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Night Moves

**Why More Resorts are Putting On-Hill
Action Under the Lights**

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Night Moves

Why More Resorts are Putting On-Hill Action Under the Lights.



The concept of night skiing is nothing new. It has been around since the early 1960s, when resorts began adding permanent lights to trails. Night skiing offers the obvious advantage of opening up the mountain when most people are not at work, offering another option for those weekend warriors. But with low temperatures, and in some cases, poor lighting, night skiing has never quite reached the popularity of daytime recreation. Almost 200 resorts in North America offer night skiing, but nighttime accounts for only 6.2 percent of ski area visits, according to the 2006/07 Kortke End of Season Survey.

One solution ski resorts have found to increase nighttime visits is to offer nighttime events. Running the gamut from terrain park and halfpipe contests, to races, to family festivals, to all-night ski events on special occasions, night events bring in bigger crowds, and hopefully, increase awareness of the resort's nighttime capabilities.

"We used to offer night skiing without the night events and it wasn't cost effective for us," Cranmore Mountain Resort Director of Marketing Kathy Bennet

says. "Combining the two has been a huge success for us."

Based in North Conway, N.H., Cranmore's main night event, Cranapalooza, is a festival of music, entertainment and games in addition to skiing and tubing. On select nights the festivities also include fireworks, and those have proven to bring in the biggest crowds. But increasing volume isn't the only reason to hold events at night.

"Sometimes it's just the right atmosphere for the event to take place under the lights...it sets the right tone," says Shannon McSweeney, communications manager for New Jersey-based Mountain Creek.

And having fewer guests there to simply ski and ride can make hosting events easier she added. "Night events can help to minimize the operational impact on the rest of the resort guests. Fewer customers are



By Brooke Geery

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“Copper’s nighttime events, whether it’s En Fuego or the night time Big Air event for the U.S. Open, helps to round out the mountain vacation experience for families.” — PR Manager Lauren Pelletreau.

impacted by trail closures, or bottle necking in the base area, etc.”

The ski industry has definitely seen an increase in night events over the past 10 years, perhaps because it is one area where there is still plenty of room for growth. Night events not only bring in more customers to use the ski lifts, but also help bolster the business of shops, concessions and après ski destinations.

“Copper’s nighttime events, whether it’s En Fuego or the night time Big Air event for the U.S. Open, helps to round out the mountain vacation experience for families,” says PR Manager Lauren Pelletreau.

Some of the most popular events to hold at night are rail jams. Thanks to the compact set up and spectator-friendly nature of these events, they lend themselves well to the night environment.

“Our rail jams have done better at night than during the day because we can get creative with lighting and we have plenty of park and pipe staff available,” Ski Roundtop’s Marketing Director Chris Dudding says. Ski Roundtop, in Lewisberry, Pa., offers three Friday night rail jams that have drawn as many as 200 competitors.

At Heavenly in South Lake Tahoe, Calif., the JackPot Rail jam series lights up Saturday nights in March.

“These events work well at night because the lights add a sense of excitement,” Heavenly Communications Coordinator Aimi Xistra-Rich says.

Many other resorts across the country host night rail jams each year, including Jiminy Peak,

Mass., Mt. High, Calif., and Ski Sundown, Conn., to name a few. Not all freestyle events are confined to jibbing through, a lot of resorts use their whole lighted terrain park to draw in competitors.

At Big Mountain, Mont., the Night Rider series vies to attract young skiers and snowboarders throughout the winter with an event that includes its terrain park and pipe. At Shawnee Peak in Maine, holiday Sundays host the regions freestylers in its “Super Hits Sunday Under the Lights” series. The snowboard-only Arcade Night Jam at Brighton, Utah, is popular with competitors. “It gives younger kids the opportunity to compete, since most of them are in school,” Brighton’s Dani Torp says.

Freestyle events at night also lend themselves well to being televised, anyone who’s watched the Winter X Games on live television the past few seasons can attest to that.

“We’ve seen a trend where events with a national television package attached tend more and more to be night events,” Mountain Creek’s McSweeney says. “They look very impressive on TV.”

