

How Now, Pow Mow?

by: Jason Blevins

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Eden, Utah - Pop quiz: What's the biggest ski area in the country?

Hint: It's not Vail.

Or Snowmass. Or Big Sky-Moonlight. Or Breck. The ski area with the most skiable terrain in the United States is northern Utah's Powder Mountain.

Never heard of it? Well, get ready. The buzz in Utah - and the fear of the mountain's loyalists - is that this 5,500-acre powder wonderland, happily huddled in the shadow of 2002 Olympic venue Snowbasin, will soon rightfully be crowned as Utah's fluffiest jewel. And what a rock she is.

The aptly named hill, a short drive from a village named Eden, is not just the largest, softest hill on Utah's trophy shelf of ski areas. It's one of the most affordable, with \$50 lift tickets and \$70 slopeside hotel rooms. It's definitely one of the snowiest, with more than 500 inches last year.

It's also the most varied. Shuttle vans ferry skiers from the bottom of "front-country" terrain - 2,700 acres of lonely, ungroomed stashes - back to the mountain-top base. Helicopters fly guests to steep and technical lines and \$8 Sno-Cat rides delivering skiers to all corners of this privately owned powder temple. Combine the whole package and it's a matter of time until the murmur on Powder Mountain builds into a scream.

Fresh tracks abound

"People talk about fresh tracks at Alta and Snowbird, but those last a few hours at most," said Linda Weiskopf, a mountain host at Powder Mountain - known affectionately as just "Pow Mow" - who helps skiers find their way around the hill. "You can get fresh tracks here days, even weeks, after a storm."

As if to prove her point, Weiskopf herds a group of powder-seeking newcomers to the top of a remote peak. It's a weekday in early February, and Utah is en-

during one its least snowy stretches in recent memory. (In Utah-speak, that equates to a typical season in most of Colorado. For the record: Utah skiers are spoiled.) It hasn't snowed for several days. Everyone at the resort is warning of less-than-stellar conditions.

Run after run delivers soft turns tucked into steep, technical lines. It's not over-the-head blower, but it's silky. You can't help but think of how fast the snow would be churned if this three-mountain resort was anywhere near Salt Lake or Colorado's Front Range. Looking out at the pastoral Upper Ogden Valley, it's easy to envision the day Dr. Alvin Cobabe was riding horses on a vista-drenched ridge nearly 50 years ago when he was struck with the notion of building a ski area. He owned the land - more than 8,000 acres that once served as his father's sheep ranch. And he was no stranger to chasing dreams late in life. Cobabe left the ranching business in 1956 and three years later, at age 45, was the oldest person to graduate from Utah Medical School. Today, at age 93, the patriarch has hung up his skis, but he is active in the operation of the modest-but-massive ski area he opened 35 years ago. Employees who stood by him on Pow Mow's first day are still there, selling tickets, running lifts and driving shuttles. It's a family affair.

Primo location

Last year Cobabe sold his beloved hill to a Utah investment group, but not before he oversaw the installation of Pow Mow's first and only high-speed chair-lift. As with most resort changes in ownership, particularly the increasingly rare founder-to-investor sale, the price of real estate surrounding the resort has soared. The 2,800-acre Snowbasin ski area a few miles down the road is still wallowing in its post-Olympic glory. In the middle of the two powdery paradises, investors have converted Wolf Mountain - a 100-acre beginner's playground - into a bona fide ski area.

Add Pow Mow's reluctant rise into the international ski spotlight, and the snowy triumvirate of resortdom

is girding the Upper Ogden Valley to usurp Utah's pair of Cottonwood canyons as the destination of choice for Beehive State skiers.

And Ogden, a 20-mile drive from Pow Mow, is pushing to dethrone the Olympic-draped Salt Lake City as Utah's gateway to the slopes. Ogden's mayor, Matthew Godfrey, is using tax incentives and a revitalized downtown to lure outdoor companies - he already has bagged close to a dozen, including Goode and Descende - in his push to make his humble burg a hub for the nation's \$730 billion outdoor industry. The town is mulling plans for a gondola stretching between its Weber State University campus downtown and a proposed ski resort just east of the city, a move that would make Ogden the only U.S. city connected to a ski resort.

"This type of environment helps foster product innovation, provides a great quality of life to employees and a community supportive of outdoor recreation," says Frank Hugelmeyer, president of Boulder's Outdoor Industry Association, a trade group representing 4,000 outdoor gear companies. "Salt Lake City hosts the Outdoor Retailer trade show biannually and offers a major airport, making nearby Ogden an alluring location for companies seeking a mid-sized, mountain town feel."

Pow Mow is already pulling a lot of the weight in the push to put the Ogden area on the world's ski map. Used to be, says longtime local skier Phil Wagner, skiers would come to Pow Mow to "get their ski legs" before heading to hot spots like Snowbird, Alta and Park City.

"Now they come and stay here all week without going anywhere else," Wagner says. "I kind of hate to tell you this, because you're going to go write it somewhere, aren't you? I guess that's good. Word's bound to get out."

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Get to know Pow Mow

At 5,500 acres, Powder Mountain can be a bewildering hill. It's one of those "upside-down" resorts, too, with the base area at the top and most lifts down be-

low. A mountain host for groups of six or fewer costs \$125 a day and is a good way to learn the mountain. Single-ride Sno-Cats cost \$8, and lift tickets run \$50 for adults and \$30 for kids 12 and under. And 4-10 p.m. night skiing runs \$19 for adults and \$14 for kids.

Skiable acres: 5,500.

Lift-served acres: 2,800.

Vertical rise: 2,000 feet.

Terrain: 113 runs with 10 percent beginner, 50 percent intermediate and 40 percent advanced.