to become habitual skiers and riders.

"We not going to suddenly become a brown-bag place or stop making and grooming snow," Fisher says. "We won't be any less a ski resort, but we'll be easier to access."

There are two basic initiatives to Mission: Affordable. The season-pass program structure for unlimited skiing and riding every day of the season (no black-out days) is as follows:

- \$249 if purchased before April 15
- \$279 if purchased April 16-May 15
- \$299 if purchased May 16-Sept. 15
- \$399 if purchased Sept. 16-Oct. 31
- \$499 if purchased after Nov. 1, 2016

Ragged on a Mission

New initiative tackles the time, cost impediments of learning to ski



The Learn to Ski and Ride Program for the 2016-17 season aims to introduce more people to the sport, increasing the customer base and replacing Baby Boomers who are aging out of the sport. By reducing the barriers of cost and difficulty, reads the program objective, it will "make it more likely people will try skiing and snowboarding, and make it more likely they will become lifelong participants."

The Free Learn to Ski Program is designed to be much more than the usual one-day introductory lesson offered by many ski areas, and introduced famously in the 1980s as Sunday River's Learn to Ski in a Day promotion.

Ragged's program takes a well-calculated step beyond a one-day quick introduction to the sport. Instead it includes three full lessons with the objective to make participants feel comfortable on the snow

and feel confident that they can control themselves well enough to turn and stop — building blocks to the enjoyment of the sensation of sliding on the snow.

Once the three initial lessons are completed, students will then be invited to join an instructor on the next Saturday morning for an "introduction to the top." Here, graduates will be escorted to the thousand-foot summit for possibly their first mountaintop view, and a mile-long run down that thousand-foot vertical drop.

Then, to continue helping these fledgling skiers develop their skills, graduates will be able to take additional group lessons for the balance of their second year at a cost of \$29. Those who complete the initial three lessons also are eligible to purchase a Summit Pass — a season everyday pass for the balance of the season at a cost of \$69.

The following year, they are eligible to purchase an "Expanded Horizons" season pass for \$199, rather than the regular price of \$500. And for those who hit the road a bit, the Expanded Horizons pass will allow holders to ski for six days at any other resort owned by PGRI — Wisp Resort in the Appalachians of western Maryland, Wintergreen Resort in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, and Mount Washington Alpine Resort on Vancouver Island, B.C.

The other side of the PGRI initiative is to try to unburden new skiers from the cost of getting into the sport — specifically the expensive gear necessary to begin skiing and riding.

Every graduate of Ragged's Learn to Ski Free program receive a coupon book worth more than \$700 toward the purchase of equipment and apparel. This would include a new pair of Rossignol

skis, bindings, boots and poles for \$299 instead of the retail price of up to \$1,000. A junior package would cost just \$199. Helmets, goggles and gloves would be similarly discounted.

"In order to share our love of skiing with as many people as possible," says Ryan Schramm, Ragged general manager, "we have partnered with Rossignol to develop a way to remove the barrier of cost. People are sometimes hesitant to spend money when they don't know if they like the sport yet."

Terry Gregg, director of the Learning Center, adds, "By making it affordable to learn to ski or ride — and you can't get much more affordable than free — we reach a lot more people who are looking to get outside and get some fresh air and have some fun in the long New England winters. This will be a big plus for skiing and for Ragged Mountain."

So why did Ragged Mountain suddenly take such a huge step forward in skier/rider recruitment? It might have something to do with the people behind PGRI and Ragged.

Yes, the new programs grew in a corporate planning effort, but the five principle players in their development grew up as skiers who became PSIA ski instructors and on to leadership roles later in their lives.

"Together," reads the concluding paragraph in the PGRI business plan, "we have an incredible opportunity to re-engage lapsed participants, reach new audiences and deliver the equipment and teaching methodologies needed, and we are excited and proud to partner with a resort like Ragged Mountain in this endeavor." **S**

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