

Number of snowboarders on the slopes declining

By Christopher Solomon, New York Times

Late last summer when Shaun White, the two-time Olympic gold medal snowboarder and X-Games superstar, was charged with public intoxication and vandalism, he became at age 26 an accidental metaphor for his sport: a young phenom all grown up and in a spot of trouble.

After exploding onto the scene about two decades ago, snowboarding is now sputtering in the United States, according to a recent study by RRC Associates, which tracks trends that affect the winter-resort industry.

“Today, there is every indication that the growth in snowboarding we took for granted has stalled, and visitation from snowboarding is headed toward a path of substantial decline,” Nate Fristoe, RRC Associates’ director of operations, wrote in the National Ski Areas Association Journal.



Sierra opened a Burton

Riglet snowboard learning area to lure younger riders. Photo/LTN file

For several months now, Fristoe's report has been the buzz of the industry. For some it's also become a rallying cry to revive this sport, which, with its bad-boy image, was widely credited with saving a dull and moribund ski industry in the early 1990s.

From just 7.7 percent of all visits to U.S. ski slopes two decades ago, snowboarders accounted for nearly one-third of visitors two years ago. Now that surge has fizzled. The percentage of visits to resorts by snowboarders even declined slightly each of the past two seasons, to 30.2 percent last winter, according to a survey by the National Ski Areas Association. The average number of days that snowboarders – usually a more hard-core bunch than skiers – hit the slopes also has seen a “sharp drop” from 7.6 days a year at its height 15 years ago, to 6.1 today, Fristoe wrote. Meanwhile the average number of days that skiers went to the mountains has remained consistent at about 5.5 days for several years.

“Snowboarding lost some of its mojo around 2005, 2006, and we've been running on fumes since then,” Fristoe said. “It's like any kind of trend: It's full of all sorts of energy ... until it isn't.”

The causes of the slowdown are many, Fristoe said. Chief among them is age: The young “grommets” who fueled the sport's explosion have matured. A 15-year-old who started snowboarding in the 1996-97 season is now 30. Nearly 38 percent of snowboarders are either part of a couple or have children, up from 23 percent a decade before, the report said.

“They're getting older, they're forming families, they're in their career-building phase,” he said.

Translation: less free time to shred, and less money to burn.

Yet other forces are at work, too, including the fact that fewer young people seem to be taking up snowboarding. In the 2003-04 season more than 42 percent of all beginners on the slopes ages 14 and younger started out on a snowboard. The percentage has steadily fallen since then, last season dropping to about 34 percent, according to the ski areas association.

One reason may be that snowboarding simply doesn't have the rebel cachet that it once did. Skiing has appropriated everything from snowboarding's swagger to its trendy clothing to technology like fat skis. Simply put, it's cool to be on two planks again.

Then there's the gender gap. Although male and female boarders start the sport in equal proportion, many more women are dropping out as proficiency grows.

"We're not retaining our female participants like we should," Fristoe said.

Furthermore, he said, those female boarders don't switch to skiing and are "lost" to the resorts.

"Combine all those factors, and that's what makes us fearful of a lack of rebound of snowboarding."

If nothing is done to reverse the slip, visits by snowboarders to resorts could plunge by one-third from its high by the winter of 2021-22, Fristoe predicts.

Although some industry leaders say Fristoe's projections are too dire, others are listening.

"We need skiing and snowboarding to grow in lock step" for the continued growth and health of the industry, said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association.

To that end, efforts have been made to attract new snowboarders by making the entry into the sport easier, especially for young children.

Jeff Boliba, vice president of global resorts for Vermont-based Burton, the world's largest snowboard maker, has been at work on that challenge for years. He dreamed up the Riglet Reel – a retractable cord that can be attached to some Burton boards so parents can tow children around on carpets or on snow, to help give them the feel of sliding. (It's available at some snowboard shops and at Burton.com for \$29.95.)

Burton has also established 20 Riglet Parks at resorts nationwide, where children as young as 3 can start learning how to snowboard. These include a Star Wars-themed park at Sierra-at-Tahoe, and another that features a "treehouse" at Smuggler's Notch in Vermont. The company has also developed children's snowboards – including its Chicklet and Chopper boards, which have convex bases that make the boards easier to turn.

The recent statistics, Boliba said, "don't take into effect kids 7 and under, and from my business, that's where we see great growth around the globe," he said.

For snowboarders – no matter what their age – who might not want to enter an intimidating half-pipe, Burton has also established Stash Parks, or terrain parks that use more natural features (branchlike rails to slide, stumps to hop), at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort in Wyoming, Killington in Vermont, and Northstar at Lake Tahoe.

Meanwhile, Squaw Valley and its sister resort Alpine Meadows, have opened Start Parks: special beginner areas with mini-terrain features, gentle transitions, soft pitches and signs describing how to navigate them, all built in a way so that there's no cross-traffic to fear.

"What we're trying to do is connect new skiers and riders to

sensations they will get on the mountain” but in “a very controlled setting” where “there’s less to take in,” said Josh Thompson-Bourrie, Squaw’s snowboard supervisor.

This winter both resorts are again offering a specially priced “progression package”: three days of lift tickets, snowboard rentals and full-day group lessons, for \$299 with advance purchase.

Other resorts are trying other things, including eliminating what Karl Kapuscinski, president and chief executive of Stevens Pass Mountain Resort near Seattle and Mountain High Resort outside Los Angeles, calls “the hassle factor.” For instance, both areas now have benches at the top of chairlifts so riders can buckle in without wallowing in the snow. Snowboard boots that dispense with annoying shoelaces are available for rent, and there are newer, easier terrain parks at both resorts for less daring snowboarders.

Kapuscinski said the dwindling number of snowboarding visitors makes such changes necessary. Last November, he said, “literally mimicked” a November 10 years ago – the same snow conditions, the same number of runs open. That year his resort saw nearly 80,000 visits, an overwhelming proportion of them snowboarders.

“This last year we did almost 42,000 visits – so, basically half,” he said, even though his resort today offers much better terrain parks and half-pipes for snowboarding. “That fanaticism,” he said, “has disappeared.”