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Management and Operations

Spotlight: The quintessential ski couple



Al Raine and Nancy Greene

Al Raine, a former ski racer, coach and resort hotel entrepreneur, has been Mayor of Sun Peaks Resort, near Kamloops, British Columbia since 2010. And yet back in his gung-ho ski racing youth his parents were anxious that he might never find a 'real job'.

His introduction to skiing was in his preteen years at Mt Seymour in North Vancouver and he went on to ski at Mt Baker where his childhood mentors were Al Menzies and Franz Gabl. During the 1960s, Al lived and ski raced in Badgastein, Austria where he learned German. A trilingual coach, Al rose rapidly through the ranks from club level, to division and, ultimately, to the national team. He was Head Coach and Program Director for the Canadian ski team from 1968-73.

In 1974 he turned to the ski industry, working first as B.C.'s Provincial Ski Coordinator where he authored B.C.'s successful Commercial Ski Alpine Policy and served as the provincially

appointed councillor on Whistler's Municipal Council between 1975 and 80. He went on to become the Executive Director for the Whistler Resort Association from 1980-82. Winter wanderlust sent him on sabbatical to Switzerland with his family from 1983-85. And, on his return to Canada, he brought progressive European inspirations to hotel projects he developed and managed, first in Whistler and then in Sun Peaks between 1985 and 2010. In 1988 Raine was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame.

During his phenomenal fifty-year career he has noticed major changes in the focus and infrastructure of the ski industry. "From 1950 to the 1960s skiing was a small family of people, smaller ski areas and everyone knew everybody who skied," Raine recounts. By the 1970s Canadian skiing had become "chic," he says, with more expensive, bigger and more commodious resorts: "By the 80s and 90s, resorts were full service and skiers were no longer hard core 'mountain people' except for the minority." This is when resorts started to focus on a wider range of facilities and amenities to make skiing a comfortable winter vacation for everyone. Raine says resorts began to improve access, lifts, grooming, and ski equipment to reflect this softer trend.

Nowadays, as Mayor of Sun Peaks, Raine is committed to providing a positive experience for everyone in town. "We do what is necessary to improve the resort for those who live, work, and visit Sun Peaks," he explains. Ironically, the resort he moved from is Sun Peaks' main rival in attracting destination skiers. "The major competition for Sun Peaks is Whistler in the long haul markets and regional Okanagan ski areas in the regional market. But we focus mainly on improving our product and service and not on what the other resorts are doing," says Raine.

His format for a great ski vacation follows the '6, 8 and 10 rule': "Winter sports today cater to the masses and it is much more than just the sport, we are in the entertainment business and there are only six hours of skiing, eight hours of sleeping and rest and 10 hours - or the biggest part of the day - is spent eating, socializing, relaxing, enjoying friends etc. These 10 hours of fun with friends and family are a very important part of our business today."

And Sun Peaks has certainly cornered the market on après ski entertainments. As well as having lovely, alpine architecture and décor throughout the easily walkable resort, it has a full menu of activities including bungee trampoline, cat trax groomer rides, dog sled tours, horse drawn sleigh rides, fondue dinner with torchlight descent, snow limo, snowmobile tours, snowshoeing, tube park, pro-photographer shoots, first tracks breakfast, resort transit, a wide array of accommodation and eateries and spas, as well as the more traditional ice skating and ice hockey. "In the old days, skiing and ice skating were about the only activities happening in winter," says Raine. "Today there is a ton of competition for the entertainment activities, indoor tennis, fitness halls, basketball, volleyball, professional sports watching, badminton, squash etc., mostly easy and relatively inexpensive to access."

These kinds of amenities also facilitate four-seasons' functionality which Raine considers vital for the future success of Sun Peaks, and ski resorts in general. "Resorts must diversify during the winter months and for the off season," says Raine. "The best resorts in the future will be those that have strong winter and summer seasons, better value for money and better staff and services. The economics of resort operations change when you have year-round revenues and stable committed year-round staff."

His love of skiing is reflected by his career path but, when asked what the perks of his job are, he says "I met my partner for life." This is Nancy Greene Raine who as Nancy Greene is known to millions of ski fans for her illustrious career in ski racing. She was top racer for Canada throughout the 1960s, winning Olympic gold and silver in 1968 and notching up 13 World Cup victories (still a record), and 17 Canadian Championship titles. She then went on to become the mother of team ski racing for children all over Canada when the Nancy Greene Ski League spread across the country on the tailcoats of her 1968 successes. Interestingly, Al Raine, then the Southern Ontario Coach, proposed the League and asked Nancy to endorse it the year prior to her Olympic medals. Greene is still Honorary Chairman of the League and in 1999 she was named Canada's female athlete of the century.

