

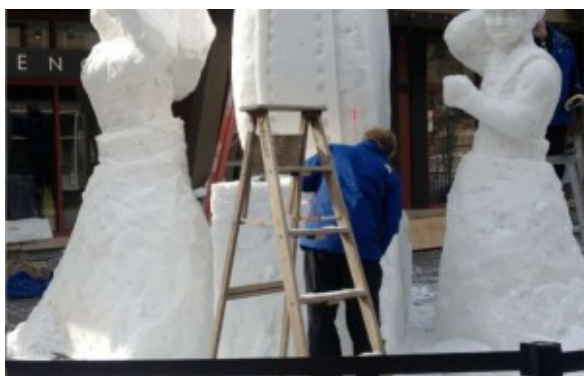
Ice sculptors take over Northstar Village

By Nathan Hurst, Wired

Last weekend at Northstar was beautiful, sunny, and in the 30s. For eight teams of snow carvers from around the world, though, it's terrible – the melty snow is sloppy, hard to carve, and even dangerous.

Teams of three from Finland, Japan, Germany, Canada, and the U.S. were selected from more than 40 applicants for the inaugural Carve Tahoe, a five-day competition to hew works of art from 14-foot-high, 20-ton blocks of snow. But despite the bad snow, the teams rely on decades of experience, handcrafted tools, and creative techniques to fashion their massive sculptures. The team members are sculptors and artists and designers, but also doctors and lawyers. Though they spend weeks each year carving, nobody makes a living doing it.

“Everyone seems to have their own method of doing things,” says Team Wisconsin’s Mark Hargarten. “It’s amazing how different they are.”



Sculpting at Northstar.
Photo/Kathleen Jay

The Wisconsin team uses a grid system for their carving – a

Native American wearing an eagle costume, its feathers turning to flames, called "Dance of the Firebird." The polyurethane model they built is scaled so one-half inch equals one foot on the finished snow sculpture. They cut a copy of the model in four, and covered each section with clay, sectioned in half-inch increments. They etch corresponding lines in the snow, one foot to a side, and they peel off one piece of clay, carve the part of the sculpture they can see, and move on to the next.

"You never get lost using the method," says Dan Ingebrigtsen, a professional sculptor from Milwaukee. "Three or four guys can work from different angles, and meet in the middle."

Wisconsin's got several other strategies behind their carving as well. From the south, it looks like they haven't even started; they left the southern side of the block intact to protect the rest of it from the sun, and the wall has been decimated by the heat. More than 20 percent of its thickness has melted by Sunday night, three days in. After the sun goes down, the team is hollowing out the interior of the structure, so it will freeze faster overnight.

Other teams are relying on nighttime freezing as well. A team partly from the U.S. and partly from Canada carves spires from blocks they removed from the sculpture, and plans to attach them to the top of their sculpture, "The Stand," which incorporates four interwoven trees. They'll use melty snow pulled from the middle of the block right when the sun goes down to cement the tops onto the trees, says team member Bob Fulks from the top of a stepladder as he cuts away at the sculpture with an ice chisel.

Fulks' team is leaving Tahoe after the competition to go straight to Whitehorse, in the Yukon, for another competition, where he anticipates no problems with warm weather.

"It's a good gig, you can travel all over the world doing it,"

he says. "You go around and see the same people."

Many of the carvers know each other from previous competitions.

"We've sculpted with almost everybody here before," says Team Idaho-Dunham's Mariah Dunham, who is working on "Sweet House (of Madness)" with her mother, Barb. The creation is a beehive, with the south side as the exterior, and the north side (intentionally placed out of the sun) as a representation of the comb, including hexagonal holds that perforate all the way to the hollow interior.

Though Carve Tahoe is new, snow carving is not. Many of the sculptors have been at it for more than 20 years, traveling around the world and meeting and competing against many of the same people – though each competition demands unique new designs from all the sculptors. Kathryn Keown discovered snow carving while Googling something completely different, and decided she wanted to host an international event.

"First we fell in love with the sculptures, then we fell in love with the sculptors," says Keown, who founded the competition with Hub Strategy, the ad agency where she works.

Keown contacted several ski areas before Northstar, but the resort was on board right away; its owner, Vail Resorts also owns Breckenridge, where one of the biggest and most prestigious snow carving competitions is held.

But Keown wanted to commit to the design of the competition, not just the sculptures. Applicants submitted their designs last summer, and Keown enlisted Lawrence Noble, chair of the School of Fine Art at the Academy of Art University to help choose modern, complex, realist designs. She wanted no artsy, kitschy snowmen.

Then she chose a design-friendly logo and judges. In addition to Noble, the panel of judges features a sushi chef from

Northstar, two interior designers, a photographer from nearby Squaw Valley, and Bryan Hyneck, vice president of design at Speck, which makes cases for mobile devices and was one of the event's sponsors.

"The level of complexity and sophistication in this type of sculpture is just amazing," says Hyneck, who has judged industrial and graphic design competitions, but never snow carving. "It's amazing how organic some of the shapes can be."

As a judge, Hyneck says he'll focus on the craft and the execution of the sculptures, and how the sculptors use particular techniques to take advantage of the snow's properties. But he adds that subject matter, point of view, message, and relationship to a theme are all important points as well.

"Anybody that is really going to push the limits of the capabilities of the media is going to get a lot of my attention," he says.

For some, like the Germans, that means suspending massive structures made completely of snow. Their sculpture, titled "Four Elements", features four large spires encircled by a tilted disc. Despite a trickle of melted snow dripping off the bottom edge, one – or even two – of the German carvers frequently stand atop the sculpture, using saws or chisels to shape the towers.

Sunday evening, after the sun has gone down and the temperature dropped, Josh Knaggs, bearded, with a cigarette in his mouth, is sitting in the curve made by the largest bear from the Team Idaho-Bonner's Ferry sculpture, "Endangered Bears." Wearing a blue event-issued jacket, he's brushing out the hollow loop made by mama and papa bear.

Three days later, the judges award Knaggs and his team third prize, with Japan's modern work, "Heart to Heart" coming in second and Germany's gravity-defying "Four Elements" taking

first. The teams disperse, and after a few more sunny days, Northstar tears down the structures before they get too soft and fall – all except the German piece, which can't bear its own weight and collapses after judging is complete. But the ephemeral nature of the snow is part of what attracts the competitors.

“It's for the moment, and it's a beauty all in itself, creating something that's gonna be disappearing, you know, it's okay that it disappears,” says Team Truckee's Ira Kessler. “We are making it for the moment.”