

# Intricacies of snowmaking rival Ma Nature



Snowmaking is integral to Northstar's desires to provide enough terrain for all ability levels. Photo/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

TRUCKEE – It looks like Jim Larmore is playing a sophisticated video game on his phone. But this is no game. As director of mountain operations at Northstar Larmore oversees the entire snowmaking operation.

He is essentially Father Nature. When Mother Nature doesn't deliver snow, Larmore and his gang do.

Many of the pumps and guns are at his fingertips via his phone.

"If I had to do everything manually, it would be too tough," Larmore told *Lake Tahoe News*.



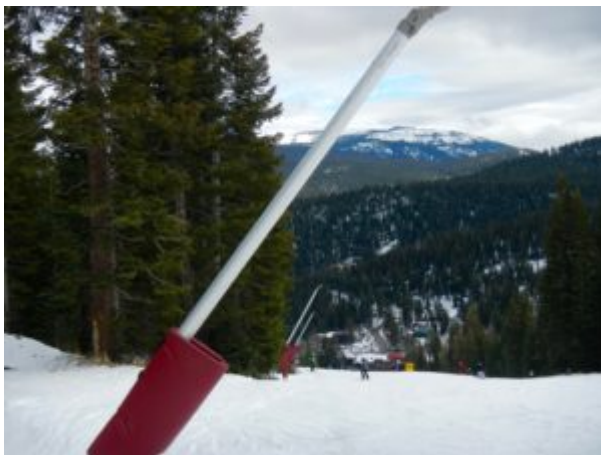
Jim Larmore is able to control snowmaking at Norhstar with his phone. Photo/Kathryn reed

Looking at the mountain Larmore knows there is more to do. But on this first day of winter he's more than satisfied with the coverage. Each day more terrain opens. On Wednesday it was Logger's Loop; today it could be Castle Peak.

Knowing the mountains suffered a rain on snow event in the last week one might think the conditions are nasty. Just the opposite. Snowmaking and grooming can do wonders to ski slopes. Snow is often moved around fill in spots.



Snowmaking equipment comes in various sizes. Photos/Kathryn Reed



And the consistency no longer resembles something that came out of a high school science project. Most of the time it's hard to tell Mother Nature didn't create it.

Snowmaking can be a 24-hour endeavor. Mostly, though, a cadre of workers are on the job when the public is long gone. Larmore says it takes someone who embraces the outdoors, doesn't mind getting wet and likes physical labor.

Scattered about the ski resort are an array of snowmaking guns. Some operate on air and water, some don't have any air.

Newer ones can use less than half the energy of older models, but they don't blow as much white stuff.

With at least half of them being automated, it means a more consistent quality is guaranteed. They turn on and off based on the temperature.

This is a huge change from the old days when the crew would sling pumps and hoses over their shoulders and walk all the equipment to the slopes.

Today the devices are too big to even contemplate doing that.

It's a balancing act to get enough varied terrain open to cater to the diverse group of skiers who come to this resort just outside the Lake Tahoe Basin. While the ultimate goal is to provide the best guest experience possible, it's not as easy as flipping a switch and suddenly there is snow.

There's the big picture plan of what staff wants to have covered at various times in the season, and then there are the daily snowmaking plans that get down to the nitty gritty. And even those plans are fluid because nothing is constant. Temperatures and humidity – the key factors in when to blow – are constantly monitored.

South facing slopes, high traffic areas and lower terrain need more help.

An advantage Northstar has over some other resorts is that it isn't that rocky. This means less snow – real or manmade – is needed to ski on because it doesn't take that much to cover grass.

Northstar has the capacity to cover 50 percent of its runs.

The water to make the snow comes from Sawmill Reservoir, which is on the mountain beyond the Nordic center. It's estimated that 86 percent of manmade snow returns to the aquifer.

If it weren't for snowmaking during recent winters, there would not have been a ski season.

"We did quite well during the drought," Larmore said. "But it's better for everyone if it snows."