

Great grades result in free ski days at Sierra

By Susan Wood

OK kids – get perfect grades and your success could lead to being graded at the Winter Olympic Games one day.

And you'll be in good company.

Gold medalist Maddie Bowman of Meyers, who told *Lake Tahoe News* she plans to compete in the Pyeongchang, South Korea, Olympics Games in 2018, started her skiing career at Sierra-at-Tahoe. She achieved a 4.0 grade point average and took full advantage of a program there that provides a free season pass for students of Lake Tahoe Unified School District. She used the program for seven years from middle school through high school.

The benefit started out in 1999 with the ski resort 12 miles west of Meyers giving away nine passes. Sierra now averages about 300 a year. A few years ago, the community-minded ski resort ended up with a record 377 doled out.

“I would attribute a lot of my career to my ski time at Sierra,” Bowman, 22, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Maddie Bowman went from straight A student to Olympic gold medalist with Sierra-at-Tahoe's help. Photo/LTN file

The freestyle skier is known for her death-defying feats on skis in the superpipe. She won gold in the Winter X Games from 2013-16 and more of the metal at the 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi in the halfpipe.

"I think the free pass did motivate me in school, and it was a nice reward," Bowman said. "I struggled with English. I still do."

After leaving South Tahoe High School, she's attending her third year of college at Westminster University in Salt Lake City.

Although Bowman's professional, competitive skiing career has taken her all over the world, her heart is anchored in Tahoe as reflected in numerous Facebook posts from all seasons.

But it's Bowman sliding on the slopes that captured the hearts and minds of young and old – especially in Tahoe. The ski area hosted a huge party for Bowman and fellow Olympic “golden girls” Jamie Anderson and Hannah Teter.

“The benefits of providing incentives for students was bigger than the (loss of ski pass) sales.”

-- John Rice



“It's hard to put the whole experience into words. The skiing is amazing. There is all sorts of terrain for everyone, and

you can get pretty creative with it," Bowman said of her home resort. "Sierra was a second home to me. It's like a big family up there, and the people and mountain teach you a lot – not only about skiing, but about life. I was lucky to grow up there."

And there you have a spilling of the heart partly because of the unique influence of general manager extraordinaire John Rice.

The straight A season pass program began as a personal gesture from Rice to his sons, Ian and Brendan, when they were attending Meyers Elementary School in the fourth and fifth grades, respectively.

"They came home with A's and B's, and I asked them what it would take for them to get all A's," Rice said, adding: "...something their father only did one semester in all of school."

Smart kids. They countered with asking what they would get.

"I told them: 'Anything you want'," Rice recalled.

"Anything in the world?" the boys tested their dad.

The prize was agreed upon – BMX bikes. And the boys consequently pulled in straight A's.

Of course, they didn't want the slap-together, inexpensive Walmart variety, Rice noted.

"They wanted Specialized, single-crank, aluminum 360 handlebar, high-end \$600 bikes," he quipped.

"I was amazed at how the extra motivation made them try that much harder, and I shared with their teachers that if any kids in their class got all A's, Sierra would give them a season pass," Rice dictated.

The word spread like wildfire after that first year. Soon, every teacher in the school participated. Then, calls came in from Tahoe Valley, Bijou and Sierra House, to which Sierra-at-Tahoe offered the same deal.



Sierra rewards about 300 students a year with free passes based on their grades. Photo/LTN file

The program has been extended to private schools, home schools and others that fall under the education umbrella.

“The benefits of providing incentives for students was bigger than the (loss of ski pass) sales,” Rice said.

Through the years, the straight A program has even crossed the state line – with Zephyr Cove Elementary and Whittell High School joining in the quest.

The ski-pass program – which amounts to a value of up to about \$300 – is so popular, Sierra-at-Tahoe was forced to draw boundaries as the requests expanded into Carson City, Reno and even to the San Francisco Bay Area.

“Sierra recognizes that not all students have the same resources to achieve the goal of straight A’s. In the past, we have given teachers day tickets for students who have made quantum leaps in their progress. Not all who earn free passes can afford to ski, but you better believe they come up and get their pass,” Rice continued. “The program has been successful beyond our dreams, and I have a stack of thank you cards and letters to prove it.”

A note of gratitude was offered from LTUSD, which embraces the program.

“The program encourages students to do their best work and shows them that hard work pays off,” district spokeswoman Shannon Chandler told *LTN*.

“A lot of our families are unable to afford (ski passes). Even if just one person in the family earns a ski pass from Sierra, it’s a huge help toward the purchase of passes for the whole family. The program also promotes parent involvement in their child’s academic career,” said Chandler, who added personally that she continues “to stay on” her children to strive for “that golden ticket.”

And while not every straight A student will have the successes on the mountain Bowman has had, time on the slopes will only make youngsters better skiers and boarders.

Note: *Sierra-at-Tahoe opens today for the 2016-17 season.*