

Heavenly's leader leaves permanent tracks

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Heavenly Mountain Resort is nothing like it was seven years ago when Pete Sonntag came to town. And that's a good thing.

"I did come in knowing there were challenges," Sonntag told *Lake Tahoe News* in 2010.

As he packs his bags to head north to take over the management of Whistler Blackcomb, Sonntag will leave behind a different mountain than what he inherited.

The local resort is a bigger player in the community. In part this has to do with Sonntag and his family living here and not off the hill like his predecessor. His kids (they were 6, 8 and 10 when he and his wife moved here from Vail) helped get the family enmeshed into the fabric of the South Shore.

The community mattered to him and soon it mattered to his employer. He is on the boards of the Tahoe Fund and Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. Through his children he has been incredibly active in the hockey community.

Charitable contributions are now common from Vail Resorts; employees give back with time and money, as well.



Pete Sonntag is leaving Tahoe this summer to run Whistler ski resort. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On the mountain, well more than \$100 million has been invested during Sonntag's tenure. Summer activities keep growing; something that didn't exist when he started. Though, they pale in comparison to what Whistler has to offer – that will be a substantive change to get used to.

Sonntag has literally weathered multiple years of drought and record snowfall. This will be good experience because Whistler can have its challenges with snow and weather in general.

When Sonntag came to Tahoe, Heavenly was still struggling in the guest services arena. Not so much anymore.

It's not that he really wanted to leave Tahoe; it's just that a unique opportunity presented itself. Dave Brownlie, after 30 years as chief operating officer at Whistler, gave notice. Three weeks later Vail Resorts announced Sonntag's ascension to run North America's largest ski resort, at 8,171 acres, with 16 bowls, three glaciers and an Olympic history.

The Broomfield, Colo.-based ski behemoth bought the Canadian resort in 2016 for \$1.1 billion. (This will be the first season the epic pass will be valid at the Vancouver mountain.)

Sonntag actually oversees Northstar and Kirkwood resorts, too. He had the title of senior vice president of the Tahoe region. Mike Goar, current vice president and chief operating officer of Keystone Resort in Colorado, will be replacing Sonntag.

The three Tahoe area mountains combined are about the size of Whistler.

“It’s arguably one of the greatest ski resorts in the world,” Sonntag said of his new mountain. And he considers it the flagship of the parent company. He calls this opportunity “a once in a lifetime chance.”

Taking over a resort that hasn’t had a top leadership change in three decades is a bit daunting. Sonntag has been up there meeting the team, getting familiarized with the operation. He doesn’t plan to make major changes at the get-go because he said, “Nothing is broken that needs to be fixed.”

He knows it will take time to build trust and respect.

Sonntag built a strong team in Tahoe. That is why what he will miss most is the people, along with those vistas.

“I will miss being on top of the mountain and the views – that never gets old,” Sonntag said. “This has been the best seven years of my career. I’m lucky to have spent it in Tahoe.”