

Ski industry veteran takes the helm of Kirkwood Mountain

By Kathryn Reed

With the sale of Kirkwood Mountain Resort to Vail Resorts being finalized Thursday, Casey Blann can officially call himself vice president and general manager of the ski area.

Blann, at 53, is a veteran of the ski industry – especially in Tahoe. Out of college it was Bill Killebrew who hired him to be a lift supervisor at Heavenly Mountain Resort in 1981. He worked there for a dozen years before going to Sierra-at-Tahoe for nine years.

For the past 10 years Blann has been back at Heavenly, with his most recent title being director of operations.



Casey Blann

“I’ve been able to live in the same house since 1989. I just turn a different direction as I leave the driveway,” Blann told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The ski industry is in Blann’s blood. He grew up in Bend, Ore., where his dad was general manager of Mount Bachelor. At age 2 he was skiing.

Now he has a resort to call his own.

“Casey is a real mountain man and skier at heart, and really appreciates what Kirkwood is. I think it’s a great fit for

him," Blaise Carrig, co-president of Vail Resort's mountain division, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Carrig added that beyond Blann's expertise with mountain operations, his leadership, attentiveness to safety as well service were reasons he got the job.

(Internal and external candidates have applied for Blann's old job at Heavenly, but a decision has not been made as to who will replace him.)

The enthusiasm as Blann talks about Kirkwood fills his voice. It also doesn't hurt that his office allows him to watch the snow fall, even though visibility was just 100 feet. Friday was another powder day at the 'Wood.

"This resort is incredible. Every time I come out here I find something new and unique," Blann said.

When he describes Kirkwood he calls it the Jackson Hole of California.

While his commute is now longer, he doesn't mind.

"I'm really excited to join the team out here at Kirkwood and take it to a different level," Blann said.

A Vail Resorts trademark of high quality guest services is one element he will be working on. But he is quick to praise the employees. Other than his arrival, no immediate staffing changes are taking place.

One of the reasons to buy the resort midseason was to be able to see how things really run and to strategize on changes for the upcoming season.

Blann said changes skiers are likely to notice at the start of the 2012-13 season are improvements to the food and beverage facilities. Specifics are still a ways off of what that might mean.

Epic Mix, a corporate-wide program that allows riders to track their vertical feet, get pins, share info with friends and other things, will be instituted at Kirkwood next season. Epic Photo will probably not be part of the initial launch.

Overall operations are being looked at, Blann said, with changes likely from the get-go. What will change still needs to be worked out.

He equated the changes about to take place at Kirkwood being similar to when he was at Sierra in 1993 and the Sprock family sold it to Fibreboard Corp.

Having more money makes a world of difference for any business.

Blann knows he can tap into the skills and resources of Vail Resorts to put Kirkwood on a bigger map.

The current master plan for Kirkwood calls for tons of improvements. Blann and others with Vail are going over that plan to see what they like, how they would prioritize what's in it, and are evaluating whether the U.S. Forest Service as land owner will need to be consulted about revising the plan.

"We will assess and prioritize operations as well as future capital investments," Blann said.

What Vail officials keep saying is they don't want to change the funkiness of the Kirkwood, just the functionality.

Kirkwood is known for its steeps and unique personality. An infusion of cash could mean making the terrain more accessible via new lifts as well as upgrading the ones in place. Kirkwood only has two high-speed quads and one of those accesses beginner terrain.

Summer operations are a growing component of what Kirkwood has to offer. An independent operator runs the zipline, there's a mountain bike park and disc golf. Plus, at different times the

lifts will run for hikers to access endless miles of trails.

Blann met with the mountain bike team Thursday, but added, "It's premature to comment too much about summer."

For those who don't want to be limited to one resort, a pass for Heavenly-Northstar-Kirkwood is available. But the die-hard Kirkwood-only riders still have a pass just for the 'Wood.