

# Ski industry strives to curtail injuries

By Susan Wood

With Christmas snow conditions ripe, Heavenly Mountain Resort's Chief Operating Officer Pete Sonntag tweeted he was about to drop into Killebrew Canyon and thanked his "ski patrol for keeping us safe."

This January marks the 16th year of National Ski Safety Awareness, changed from a weeklong event to a month in 2013. And with the resorts bound to be packed for this coming three-day weekend, safety is a big concern with more people on the slopes.

Despite reports of accidents, incidents, a landmark Colorado court hearing and a slight rise in fatalities last ski season compared to the previous year, most stakeholders from the National Ski Areas Association and California Ski Industry Association to a Lake Tahoe ski area general manager and ski patroller believe the awareness campaigns are working.

There were 39 fatalities among U.S. ski areas last year, up by four from the 2014-15 season, according to the NSAA. This is out of 52.8 million ski days reported. Granted, the ski visits were at a slight decline from the previous year, but one needs to place the assessment into perspective.

That's 0.74 fatalities per 1 million skier or snowboarder visits – near the decadelong average fatality rate of 0.67 deaths per 1 million riders visiting the hills.

Another perspective – the National Safety Council pointed out that in 2014 35,400 Americans died in motor vehicle accidents, 32,000 in unintentional falls and 42,000 from unintentional poisoning.

The NSAA also reported 45 catastrophic injuries in the 2015-16 season, a dip in the ski industry's 10-year average. Catastrophic constitutes those involving forms of paralysis, broken necks, broken backs and life-altering head injuries.

"If you look at ski injuries broadly, it's been declining for decades," NSAA President Michael Berry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Think of all the things we see that didn't exist 25 years ago (that help the cause)."

Berry, who ran Kirkwood Mountain Resort for 13 years, listed the level of awareness, equipment and better grooming as contributing factors to a stunted growth of these types of serious incidents.

"Layer all those things, and we continue to see a decline in ski injuries," he said.

For one thing, Berry cited an extraordinary number of signs on the mountains in the last decade. The ones indicating slow zones have popped up all over the slopes.

Berry suggested to those skiers or boarders who believe some riders are going too fast or get too close to perhaps consider this perspective.

"That skier flying by used to be me," the 69-year-old ski executive said. "It generates some conflict. But when you say 'I can't believe he passed me that fast,' consider that you were that person 20 years ago."



Ski patrol as Sierra early this month train on chairlift evacuation techniques.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed

## **It takes a level of courtesy, awareness and knowing your limits**

Most of the time the mingling of people works out. But sometimes it doesn't, resulting in impact on not only those who experience the injury, but to those who witness the incident.

Take Lake Tahoe skier Brenda Knox who witnessed a horrifying collision at Northstar last season. On Super Bowl Sunday she was coming down West Ridge from the summit of the backside when out of nowhere a skier acted like a linebacker by clobbering a snowboarder who was cruising into the slow zone.

The woman was between 15 to 20 feet in front of Knox doing her 10-foot turns when the man on skis who was straight lining down the hill sent her flying into the air.

“He came from my left going really fast. As she turned, he ran into her, and she flew into the air. I saw her leg break. She was screaming. She kept screaming,” Knox said.

When the ski patrol arrived, Knox told them what happened and that she saw the woman’s leg snap.

“I told them they needed to treat her for shock,” she said. “It really shook me.”

She was forced to calm down in the Zephyr Lodge after witnessing such an incident.

“What he did was so wrong. It was a slow zone. Signs were up everywhere,” Knox told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Ski area stakeholders believe they can only do so much in making the slopes safer. They can’t make people be more courteous, despite what Squaw Valley-Alpine Meadows CEO Andy Wirth told *Lake Tahoe News* he would like to see in 2017.

“We do everything we can to make it safer. Still, there’s accountability with our guests. I’d like a reboot of people being more courteous,” Wirth said.

Granted, gravity goes with the sport of skiing.

“Gravity and the thrill of skiing is part of the general passion, but you have to have balance between what gravity does for us and safety,” Wirth said. “I’m of the very firm belief that our sport is safe, if not safer than most sports.”

Wirth pointed to training – which is “extensive and exhausting,” technical advancements and the focus on maintenance of equipment that have contributed to better safety.

And by all means, the awareness helps. At its core, all ski areas operate on the seven-point mantra of having riders live by the “responsibility code,” – which is posted in many places.



Ski patrollers at Sierra work to slow down skiers/snowboarders who go too fast. Photo/Provided

### **Knowing the code helps:**

- *Always stay in control, and be able to stop or avoid other people or objects.*
- *People ahead of you have the right of way. It is your responsibility to avoid them.*
- *You must not stop where you obstruct a trail or are not visible from above.*
- *Whenever starting downhill or merging into a trail, look uphill and yield to others.*
- *Always use devices to help prevent runaway equipment.*
- *Observe all posted signs and warnings. Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas.*
- *Prior to using any lift, you must have the knowledge and*

*ability to load, ride and unload safely.*

Heavenly and Kirkwood spokesman Coop Cooper joined Northstar in declining input for this story, citing “our company’s corporate media policy,” but he didn’t indicate what the policy of parent company Vail Resorts is.

At Sierra-at-Tahoe on the South Shore, ski patroller Shannon Maguire notes the ski area goes a little further than the safety message.

Sierra takes its recruits for ski patrol and has them work as trail crew manning the slow zones.

“That program has grown since I’ve been here. More people are working the slow zones to have more eyes and ears on the hill,” Maguire said.

For patrollers, it’s just part of their training.

In the decade Maguire has been with Sierra, there are also more markers indicating mergers, high traffic areas and blind spots.

The ski resort has even expanded enhanced safety education to its racers – knowing they ski at ability levels that are quite different from beginners on the hill.





Tools of the trade when someone is injured on the slopes.  
Photo/LTN

### **Education before punishment**

Although there are no hard numbers on passes revoked locally or nationally for the season, Maguire indicated that's done as a last resort.

She noted the resort has the option of stripping away a pass for a few weeks.

"Sometimes the situation is more severe demanding stronger repercussions. But our goal is to educate them rather than go that route," she said of pass revocation.

And rarely do the consequences rise to the level of that of what Casey Ferguson endured. The Keystone (Colo.) Resort snowboarder was ordered to pay more than \$260,000 in damages from a collision that separated the shoulder of Chicago resident Tom Dubert. He was charged with reckless skiing, a rarity in the courts because many cases are settled between attorneys and insurance companies. In this case, Ferguson's parent's homeowners' insurance policy covered the damages.

This all comes with the territory for California Ski Industry Association President Michael Reitzell, who's also a personal injury attorney.

The legal cases are few and far between, despite the accidents being dramatic. The outcomes may also be determined by the state they're made in.

"Colorado is different when it comes to litigation. It's thought of as a skier-friendly state, a place to go to ski," he said. This means skiing, and therefore being safe skiing, is part of the image of Colorado.

"No doubt we're gonna see increased efforts through the years and see less tolerance for less courtesy," Reitzell told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Snowboarder, skier – whatever the equipment, if you choose to not be courteous, you're an increased hazard on the hill and an increased risk to people around you."

Reitzell also admitted a ski area can only do so much to reduce the risk – especially since the number of skier visits grew from 4.6 million in 2014-15 to 7.2 million the following year. The average of the six-year period is 6.5 million.

The association is beefing up its safety measures for the state including coming out with a generic ski safety map that highlights what to do at certain hazard zones at any given ski resort. For example, it would warn skiers and boarders to watch out for the hazards of tree wells.

"Our goal is 100 percent injury free," Reitzell said.