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Billy is still the Kidd

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Posted on Sunday, December 28, 2008

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Color World/STEVE HAGGERTY
 Skier Billy Kidd is on top of the world at Steamboat Ski Resort. The former Olympian has been the resort's ambassador and cheerleader for decades.

Color World/STEVE HAGGERTY Good snow and safe slopes make Steamboat Ski Resort excellent for family skiing.

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. - By January, the snow lies steep and deep on the slopes at Steamboat Ski Resort, in northwest Colorado. Which is just how former Olympian and 1964 silver medalist Billy Kidd likes it.

But Kidd, Steamboat's official ambassador, doesn't need the real thing to feel that old adrenaline rush or hear the whoosh of skis slicing through fresh powder. There's snow in his yard this morning, enough for a lesson, but he ignores it. Instead, he jumps up from the breakfast table to show visitors invited for scrambled eggs how he does it.

"I can improve your skiing right here in this room," says the expansive 65-year-old, reaching for a pair of imaginary ski poles. He bends his knees and balances lightly, poised to power-carve through a snowy glade. "You don't believe me?" he asks, not waiting for an answer. "The secret is visualization."

We'd watched Billy - everyone calls him that - in action the day before at one of his "Ski With Billy" clinics, held on most winter afternoons at the top of the Christie Peak Express, Steamboat's new highspeed six-pack chairlift. The 90-minute clinics are one of the mountain's most popular events.

By the time Billy showed up, wearing his signature cowboy hat with the pheasant feather hatband, a crowd was waiting to meet the man whose face and career have been synonymous with Steamboat Ski Resort for the past 30 years. Some were serious skiers, hoping for a moment of enlightenment. Others were fans, there to gawk and shake his hand. But few could resist Billy's high energy and confidence. After the final ski-along back to the base area, even skeptics were convinced that sliding on snow was as natural as walking.

When Billy gave up racing and decided to put down roots, this area's so-called "champagne powder," (the resort has patented the phrase) was one of the reasons that he hitched his star to Steamboat Ski Resort. If there's a flurry within 100 miles of here, it seems to find its way to the Park Range, on the westernmost

slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The snowfall is so predictable, in fact, that climatologists come to study how those featherlike flakes are formed.

"It's our location that's so unique," said Mike Lane, the resort's spokesman. "We get the south end of northern storms and the north end of southern storms. We're the first real barricade most Pacific storms hit after they cross the [Utah] Wasatch Mountains."

Last year's snowfall, totaling 489 inches measured at midmountain in early April, was a record-breaker, said Lane. And the storms came at intervals, regularly dumping new powder to create perfect ski conditions all season.

Seen from the middle of town, a mile from the resort, the mountain appears to be a single massive peak. But the behemoth actually has six mini-peaks, including 10,372-foot Storm Peak, 10,384-foot Sunshine Peak and 10,565-foot Mount Werner. Twenty chair lifts on 2,965 skiable acres access 165-odd ski trails that run along sloping ridge lines, down through gladed steeps, through gentle meadows and down to the base along wide groomed cruisers.

There's some expert terrain here. But Steamboat is mostly intermediate country. More than half the mountain's trails are rated for the average recreational skier; at least onetenth of the trails are groomed for beginners, a safe place for a novice to practice those selfvisualization techniques.

Ahead of his time, Kidd discovered the power of imagination in grade school in Stowe, in Vermont's Green Mountains, where skiing was a school elective. While most of the kids were shooting hoops, Billy was jumping the bumps. When he wasn't on the slopes, he was pretending.

"I realized I could sit in the classroom and build muscle memory by imagining how to turn," he says. "When I got older, I watched films and analyzed what the skiers were doing. You get those mental images in your head, then you just let it happen."

Where it happens today is at the Steamboat Resort's Billy Kidd Performance Center, designed for motivated skiers of all skill levels. The one-, twoand three-day camps offer Olympic-style coaching with a strong emphasis on what Billy calls "building the basics." The coaches emphasize positive attitudes and winning strategies. They also carry video cams and use them liberally, to help skiers do visualizations.

