

Star Wars lands at Sierra with park for little snowboarders

By Kathryn Reed

TWIN BRIDGES – Sierra-at-Tahoe has put the force of Burton and Lucas Films behind its kids' learn to snowboard program.

Four-year-old Elliana zips away from Jar Jar Binks headed toward Chewbacca. It doesn't take her long before she is riding without any assistance.

"Dropping in," she says as she whizzes down the subtle decline.



Yoda's Riglet Park at Sierra is designed to teach 3- to 6-year-olds how to snowboard.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

There isn't anything about the sport and Yoda's Riglet Park that she doesn't like. She even likes jumping. But the 180s come with a little assistance. Instructor Alexis Fleming lifts Elliana up by the strap on the back of her bib to twist her

around. Still, it gives her the feel for what it's like to get a little air and go from regular to goofy foot.

"Here, there are so many more options," Fleming said in comparison to the magic carpet. "It helps kids because they stay more engaged."

She said youngsters learn more in such a fun atmosphere and that they seem not to notice they are in a lesson instead of a theme park. But with a storm trooper standing guard and Yoda welcoming the youngsters, it does feel more like a play area than a ski center.

However, when Fleming tells one of her charges the reason she is on her knees is because she needs more weight on her toes, it becomes obvious this all-day class is focused on teaching youngsters to snowboard.

Yoda's Riglet Park is the combination of Burton wanting to tap into a market that is often ignored (3- to 6-year-olds), using the snowboard company's technology, and Lucas Films' wanting to engage the next generation of Star Wars fans. The film company, whose headquarters are in Marin County, also wanted a local ski area to work with. Burton and Sierra have had a partnership for years.

With "Jedi Knights" coming to theaters Feb. 10, it's timely of Sierra to launch its other-worldly training facility. Folks from Burton and people affiliated with the Star Wars films will be at the resort Feb. 17 for the grand opening of the park. By then the audio features should be installed.

But some people wanted to learn this weekend instead of waiting for the crowds of Presidents Day weekend.

Kristi Verma is standing outside the fenced-in area watching her 4-year-old son, Ahren, slide across the white stuff. While the kid from Sacramento didn't say much during the lesson because he was focused on the job at hand, his mom said all he

could talk about on the way up Saturday was learning to snowboard.

With the X Games just last month, this is also fueling the enthusiasm to learn to board. Who knows, maybe one of these snowboarders will be the next to score a 10 in superpipe.

Pato Bicens is working with 5-year-old Jayden of South Lake Tahoe in the "superpipe" area. He's able to pull her via the riglet at the top of the board from the bottom of the pipe to the top. The riglet is the device at the top of the board instructors use to pull little ones that helps them with balance as well as making it more realistic instead of pushing them along. The pipe, while it does have visible contours, is miniature like everything for this size and age group.

But what could not be scaled down are the Star Wars figurines. Sculptor Bob King of Washington had to carve the wooden items to the same specs as they are seen in the movies.

Much of the park was built from downed trees at the resort, with a portable mill being brought in to cut the wood.

Before getting on the snow the newbies enter the Padawan Center. In Star Wars lore a Padawan is the first step to being a Jedi Warrior.

One wall has Yoda overseeing the training of a young Luke Skywalker.

Each young Padawan is given a fighter vest. Older warriors wear an R2-D2 vest. All have a light saber – though no one was dueling on the snow Saturday.

In the center they stand on a skateboard-like device that shows instructors which foot they put forward first (left = regular, right = goofy), and to test their balance on a stable surface.

Then it's off to Yoda's Riglet Park.

The idea is if the little ones get the hang of it, by the afternoon they could be on the mountain in Burton's Progression Park off Easy Rider. Classes usually don't have more than four kids per instructor, so there is lots of quality time.

Most classes are all day, though half-day afternoon sessions are available. Three-day and 10-day learning packages are also available.

Susan Wood contributed to this story.

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