



THE SKI UTAH PASSPORT PROGRAM OFFERS DISCOUNTED LIFT TICKETS AND GEAR TO FOURTH-, FIFTH- AND SIXTH-GRADERS.

THE CHANGING FACE OF SNOW SPORTS

Stakeholders look beyond the core to reverse the participation plateau. By Eric Smith

As SIA Research Director Kelly Davis sifted through last winter's data for the *2016 Snow Sports Intelligence Report*, she uncovered at least one promising stat buried underneath mounting evidence of plateauing participation.

"There are more girls under 17 snowboarding than ever before," Davis says.

While the number of downhill ski participants (alpine and freestyle) declined 1 percent to 11.6 million and the number of snowboard participants declined 1 percent to 7.6 million in 2015-16, more young girls boarding signified an underly-

ing positive trend for an industry that has seen participation across most disciplines stagnate in the past decade.

"Super-core snowboarders back in the late '90s are parents now, and they want to snowboard again," she says. "Their jobs aren't eating their lives, their young kids aren't eating their lives, and they're saying, 'I'm going to intro-

duce my kids to snowboarding.' They're sharing their passion with their kids."

More people sharing the passion of snow sports – whether it's alpine skiing, freestyle skiing, cross-country skiing, snowboarding or snowshoeing – is critical as industry stakeholders look to grow their audience and overcome the same two hurdles that have hindered participation since 1970 – expense and proximity to a resort. The other obstacle, of course, is poor weather, which doesn't affect the number of participants but does alter the frequency of par-

ticipation for existing skiers and snowboarders.

What many stakeholders agree on: To get off the participation plateau, the industry must think beyond its core and attract a more diverse audience – age, gender, race, socioeconomic – to build the next generation of snow sports enthusiasts.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

The industry's challenges remain the same: Entice casual skiers and snowboarders of all backgrounds to participate more often and also bring newcomers to the sport. The solution is also the same: Find new ways to ignite or reignite a passion for snow sports among those who have never tried one or who have drifted away.

Myriad programs across the U.S. are pursuing this mission. Learn to Ski and Snowboard, a coalition of industry stakeholders from retailers to resorts, ski manufacturers to ski associations, again hosted Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month in January. The program encourages newcomers to take a lesson from a professional instructor at a resort instead of learning from a sibling, friend or spouse.

"The dropout rate (for those who don't learn from a professional) is very high, 85 percent, compared to the number of people who take a lesson and stick with it," says Mary Jo Tarallo, executive director for the Learn to Ski and Snowboard/Bring a Friend initiative. "The idea is to guide that beginner along the right path."

Plenty of other programs have similar ideals. The Bring a Friend program incentivizes skiers and snowboarders to introduce someone else to the sports. Clubs like the National Brotherhood of Skiers work to attract people of color to skiing and snowboarding. Nonprofits like SOS Outreach (see sidebar) introduce snowboarding to un-



WHITETAIL SKI RESORT IN PENNSYLVANIA PARTICIPATES IN LEARN TO SKI AND SNOWBOARD MONTH.

deserved youth who wouldn't otherwise be exposed to it. Resorts in places like Southern California are posting signs in Spanish to draw more Hispanic skiers and riders.

And numerous ski associations are promoting programs to drive traffic to their resorts. Ski Utah, for example, has a three-pronged approach to its passport program. Instead of limiting it to one grade, something other associations do, Utah includes fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders. Each year is designed to further stoke a love of skiing and snowboard-

ing among students while weaning them off the discounted passes by the time they're in junior high.

"We've seen kids go from never really thinking about skiing and snowboarding because of their socioeconomic position to participating in the program and falling so much in love with it that when they get to seventh grade they do newspaper routes or whatever they can to make money to ski," says Raelene Davis, vice president and director of marketing, Ski Utah.

BACK TO BASICS

Snowboarding icon Jeremy Jones stays true to roots. By Eric Smith

Long before Jeremy Jones (right) was shredding the world's gnarliest descents on his namesake snowboard, he was just another kid sliding down the mellow hills of a Cape Cod golf course on an old Burton Backhill.

Growing up in Massachusetts in the early 1980s, Jones and his brothers Steve and Todd – the founders of Teton Gravity Research – made their first turns on that golf course, an experience that sparked in each of them a lifelong passion for snowboarding.

"It's where a lot of people learned to slide down snow," Jones says.

Now the star of numerous action sports films, creator of a successful snowboard line and founder of the non-profit organization Protect Our Winters, Jones has ascended to snowboarding icon. Yet he remains true to his roots when it comes to his role as an ambassador for the sport.

Jones taught his kids to ride on a small hill at his North Lake Tahoe house by putting them on a binding-less board and letting them glide down – "stand-up sledding," as he calls it. Without the need for expensive equipment or lift tickets, the hill proved the ideal training ground for his kids and their friends, much like Jones's own origins.