Equally popular is the "Kids Ski Free" program. The best deal in the country, it's designed to make it affordable for parents who ski to bring their children along, too. For every adult who buys a five-day

lift pass, or a ski and boot rental, a child aged 6-12 gets one free. On some packages, even the airplane tickets are free. For more on these programs, call (800) 922-2722.

A recent face lift at the base, part of a five-year \$40 million renewal project, has transformed the look of the base area. But Steamboat Springs, a ranch town settled long before skiing came along, is as friendly and unpretentious as ever. U.S. 40, running down the center of town, still has the original diagonal parking spaces, without meters, for a realtime back-to-the-future look. The brick buildings are old timers, too, and so are many of the homes built on adjacent streets. For a touch of history, visit the Tread of the Pioneers Museum, in a vintage house on Oak Street.

"I guess we won't see any gongs for sale," quipped our son, Paul, a reference to the oriental gong we'd seen in an art gallery in Aspen, priced at \$15,000. More typical here is F.M. Light, a century old and still doing a land-office business selling jeans, work overalls, leather belts, gloves, jackknives and so forth. They sell Billy's signature Stetson, too, a chocolate-brown model with a slightly-rolled brim.

For a rollicking good time and great food, book a reservation for the Western barbecue dinner served at the top of the Gondola on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Staggered reservation times move everyone past a buffet laden with rare roast beef, chicken, pork ribs, a half-dozen vegetables, potatoes, rolls, salads and dessert.

A country and bluegrass band tunes up at 9 p.m. to play favorites ranging from Patsy Cline classics to "Rocky Top" and the "Orange Blossom Special." Adults, teenagers and children jump up to dance; the rest, imagining they're dancing, tap their toes.

To really enhance your ski vacation, consider renting a condominium on or near the slopes. Not having to ride the shuttle bus makes the entire day go more easily. We stayed at a unit in the Bear Claw Condominiums, 100 yards up the slope from the base, and loved the convenience. We also skied more, but in shorter spurts.

One of the resort's original properties, each unit is privately owned, but all are updated regularly. One- to three-bedroom units are available, all with rustic decor and contemporary amenities, from TV and entertainment center to fireplaces, fold-out sofas and fully equipped kitchens. Ours had games, puzzles, a DVD player and books. The complex has private parking, an outdoor heated pool, hot tub, game room, apres-ski bar, ski lockers, 24-hour front desk service and a film library with a couple of Warren Miller ski titles. All the better to try a little "visualization."

Ways and means

LESSONS, CLINICS AND LIFT

TICKETS

Prices for lessons, lift tickets, one-day lift tickets and lodging can vary according to the date, weather and availability, and often change as the season continues. Discounts are offered in early and late season. For up-to-date information check the Web site, at www.steamboat.com. In general, one-day tickets are the priciest. Five- or six-day passes are discounted. For Billy Kidd's two- and three-day Performance Camps call the Ski & Snowboard School at (970) 871-5375 or (800) 299-5017.

STAYING THERE

Call Central Reservations at (800) 922-2722, for hotels and condominiums. Free ski shuttles run between all accommodations and the ski base, and between the resort and Steamboat Springs.

Bear Claw I and II luxury condominiums, on the slopes, have one, two and three-bedroom units on the slopes. Fiveday stays start at \$425 per night. At (800) 232-7252 or visit www.bear-claw.com.

The Shadow Mountain Condominiums, economy lodging a half-mile from the ski area base, are clean and comfortable. All have a kitchen nook, cooking equipment and TV. The building has a swimming pool and ski storage.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

The Chamber of Commerce at (970) 879-0880 and www.steamboat-chamber.com. Steamboat Central Reservations, lodging, lift tickets and shuttle services at (800) 922-2722 and www.steamboat.com.

GETTING THERE

American, Continental, Delta and Northwest fly into Hayden or Denver. The ski area is one mile from Steamboat Springs, and 22 miles from Hayden Airport. Shuttle services run all day, every day.

- Anne Z. Cooke & Steve

Haggerty

FEEDBACK:

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