Nowadays, her roles include Director of Skiing at Sun Peaks, past Chancellor of Thompson Rivers University and also, since Jan 2009, Senator for British Columbia in the Government of Canada. And she still finds time to guide people around the mountain, working for the Sun Peaks Resort Corporation as well as Tourism Sun Peaks. "My situation is pretty unique, and I am very much part of a team," she says. "I've never considered what I do as a 'job' - certainly I don't have a job description. I just use my initiative to promote Sun Peaks as best I can, and to be out on the slopes connecting with our guests every chance I get."

As well as her value in celebrity endorsement, her interaction with tourists helps garner valuable feedback to resort management. And being able to ski with Nancy Greene is an added "wow factor" for visiting media and travel industry personnel as well as tourists at the resort as Nancy skis with guests daily when she is in Sun Peaks. For many years she partnered with Raine in the building and running of Nancy Greene's Cahilty Lodge at Sun Peaks. "We have sold the hotel management company to former staff, but still assist with hosting," she says. "Everything I have been able to do in ski tourism has been alongside Al." The two were married a year after Greene retired from ski racing at the age of 24.

Sources: Interviews with Al Raine and Nancy Greene Raine, November 2014

On-mountain operations

Ski lift operations

The network of lifts at a ski resort can be arranged in several patterns depending on the size and topography of the area. A common pattern is where several lifts run outwardly from a common base area to top stations along surrounding peaks and ridges. Lifts might also run inwardly from several base stations to a common summit area. Ski areas located along the face of a long ridge may simply have numerous lifts running roughly parallel, and high-traffic areas may have two or more lifts in parallel for increased capacity. A small percentage of ski areas have lifts which cross one another, usually with an aerial lift crossing above a surface lift, and some have lifts connecting two mountains; the PEAK 2 PEAK Gondola connecting Whistler and Blackcomb mountains is a good example of such a lift.

Needless to say, operating ski lifts is an important element of ski area operations. In the U.S. alone, there are approximately 3,500 lifts, the vast majority being traditional double, triple and quad chair lifts (both fixed and detachable), as well as gondolas, surface lifts, rope tows and aerial tramways. Ski areas tend to adhere to rigorous and exacting inspections procedures for their lifts, and they tend to have an excellent safety record (NSAA, 2012). Ski area employees conduct their own individual inspection to their lifts on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis. This maintenance regime is conducted pursuant to state agencies, lift manufacturer requirements, federal regulations, national safety standards and other inspection entities. It is not unusual for a ski area to close a lift due to adverse weather conditions and the decision to close lifts is usually determined by a select group of ski area managers, which may include the general manager, ski patrol director, the risk manager, and/or the manager of the lifts department.

Ski areas tend to invest heavily in new and upgraded lifts. In the U.S., capital expenditures on new and upgraded lifts is well over \$1 billion going back to the 1996/97 ski season, with an average investment at more than \$69 million on lifts at resorts each year (NSAA, 2012). In addition, ski area expenditures on lift maintenance and repair has increased overall by 92 per cent in the last decade, representing an ongoing financial commitment to effective and safe lift operations at ski areas across the country.

Snowmaking

As was mentioned in Chapter 3, early season snow cover is critical for ski resorts, as demand is often the greatest at this time (over the New Year period in particular). Skier perceptions of early conditions greatly influence the momentum and success of the overall season (IBISWorld, 2013). If the temperature is low enough, most resorts now have the snowmaking capability to put down a base at the start of the season if natural snow has not arrived. The quality of snow cover is also important, with skiing performance and enjoyment being related to the following parameters: density, temperature, liquid water, hardness and texture (Perla & Glenne, 1981).

Snowmaking requires extremely large amounts of water – about 140,000 gallons for an acre-foot of snow. A typical ski run, 200 feet wide with a drop of 1,500 feet would take three acre-feet of water (55 tanker truck loads) to cover it with one foot of snow (Mill, 2012). Most resorts pump water from one or more reservoirs located in low-lying areas. The run-off water from the slopes feeds back into these reservoirs, so the resort can use the same water over and over again. Capital costs for snowmaking can run from \$10,000 to \$20,000 for each acre to be covered, but the big expense is power consumption. If a slope uses compressed air in its snow guns, it needs to provide a large amount of energy to run the large air-compressing pumps. It also requires a pump system to provide the water to the snowmakers. Airless snow guns consume a lot less energy for every foot of snow they produce, but they are still major power draws. Snowmakers have to