"In a lot of ways, that is where it should all start," he says. "Less is more, especially with kids."

Jones didn't take his children to a lift-operated ski area until they were a few years older because he believes the purest experience of skiing and snowboarding doesn't require a destination trip to a megaresort, which can be expensive and intimidating for many families.

He instead preaches the simple pleasures of snow sports – the giddy joy of sliding down a slope on an inner tube or a sled or a binding-less board with friends and family, followed by a roaring bonfire and a cup of hot chocolate.

This is the secret to growing snow sports participation, he says – more people learning how to ski and snowboard on backyard hills or golf courses before they graduate to their local ski area. And once they do, simplifying the "house-to-chairlift" process will bring even more people to the sport and foster lifelong engagement. This grassroots approach might even create the next Jeremy Jones.

"All the pieces are there," Jones says. The question now is, "How do we connect the dots?"



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF WHITETAIL SKI RESORT; JEREMY JONES



CASE STUDY: REMOVING BARRIERS

SOS Outreach targets at-risk & underserved kids with snow fun. By Eric Smith

Vincent Lefteroff (left) grew up in South Lake Tahoe, where he was surrounded by nine ski resorts and a hardcore winter sports culture, but he likely wouldn't have discovered snowboarding without the help of SOS Outreach.

Founded in 1993, the Eagle, Colo.-based nonprofit connects at-risk and underserved youth with the outdoors – snow sports in the winter and hiking, camping and backpacking in the summer. It operates at 31 resorts and has raised millions of dollars in cash and in-kind donations to help kids like Lefteroff find success both on and off the slopes.

Lefteroff learned to snowboard a few years ago and says he was "hooked" on the sport soon after his SOS mentor Matt helped him lace up his boots and strap into his board. "We snowboarded all day," says Lefteroff, now 19. "It was amazing. To me, it just clicked."

SOS reaches more than 5,000 at-risk children each year through its extensive programs in Colorado and California, and it has served 4,000 youths through winter programs alone during the current program year, says Executive Director Seth Ehrlich.

The organization partners with a variety of sponsors that donate everything from gear to discounted lift tickets to volunteer work. With their help, SOS increases exposure to snowboarding while reducing the expense – often the biggest roadblock for many children it targets – and also introduces youth to careers in the snow sports industry.

"SOS's success is creating a community around a sport so that these kids who have never been in it and never had parents who participated in it now have support systems to continue in the activity and continue in their own personal success," Ehrlich says.

SOS measures success differently for each individual, Ehrlich says, whether that's "graduating high school, going to college, going into the military or going into a career and being able to support themselves."

Success is easy to measure for Lefteroff. He has developed such a passion for snowboarding that he now works as a lift operator at South Lake Tahoe's Heavenly Mountain Resort, where he makes turns on his breaks and revels in being part of a community that once seemed so far away despite being in his backyard. He is even working to become an SOS mentor to teach other kids how to ride and find their own success.

"Snowboarding is definitely part of my life," he says. "These programs give kids the chance to get outside of their normal lives, put them into something new and spread the love of snowboarding."



SOS OUTREACH PARTNERS WITH SPONSORS FOR GEAR, CASH AND VOLUNTEER HOURS TO REACH UNDERSERVED YOUTH.



Another association, Ski Vermont, addressed last year's decline in visitation by asking customers what they want and then crafting products to meet those demands, says Communications Manager Chloe Elliott. For example, its Take 3 program gives visitors three lessons for \$129, which is both inexpensive and encourages return trips to the mountain.

"What they're telling us they need is a more affordable way to get out into the mountains," Elliott says. "They need more incentives. They need family options. So, we've really tailored all of our programs and packages to those needs."

GENERATION GAP

One group whose needs aren't being met is Millennials, according to numerous industry insiders. The under-35 population is skiing and snowboarding half the number of days of the preceding generation, says Nate Fristoe, director of operations, RRC Associates. This lower level of participation from the younger audience has stakeholders scrambling.

"Right now, our product offerings aren't necessarily in

alignment with what they're telling us they want," Fristoe says. One example: potential season-pass buyers can't be bothered to figure out the different types of products available and their varying purchasing deadlines. If someone finally decides in December that they want a season pass, it's often too late, Fristoe says. And when they see how much a lift ticket costs at the window, they're likely to bail.

Because Millennials want to participate in a different way, the industry needs to adjust and pivot to meet their needs, and that message finally appears to be getting through. "People are sobering up to it," Fristoe says. "A lot of folks are waking up to this reality."

While some resorts offer ski passes geared toward Millennials, reaching them extends beyond products that might save them a few bucks. It's about conveying, through the right channel, why they should invest their disposable income in snow sports. "Our message has to be spot-on and the offers have to be good enough to convince them to spend their money on skiing," says Ski Utah's Davis. "When Millennials like something, they'll become a disciple of it, but there are so many choices for them now."

