

Heavenly's new leader bullish on ski resort's future

By Kathryn Reed

Pete Sonntag comes across as a man who would rather be answering questions on a chairlift in between runs than sitting in his spacious office.

As the new leader of Heavenly Mountain Resort, he's eager to get on the mountain – he skis and snowboards. After all, the former Vail ski and snowboard school director has only skied his mountain 1½ days.



Heavenly GM
Pete Sonntag
is eager to
make some
turns.

Photo/Kathryn
Reed

When he spent the summer of 1997 in Reno many of his days were on the trails in the basin, climbing most of the higher peaks.

Having started his job in August, he's been familiarizing himself with the area via his running shoes and bicycles. He's passionate about cycling – road and mountain.

It's not just the outdoor terrain Sonntag is getting used to.

He headed west knowing Lake Tahoe can be a difficult work environment.

“I did come in knowing there were challenges,” Sonntag said in a wide-ranging sit down interview with *Lake Tahoe News*.

He believes the resort has a strong team in place so he’s relying on those players to steer him through landmines before he gets a feel for the lay of the political and regulatory landscape.

“I want to have a positive impact on our company and community,” Sonntag said. “I would say we’re in a period of transition in our company. We are actually looking to make the company stronger. That’s reflected in restructuring at the highest level.”

Sonntag reports to Blaise Carrig, former chief operating officer at Heavenly, who is co-president of the Mountain Division. Sonntag’s titles are general manager and vice president. He is running the day-to-day operation at the bi-state resort.

Sonntag says a similarity between them is being competitive. A couple things setting the two men apart are Sonntag will live at the lake, while Carrig lived in the valley. Sonntag has children – ages 6, 8 and 10. Plan to see the Sonntag gang at the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena a lot – the kids are big into hockey.

Sonntag expects being in the community as a dad will allow him to hear plenty of “unfiltered feedback.”

He’s optimistic Heavenly will have another profitable winter. Although on-mountain figures were good for Vail Resorts last season, the company’s overall numbers were down because of the real estate sector.

Still, Sonntag believes the ski industry is rebounding.

“I feel like it’s the strength of the brand at each (Vail-owned) mountain, which is built on great guest service,” Sonntag said. “People still value time with their family. A ski vacation is incredible. It’s a valuable way to spend time with your family.”

Looking forward, Sonntag won’t point to what the next improvement to the resort will be beyond the Feb. 1 opening of Tamarack Lodge near the top of the gondola.

“Every year we need to look at what needs to be done immediately, then three to five years, and what might be done in 20 years,” Sonntag said. “It’s an ongoing conversation. There are a lot of ideas.”

He said it would be a matter of prioritizing the ideas, and analyzing the impacts to the company and guests.

“We’re bullish about the future,” Sonntag said.