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Getting Schooled

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Wednesday, November 22, 2017



At Green Mountain Valley School, students don't need to choose between elite skiing and school life.

It's 7:45 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in May, and the GMVS campus is awake. Some students hurry to the Weiss Academic Building to buckle down for classes, while another stream of students heads over to the Racing Performance Center, or RPC. Each one has a locker in the newly minted 30,000-square-foot center, a state-of-the-art facility with a multipurpose gym. They lace up their indoor-only trainers, split off into age groups—U16s, U19s, etc.—and head into the weight room.

Strains of Drake waft through speakers, mixing with the thrum of the Keiser pneumatic resistance squat racks. Free weights thud onto the Mondo Sportflex flooring, and the students change stations in their rounds of circuit training. The U19 women move through their stretching routine—calf, hamstring, hip flexor, ab-/adductor, quad—and then head to the machines. The movement is almost balletic, as commands are barked out by the women's head coach, Dani Koch. "We never really stop training," he comments. The temperature, although climate controlled, heats up as the groups move through a tough strength routine, followed by a stretching and cool-down period. When the students walk out the door, it's 9:30 a.m., just in time for morning classes. The rest of the day will be filled with afternoon classes, more training, maybe even a lacrosse game (GMVS offers both men's and women's Division II soccer and lacrosse), dinner, and then an evening of homework.

This is a typical non-winter day at the Green Mountain Valley School, a small ski school academy nestled in the Mad River Valley. Winter gets even busier. Breakfast at 7 a.m., gate training at Mt. Ellen by 8 a.m., all the way through until a late lunch, and then classes until 6 p.m. The kids don't roll into bed until after homework and ski tuning, somewhere around 10 p.m.

But then, GMVS has always been a place where a student could do it all. "The heart of the school is—ironically, with the focus on skiing—a place where students do not have to give up dreams of academic greatness or other sports, or theater, or the school prom, et cetera," said former headmaster Dave Gavett. "I think few schools are able to offer students access to truly being 'all that you can be.'"

This is in sync with the GMVS philosophy: develop the whole person, and create well-rounded scholars, athletes, and citizens who live by the

ideals GMVS endorses in its mission statement: "Discipline, Responsibility, Respect, Independent Initiative, Total Commitment, and Effort." This credo echoes the steady day-to-day pace of academy life and has shaped legions of student-athletes who have passed through the school's doors.

Now in its fifth decade of operation, the school has just begun a new chapter. In July 2017, it welcomed Tracy Keller as headmaster, a role that Dave Gavett filled for nearly thirty years.

GMVS, or "The Mad Acad," opened for business in the winter of 1973, with twelve winter-term students. Al Hobart, along with his wife, Jane (a local elementary teacher), Ashley Cadwell, Bill Moore, and John Schultz were at the helm. Ski school academies already existed, but Hobart and his crew wanted to wow the competition by building an impressive academic résumé. This included an MBA from Dartmouth, a Wellesley graduate with a master's degree from Brown, a Pure Math graduate from MIT, and two Middlebury graduates, one an economics major and the other with a Vermont teaching certificate.

The students arrived in the winter for a five-month tutorial program; they lived at the Hobarts' ski chalet on Bragg Hill and in a rented chalet nearby, and brought their work from their home schools. Far from today's routinized organization of school and sports, the operation ran by the seat of its pants. Transportation to and from Mt. Ellen and Sugarbush was in Hobart's station wagon or Cadwell's ailing van; individual tutorials were held wherever space could be found.

The pictures from that era capture the heady atmosphere. One shows a group of forty kids and coaches standing on a huge snowbank, as well as atop the roof of the Schultz home and barn (the second campus for the fledgling academy), bundled up in down puffs and sweatshirts, wearing broad smiles, and hardly dreaming that their experiment would blossom into a fully accredited school with its own curriculum and campus.

The academy moved to its current site on Moulton Road in 1978. The dorms were built around a cornfield, which later became a soccer field, and the whole "Let's give it a try" attitude burgeoned and grew into the community we see today, complete with a LEED-certified library, the Weiss Academic Building (renovated in 2014–15), the Racing Performance Center, the Dave Gavett theater, additional dormitories, two sports fields, and a student center.

The facilities GMVS uses to train at Sugarbush have gotten more sophisticated over the years, too. The school has its own dedicated training area at Mt. Ellen, the Kelly Brush Race Arena, boasting a T-bar, revamped Poma, and the Inverness and Brambles trails, all maintained by Sugarbush. With the mountain's snowmaking capabilities, GMVS can get athletes on snow in early November; in addition, Sugarbush is able to host some of the first races of the season in New England. (The area is used not just by GMVS athletes but also by U.S. Ski Team members, thanks to the recent joint designation of GMVS and Sugarbush as a U.S. Ski Team Development Site and a U.S. Ski Team High Performance Center.)

As the school and mountain facilities have changed, the original student body has grown to an enrollment of 117 students—both alpine and Nordic skiers—but one thing is constant: the vision remains true to its 1973 roots of developing the whole person.

This resonates with the current leadership. Tim Harris and Kerry Jackson have served as interim co-headmasters for the past year, with Jackson in the role of academic director as well. "We attract people that are drawn to our mission of developing the whole child," Harris said, as he ticked off the core tenets that comprise the GMVS mission statement. Harris commented that the families who embrace GMVS, and the students who attend, "clearly see that we are different, and that we have a strong academic program, a great college record, and that we also have an athletic program that can satisfy the needs of a top-level world athlete as well as someone who is working on the goal of becoming a top-level athlete."

GMVS even manages to put on a full-scale musical production each fall. Recent productions include *Shrek*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Les Misérables*, and *Legally Blonde*, complete with live orchestra and Broadway-inspired singing. "I asked Al Hobart and Ashley Cadwell my first year at GMVS if I could start a theater program, and, in true GMVS fashion, they simply said, 'Go ahead.'"

