

Grooming goes high-tech with a beastly fleet at Heavenly

By Susan Wood

She may be cold sometimes, but she'll warm up fast – then take you for a real ride.

If you push her buttons just right, she'll raise her big blade – then cover her tracks behind her.

She'll light up your night man. And to the one who knows her best, she is an animal that often lives up to her name – The Beast.



The Beast is able to cover more terrain than smaller snowcats and do high-angle grooming.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Heavenly Mountain Resort's latest fleet of four grooming snowcats is aptly named for being the best at moving snow, carving corduroy and covering ground.

With a 500 horsepower engine, she can put her mark on 9.5

acres per hour. Her predecessor the Bison is a smaller version in the 13-machine fleet that grooms 6.5 acres an hour with 350hp under the hood.

“The whole reason we bought The Beast is it can do more acres per hour. It has its place. It can push (snow) uphill. It’s aggressive. We need to cover as much ground as we can in the time we have,” Casey Blann, chief of Heavenly’s mountain operations, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “In their second year, we think it’s the way to go.”

This year, covering enough ground and spreading the snow can be more of a challenge with the lack of it – especially compared to what Lake Tahoe Basin experienced last season.

“Usually we have Mother Nature covering holes and rocks. Now it’s all us,” said swing shift groomer Daniel Huizar, who waited patiently for clearance to drive his rig up the mountain from the Tamarack Lodge at the end of the day. It’s Huizar’s fourth season as a groomer – a big step up in his eyes from sitting inside auditing tills at Mount Hood Meadows. Now he usually works at Heavenly from 4pm to midnight.

Heavenly employs 35 groomers who collectively have logged at least 230 years of experience.

Huizar’s first glance at a grooming machine was love at first sight.

“I want to be in one of those,” he recalled with the glee of a teenage boy. The 28-year-old is spending his fourth season at Heavenly. He sought change, and change is what he got with the opportunity to drive The Beast.

This beauty’s tiller in back and blade up front measure 23 feet across at full wing span. That’s a good 4 feet more than the Bison. Both are made by Prinoth, an Italian corporation that took over the former Bombardier company.

Parent company Vail Resorts spared no expense with purchasing the first Beast at Northstar then adding four more at Heavenly at about \$500,000 each – substantially more than what the Bison models cost. With the buttons, joystick, levers and stereo with an iPod hookup, she's a little bit of a cross between an airplane and video game inside. There's even a knob for defrosting a very large windshield that runs coolant through the blades. (Tahoe residents would likely line up for that feature on their trucks and cars in the winter.)

Outside, she resembles a bulldozer on snow. She can push snow up the mountain like no other machine – even at a 16-degree angle most cats would have to use a winch for what's called "high-angle grooming." It can be nerve-racking to drive it at first because unlike smaller cats she can easily clip a fence with her size. If you were to equate different models with paintbrushes, The Beast would cover the wall. The Bison would touch the corners.

Although Huizar appreciates the workhorse nature of The Beast, he waxes poetic when talking about her ability and where she takes him on the hill.

There's a certain rhythm to watching The Beast's giant blade push snow. It reminds Huizar of an ocean wave forming over the shoreline.

It was hard to imagine the run off the Tamarack chairlift was so tracked up when The Beast went for a spin last weekend. She placed perfect corduroy behind her. This is why some riders and skiers hang behind the machines – to "poach" the tracks, as Huizar put it.

Apparently, they're not the only ones. Huizar often sees coyotes. One ran off with a whole bottle of Gatorade near the Beach Hut at Patsy's chairlift. Most sniff the tracks to see if food has been churned up.

"Some places are thin, so you don't want to do too much," he

said of this year's slim natural snow. The groomer pointed to the top of the ridge that takes skiers and riders to the Nevada side of the resort and indicated how the area can be more challenging to groom with rocks just underneath the surface. Though conditions have improved substantially in the week *Lake Tahoe News* took a ride in The Beast.

"You tend to feel rocks more on these machines than skis," Huziar said a week ago.

(Note to my skiself: These guys have saved the ski season.) But a modest Huziar turned the credit over to the snowmakers who manage the gun operations.

Suddenly, a beautiful rosy sunset lay over Mount Tallac to the west.

"Oh, I love this," he said, stopping the machine on the Tamarack ridge and pulling out his camera. This is where Huziar takes lucky, ride-along buddies at the end of the ski day. They're picked by ski patrol from the lodge. Many are so appreciative, they try to tip him, but to no avail.

To the east, overlooking the Carson Valley, the groomers have even coined a name for the view from where the Big Dipper meets Orion – "Operation Elevation."

A fleet may follow each other's fall line from the ridge like a pack of dogs. The camaraderie is enhanced by the chatter on the radio. For that reason alone, Huziar doesn't get lonely – even on occasions when he works the graveyard shift. He recalled how interesting the nights were at Mount Hood when groomers at Meadows would flash their lights at the Timberline resort drivers and vice versa.

Night operations is a world all its own.

"I don't think people realize how a lot goes on at a ski resort at night," Huziar said.

Sometimes he sees the groomers at Homewood across Lake Tahoe.

“The views up here are awesome,” he said as the sun was setting in the real High Sierra.

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