Growing participation among Millennials requires a new way of thinking because many of them are moving away from rural areas and mountain towns to urban centers, says National Ski Areas Association President Michael Berry. Messaging targeted at Millennials must be pitch-perfect, and any experience or product designed to meet their needs must be revisited often to ensure it's still viable.

You have to have a holistic effort that pushes things forward. We have to share best practices.

"This is not a problem that you can think that you've solved," Berry says.

"If you reinvented your ski school five years ago, it's probably time for another redo right now. It's the issue of never ignoring the reality of your future – and entry (into snow sports) is the reality of our future."

'THOUSAND PATHS TO THE TOP'

Gateway sports are another way to drive participation, according to SIA, which found that 8 million people in the U.S. went sledding last winter (though it's not technically listed as a snow sport). This presents an opportunity to bring more people to skiing and snowboarding, according to SIA Board Chair Bob Gundram. (See sidebar.)

"The traditional programs that provide discounts and incentives to get people – especially kids – skiing keep the participant base nice and stable, but the research suggested that we have to look at the issue with fresh eyes if we want to grow the market," says Gundram, CEO of C3. One solution, he says: "Consider sledding events in population centers to promote skiing and snowboarding and recruit new participants."

Big-mountain snowboarder Jeremy Jones preaches "stand-up sledding" – basically snowboarding without

bindings – on small hills and even golf courses as a way to teach kids how to slide down snow, lowering the barrier to entry by cutting down the cost and expanding the places where people can participate (see sidebar).

But as the industry continues exploring new ways to attract and retain participants, and also to encourage them to introduce snow sports to their friends and family members, the fragmentation of manufacturing brands, retailers, resorts, associations and ski clubs remains a roadblock that must be razed. "You have to have some kind of holistic effort that pushes things forward," Fristoe says. "There's a brutal economic reality underlying what a lot of the hard-goods and softgoods companies are experiencing. But at the end of the day, we have to cooperate on these things and share best practices."

These best practices are a "thousand paths to the top of the mountain," says SIA's Davis, who understands that a collective and collaborative journey of all snow sports stakeholders will make the summit more attainable.

"We need to build these thousand paths to stoke that passion that we all feel for snow sports," she says. "It's a unique thing, and most of the people in the community want to share it. And it's not just about making money. We love the drug. We love it and we want other people to have that experience." ●

SHARING THE STOKE

What does the future of snow sports participation look like? Bob Gundram, chair of SIA's Board of Directors and CEO of C3, spoke with *Snow Show Daily* about the challenges facing the industry as it works to grow participation for a healthier future. By Eric Smith



What is keeping people from trying snow sports for the first time, and how is the industry addressing this?

Time and money – or really, lack of time and money – and not knowing how to get started are the most common reasons people give for never trying snow sports. SIA recently under-

took a huge research project (Downhill Consumer Intelligence Project) to find out how our participant base has changed and what we can do to expand it. Here are some of the major recommendations:

- > Continue traditional programs that clearly work
- > Create content that describes how to get involved with snow sports and post it where potential consumers are likely to visit
- > Consider sledding events in population centers to promote skiing and snowboarding and recruit new participants
- > Use social trends like the sharing economy, constant connection and festivals to promote snow sports
- > Sell equipment to participants who are not considered "core"
- > Use regular and consistent consumer intelligence research

Is the industry doing enough to keep up with the changing needs of a diverse pool of participants?

Probably not, but we are working to discover how we can better address those needs. We all know that the demographics in the U.S. have changed significantly over the past 20 years and are going to change even faster over the next 20. Changes including more ethnic diversity, erosion of the middle class and the growing buying power of women haven't escaped our attention, and we are keeping a close eye on how those changes may impact the snow sports market in the future.

How important is collaboration in the industry?

Collaboration is critical to the health of the industry. The SIA Snow Show is one place where all of those groups come together and events like SIA's Industry + Intelligence are designed to spur discussion around topics like how to grow the market. We all want the same things and we can get there faster if we work together. SIA President Nick Sargent has done an outstanding job of listening and engaging all of the groups in snow sports. Working together and listening to each other should help us maximize our impact on the snow sports market.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THERE ARE MORE GIRLS UNDER 17 SNOWBOARDING THAN EVER BEFORE. HERE, THEY TAKE A BREAK FROM SHREDDING AT WELCH VILLAGE IN MINNESOTA; GETTING KIDS STARTED EARLY AT SEVEN SPRINGS MOUNTAIN RESORT IN PENNSYLVANIA; EMBRACING THE FUN OF SNOW AT LIBERTY MOUNTAIN RESORT IN PENNSYLVANIA; SNOW IS IN THE AIR IN BELLEAYRE, NEW YORK.

COURTESY OF LIBERTY MOUNTAIN RESORT; WELCH VILLAGE; SEVEN SPRINGS; BELLEAYRE