Past and current students capture this spirit. Thomas Walsh ('13) had starring roles in several theater productions during his time at the academy. "GMVS taught me to be respectful, self-reliant, independent, fiscally responsible, and to take ownership of my actions. What I learned at GMVS has spilled over into everything I do," he said. Thomas will likely compete on the U.S. Paralympics Alpine Skiing National Team in the 2018 Paralympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. (In 2009, at the age of fourteen, just days before Thomas was to attend GMVS, he was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, a rare disease in which cancer cells are found in the bone and soft tissue; he had a series of major surgeries, including on his pelvis and his lungs.)

Daron Rahlves ('91), a U.S. Ski Team member and World Cup champion who participated in four Winter Olympics, said, "The perseverance and work ethic I learned from GMVS in the classroom, gym, and outdoors . . . propelled me into an amazing ski career that lives on to this day."

Mike Riddell, the father of GMVS student Lydia ('20), loves to see his daughter doing what she is passionate about, both on and off the snow. "What the GMVS kids learn about themselves and life goes much further than going around red and blue gates," he said. "GMVS is supportive and invested in guiding Lydia's growth and development as a student athlete. It's a fabulous training ground for life."

Hannah Utter ('17), who was in the U.S. Ski Team's 2016–17 National Training Group (NTG), valued the dual demands of skiing and academics. "Being a student-athlete, instead of just an athlete who just does school, kind of prepares you to manage your time and to work a little harder," she said. She'll soon be skiing for Dartmouth College, where she's a member of the class of '21.

Jimmy Krupka ('16), who, like Utter, was part of the 2016–17 NTG (and was selected again for 2017–18), said he was pushed along by GMVS's "grueling" training program and high-level facilities. "GMVS prepared me very well for skiing at a higher level with the Development Team," he said.

When I spoke with the incoming headmaster, Tracy Keller, by phone, her husband and their three-year-old son were heading out the door to ski. After a misplaced ski sock was found and Keller's family left for the mountain, we settled in for a brief but uninterrupted conversation, her four-month-old daughter happily cooing in the background.

Keller grew up in Rutland, Vermont, and started ski racing when she was six years old. She went on to race for Dartmouth. By her senior year, she was captain of the ski team and thought she was going to attend law school, but first she wanted a fresh start away from the East Coast.

"Sight unseen, I took a job at Sugar Bowl Academy [not far from the Donner Pass in California] as a teacher, coach, and dorm parent," she said. As the years passed, and she assumed more responsibilities, she realized that she wasn't going to attend law school, so instead got her master's degree in secondary education from the University of Nevada, Reno. One thing led to another, and when the head of school stepped down, she served as interim head, eventually assuming the top role after a nationwide search. She held that role for six years.

Keller was not deterred by the fact that the world of ski racing—both in terms of who coaches at the highest levels and who leads the ski academies—is heavily dominated by men (she is one of only two females heading a ski academy in the U.S.). "A lot of it, I attribute to being a member of the Women's Ski Team at Dartmouth and being surrounded for four years by women who really didn't see [being a woman] as a barrier," she said. "For me, being a part of that team fostered the sense that we can do whatever we put our minds to."

With families shopping an array of choices in independent and charter schools, from STEM education to a focus on the arts, Keller believes that ski academies have their own niche, which gives them an advantage. If students want to ski competitively, she explained, the easiest path is to be "on the ground at a ski academy." Part of her role will be to articulate what that ski academy experience has to offer.

She thinks another part of her role as headmaster is to honor the history and culture of the school. At the same time, she said, "We are at a point where we can expand in the ski academy market, and say, 'Hey, the ski academy model is valuable in so many different ways.'" She hopes to take GMVS to the "next level," and incorporate some of the work she did at Sugar Bowl. During her tenure there, Keller helped take the school and ski club to new heights, earning reaccreditation, achieving U.S. Ski & Snowboard Association Gold Certification (a measure of a school's organizational and athletic success), doubling enrollment, and spearheading a successful \$13 million capital campaign.

A daunting challenge? Perhaps, but Keller is tough, thoughtful, and not afraid to take on that task. With her at the helm, GMVS is ready to start on its next chapter.



The early days of GMVS, at the Schultzes' home in Moretown



GMVS's training ground at Mt. Ellen - Inverness and the Kelly Brush Race Arena



Drew Duffy at Sugarbush

LAUNCHING PAD

GMVS skiers might have gone on to train and compete at the highest levels. Here are a couple of recent highlights.

USSA National Training Group

Out of all of the U19–21 ski racers in the entire country, three GMVS athletes were named to the U.S. Ski & Snowboard Association's National Training Group (NTG) for the 2016–17 season: Hannah Utter ('17), Jimmy Krupka ('16), and Ben Ritchie ('19). To put this in perspective: only four women qualified in the U19–21 age category, and only five spots were available on the men's squad, with two GMVS athletes filling those slots.

The NTG is the premiere venue for young athletes to hone and develop their skills. Athletes are selected based on objective criteria built on international rankings, performance, and head-to-head competition.

As Krupka wrote from Park City, Utah, where he and Ritchie were currently training with the Development Team: "At GMVS, the importance of fundamental skills is stressed from a young age. . . . When I joined the NTG, I had a solid base to work from."

Utter credits GMVS with much of her success. "A lot of my teammates came into [the NTG], and they weren't really ready for the demands of the physical training and the time management," she said.

Ritchie adds that his year with the NTG "was amazing. The travel, the coaching, and being able to train and race with the top guys was unbelievable. You get to see where you stand against some of the guys that race World Cup."

U.S. Ski Team



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