

Epic Mix creates competition on, off the slopes

By Kathryn Reed

Based on the amount of vertical feet being skied by people at Heavenly Mountain Resort, it would be hard to know the whole mountain hasn't opened because of the lack of snowfall.

Those who are into keeping track of where they ski, vertical feet, number of days and other stats just have to sign up for Epic Mix. The social media component to skiing is Vail Resorts way of making it more than just a ski day. And while it's offered at all their mountains, Heavenly has the most enthusiastic Tahoe participants.

Its nicknamed "Epic crack" because it is so addictive.



At the end of a ski day, Shirley Hackett goes over her Epic Mix account online.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Shirley Hackett, 56, skis every day at Heavenly – except when she's skiing someplace else. In summer 2011 she was diagnosed with a life-changing illness that almost kept her off the slopes for good. When she got back in January 2012 her goal was to ski 1 million vertical feet. She ended that season with

2.5 million vertical feet in 85 days.

In the 40-plus days she has skied this season she is at more than 1 million vertical feet. It's a little easier to do this at Heavenly compared to the New York resort where she learned to ski. It had 250 vertical feet top to bottom.

Hackett's goal last season was to ski 100 days. She got in 112 – but not all at Heavenly. For her 102 days at a Vail owned resort she skied 2,619,439 million vertical feet. She finished the season top among all women at all Vail Resorts.

“So, now all of this seems quite easy,” Hackett said as she went over the various components of her Epic Mix page.

And the prize at the end of the season?

“There is nothing except bragging rights,” Hackett tells *Lake Tahoe News* with a smile. “It's good clean fun. You are outside in one of the most beautiful places, exercising. You can't beat that.”

Anyone can go online to see how people are doing – assuming they've made their profile public. It's optional to activate Epic Mix.

Dave Maderis, who also skis at Heavenly, decided after the first year he could beat the record of 4.3 million vertical feet. So in 2011-12 at age 69 he began his quest. In 136 days he skied 4.8 million feet – for those bragging rights.

He did so through a viral infection and cracked ribs.

Maderis decided after turning 70 he didn't need to challenge himself in quite the same way.

In year three, Mark Emmerling, who's home resort is Heavenly, decided he was going to beat the Colorado guys who often have an earlier start to the season, sometimes a later ending date and resorts with longer runs. He did so – skiing 7,036,536

million vertical feet in 2012-13.

Robert Martin collects his vertical feet on a ski bike.

Then there are the stories of those who have camped out at World Cup to swipe their pass to get the feet without ever getting on the lift, let alone skiing down. It was also an easy way to earn the Dark Knight pin, which is 10 lifts after 4pm.

“I don’t think we had any idea how really, truly competitive our guests are,” Stacey Pool, director of online experiences for Vail Resorts said. And they are competing against people they may not know, especially people at another resort.

But Epic Mix isn’t just about vertical feet. It’s also about pictures, pins, lessons and racing. Vertical feet and photos are the two most popular features of the application.

Photos can be uploaded to Facebook within a matter of hours. It’s there with the resort’s logo, so it’s practically free advertising. Guests can buy photos if they want.

People can be seen on chairlifts tracking their pins, vert feet and posting photos. It’s that addictive. They don’t even wait until the end of the day to know their stats or share their info with others.

“You don’t have to be the best skier in the world. It’s a game,” Maderis told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s good for people who come up 15 to 20 days to see how many points they can acquire.”

The points are based on pins, vertical feet and other criteria.

Vail Resorts started Epic Mix as a way to tap into the burgeoning social media platform.

“It was a way to capture special memories, experiences you

were having on the mountain and then you could share with friends,” Pool told *Lake Tahoe News*. “At first we measured social impressions – how many eyeballs were on social posts. It was in the millions of social impressions in the first year.”

Each year Vail has tweaked Epic Mix or added something to it. New this year is with ski or snowboarding lessons the ability to track one’s progression. It also has the name of the instructor and other details not available if the person has not activated Epic Mix. (Epic Mix is free and is available on season passes and day passes.)

Pool said Epic Mix is not being used to track where individuals are. However, it has been used when someone has turned up missing to see where they have been skiing so ski patrol can start with that area to locate the person.

With the pins that can be collected – and they are all virtual – it’s possible to put them up in a route on the mountain at times that would disperse skiers from congested areas. People know where they are by using their smart phones.

Otherwise, Epic Mix is considered a passive app, and that’s how Vail Resorts intends to keep it. What will be new for 2014-15 – if anything – Pool isn’t saying. After all, this season isn’t even half over.