



Top Jobs: Ski Patrol

Ski patrol at Keystone

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By: Julie Dugdale

From before dawn to well after the lifts stop running, ski patrollers have one of the most demanding—and rewarding—jobs on the mountain.

Like much of the working world, Dusty Calfee once sat in a cubicle—until he realized what he was missing beyond the desk. These days, his “office” looks a little different. White-capped peaks replace white-washed walls, and overhead lighting comes in the form of Colorado sunshine at 12,000 feet. Morning staff meetings end with group warm-up exercises, and nine-to-five is not an option. Business attire consists of a helmet, goggles, and a red-and-black ski jacket emblazoned with a white first-aid cross.

Calfee is a ski patroller at Keystone, one of Colorado’s [largest ski resorts](#). The squad of 95 patrol members manages public safety on the resort’s 3,148 acres of terrain, which includes three separate peaks. Ski patrol duties range from emergency medical treatment to avalanche mitigation

to trail evaluation and hazard mitigation. “It’s a really dynamic environment,” he says. “We have to adapt all the time—and that’s a double-edged sword. Things change daily or hourly or minute-to-minute. You have to be really centered and aware so you can adapt to those changing conditions.”

It’s hard to convey the extremity of the job to the public, says Calfee, who’s working his fifth season with Keystone Ski Patrol. The number-one question a patroller fields on the chairlift when riding up with a guest: “So, what do you do—just ski around all day?”

Not quite.



Vail Ski Patrol. Photo by Chris McLennan.

Calfee’s alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m. most mornings, and his commute to the top of Keystone’s Dercum Mountain is over before the sun even breaks the horizon over the Rockies. Frigid temperatures and storms come with the territory. In fact, he’s one of seven patrollers on the Weather Team, which demands a chilly 4 a.m. clock-in once a week, not to mention a solo snowmobile ride up the mountain

to check snow totals at the designated **snow stakes**. After data collection and a terrain rundown

from the mountain's snow groomers and snowmakers (the true graveyard shift), morning reports have to be completed and disseminated to Keystone and the entire Vail Resorts company by 6 a.m.

After the day's briefing just before 8 a.m., the patrol team skis high-priority trails before the mountain opens to inspect conditions, identify potential hazards, and close terrain if necessary. At the end of the day, trails get skied when patrol "sweeps" the mountain. Constant communication and adherence to visual checkpoints are a must to make sure no skier is left stranded on the mountain after the lifts stop running. Staying alert is crucial, as is high-level teamwork. The resulting camaraderie is what Calfee loves most about the job: "The staff we surround ourselves with tend to be highly committed people," he says. "They're really interested in looking out for each other and getting the job done right."

First and foremost, that includes medical and rescue responsibilities: The majority of Keystone's patrollers are certified in both Outdoor Emergency Care (OEC) and Basic EMT care, and mountain rescue requires a physically demanding skillset. "Snow surfaces are changing all the time," Calfee says. Ultimately, it's the guest's responsibility to ski and ride safely, which means education is a big part of the job.

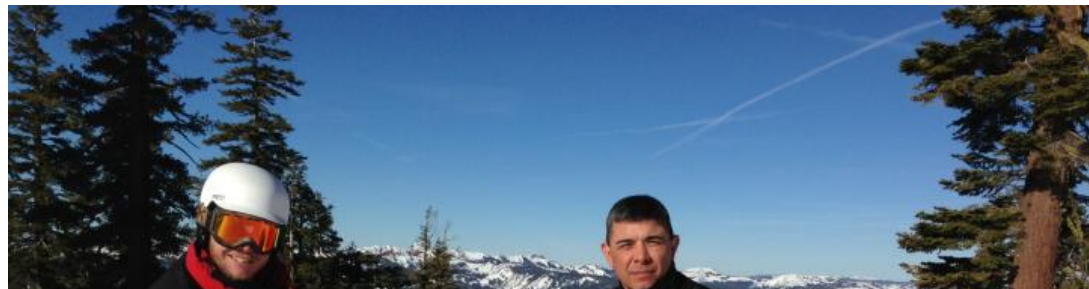
And then, there's the avalanche mitigation. If patrollers aren't ski-cutting a slope—essentially, trying to start a small avalanche with their own body weight to eliminate unstable snowpack that could dissolve into an avalanche—they might be carrying up to a dozen dynamite-like explosives to toss down the face and trigger the slide. "The risks are ever-present," Calfee says. It's why patrol does its best to educate skiers and snowboarders about those risks—and to reduce them when

possible. “If a tree falls across a trail,” Calfee says, “we’re the ones called out there with a chainsaw.”



Breckenridge Ski Patrol. Photo by Nate Zeman.

Challenges notwithstanding, more than 60 hopefuls show up at Keystone each spring for Ski Patrol tryouts. The applicants must first



prove they can ski every kind of terrain with skill and confidence, and that they have enough endurance to ski the mountain top-to-bottom, in control. But expert skiing chops aren't enough. "We look for teachable people who can follow instruction well and adapt," Calfee says, noting that a big indicator is how you handle mistakes.




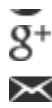
Northstar Ski Patrol.

His advice for anyone considering a career with ski patrol: "Learn to ski as best you can, get your EMT Basic certification, and introduce yourself to snow science and avalanche study," he says. "Prepare yourself to run into any situation at any time—to meet any kind of physical or mental challenge at the drop of a hat."

Look for Calfee on the slopes of Keystone this season, and check out the video for an inside look at a day in the life of a ski patroller.

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