

Vail Resorts renewing its focus on guest safety on the slopes

By Kathryn Reed

No sport is without risk of injury or death. While common sense can play a roll in staying out of the hospital or morgue, sometimes it's the other "players" who are the problem.

Skiing and snowboarding are two sports where participants don't often have control over whether they will be hurt. Out of control riders are par for the slopes. Hardpack terrain is unforgiving. Safety bars on chairlifts don't have to be used.

According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the 213,000 people who were treated in emergency rooms between 2004-05 for outdoor recreational injuries, snowboarding (25.5 percent), sledding (10.8 percent), and hiking (6.3 percent) accounted for the highest percentage of injuries. Fractures (27.4 percent) were the most common injuries.



Those taking lessons at Heavenly must wear a helmet.

Photo/LTN

Injuries are so prevalent that most ski resorts have an onsite clinic to treat injured riders before assessing if they should be taken to a hospital by ambulance or helicopter.

While it would be impossible to prevent all injuries, Vail Resorts is raising the safety bar in terms of trying to make its six resorts safer than they have ever been. The Play It Safe, Play All Season campaign rolled out last month, after having been in the works since last spring.

Pete Sonntag, general manager of Heavenly Mountain Resort, said weekly surveys of guests keep indicating the resort could improve in the safety department. He said slope density, people skiing faster than they should, and where trails merge near lifts are three of the biggest problems people cite at the South Shore resort.

Sonntag would not say how many people are dedicated to the safety program, but said the numbers have increased substantially. He, along with other upper management, is taking turns joining the Yellow Jacket team. These employees work in slow zones and elsewhere on the mountain to ensure people are riding responsibly.

**Skier-Snowboarder
Responsibility Code**

- Safety on the slopes is everyone's responsibility. Ski safely-not only for yourself, but for others as well.
- Always stay in control and be able to stop or avoid objects.
- People ahead of you have the right of way. It is your responsibility to avoid them.
- Do not stop where you obstruct the trail or are not visible

from above. • Whenever starting downhill or merging into a trail, yield to others. • Always use devices to help prevent runaway equipment. • Observe all posted signs and warnings. • Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas. • Prior to using any lift, you must know how to load, ride, and unload safely.

Some people receive warnings, with their pass or day ticket marked, while others are done skiing for the day or even the season.

Through December, one person had their pass yanked for the season, with about 60 being revoked for the day.

Those who have their passes confiscated are able to go to a safety training at any of the Vail properties and get their pass back if they pass a quiz.

Mike Allen, director of snow surfaces, said the people being talked to run the gamut. It's not a particular demographic that is more prone to violating the Skiers' Responsibility Code.

"While everyone is ultimately responsible for their own behavior on the slopes, we can absolutely do our part in encouraging and enforcing responsible behavior and are committed to doing that," Blaise Carrig, co-president of Vail Resorts' mountain division, said in a statement.

Vail officials would not point to anything in particular for the amped up safety campaign. The announcement coming in the same week Heavenly was sued by a skier who was allegedly hurt last season by a snowboarding employee was coincidental, according to spokesman Russ Pecoraro.

He also said Vail Resorts does not release stats about injuries at any of its resorts because it is a publicly traded company.

According to the National Ski Areas Association, in the last 10 years nearly 41 people on average died each year from skiing or snowboarding.

This season to date, the lone death at a Tahoe area resort came after a 7-year-old boy fell from a chairlift at Sugar Bowl.

According to the California Ski and Snowboarding Safety Association, coming into this season, "Twelve chairlift deaths have occurred since 1973, the latest at Heavenly Valley Ski Resort [in 2007] where 19-year-old Ryan Moore died when he leaned forward on the Dipper Express chair because of a leg cramp and fell nearly 20 feet into rocks below. California law does not require ski resorts to use restraining bars on chairlifts and no resort mandates it."

However, Heavenly does mandate the bar be used for all ski school participants.

Teaching kids is one way Vail Resorts is getting its message out. Kids must wear helmets during lessons, and the safety bar comes down almost immediately and is not raised until just before disembarking.

Bars are on every lift at Heavenly, but they don't have to be used by anyone except those riding with an employee.

While the technology exists to have bars operate automatically, Heavenly doesn't foresee putting in those devices any time soon.

National Safety Week, which is embraced by most resorts, is Jan. 14-22. This is a time when ski areas put an emphasis on alerting skiers-boarders about etiquette on the mountain and

other rules that make it safer for everyone.