Mountain Creek has hosted a stop of the Grand Prix series, as well as the qualifier for the Union Square Street Sessions at night. Aspen Mountain, Colo., has signed on to host the Winter X Games through 2010, lighting up its Buttermilk base area, and takes advantage of the large crowds by also including a stop of its outdoor concert series.

“Our guests are so busy during the day, skiing, snowboarding, shopping, snowmobiling, spa-ing, that nighttime events give everyone a chance to check it out with out another activity conflict,” Communication Manager Melissa Rhines says. “It’s one more thing to add to the winter fun, but at night!”

Another common theme at night is team events. Fewer conflicts in people’s schedules at night are perhaps the reason that group events work so well. At Powder Mountain, Utah, in the 3 on 3 Team Challenge, teams of three go head-to-head on three pre-chosen terrain features each night, in a battle for various awards, with the series winners taking home season passes.

“The event began three years ago in an effort to boost mid-week revenue and to promote the Sundown Terrain Park,” Powder Mountain’s Director

of Public Relations Carolyn Daniels says. “With little spent on promotions, the event quickly maxed out with 80 competitors.”

And it’s not just freestyle night events that lend themselves well to teams. “Our core night activity is our race league,” Wachusett Mountain’s Marketing Director Tom Meyers says. “Four nights a week for eight weeks we have 200 racers a night. It’s really established itself over the years as one of the biggest night race leagues.”

Many other resorts offer night race series as well. Shawnee Peak and Lost Valley, Maine, Blanford, Mass., and Ski Sundown, Conn., all host corporate race events, taking advantage of proximity to nearby metropolitan areas with companies looking to give employees an activity to do after work.

Blue Mountain, Pa., offers a different race event nearly every night of the week. Its Pinnacle Sports/Blue Mt. Challenge race series take places on Mondays, adult racing Tuesdays, NASTAR racing Thursdays and snowboard racing Fridays. Being able to offer events midweek during non-holiday periods is something that is only really effective at night, but of course, but it’s not going to replace events on weekends.

“Our weeknight events and programs do attract a good amount of participants and spectators, but our weekend daytime events still attract more,” Blue Mountain’s Marketing Manager Sandy Harlan says.

Maybe it’s because the concept of skiing and riding at night is a little unconventional anyway, but many resorts offer some less-than-expected events as well. At Ski Roundtop, Pa., the Cardboard Derby challenges teams to build cardboard vehicles and race them down the slopes. Shawnee Peak holds an annual Snow Mountain Bike Race at night. At Mission Ridge in Washington, Saturday nights starting in December include guided snowshoeing for the whole family.

“We are interested in getting more folks up to the mountain that might not ski or snowboard yet to show them how much fun winter and snow can be,” Mission Ridge’s Marketing Director Jerri Barkley says. “The snowshoe trips have been great because they are achievable and not too long.”

Some resorts have stayed away from night events in the past and are just starting to come



Copper Mountain’s En Fuego – Spanish for on fire – features fire performers, seen here, a torchlight parade and brilliant fireworks displays, seen opposite.



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Southeast, Midwest Own the Night

The 2006/07 Kottke End of Season Survey indicates that the Southeast and Midwest have the highest proportion of night visits, 29.9 percent and 26.6 percent respectively. The Pacific West tallies 6.1 percent of its visits at night, followed by the Northeast at 4.7 and only 1 percent of visits in the Rocky Mountain region occur at night. By resort size, night visits play a much more important role at smaller resorts. The survey shows 27.3 percent of visits occur at night at smaller resorts, whereas larger resorts log only 2.5 percent of visits at night.

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Nearly Half of Tubing Visits Occur at Night

Last season 44 percent of tubing visits occurred at night, according to 74 responding resorts. However, the results vary greatly when broken out by region. More than half, or 59 percent, of tubing visits in the Rocky Mountain region occur at night, followed by the Midwest at 52 percent, the Southeast at 48 percent, 36 percent in the Northeast, and only 1 percent of tubing visits in the Pacific West.



around. Camelback, Pa., will host its first night event this season, a torchlight parade as part of its 45th birthday celebration.

"There's one reason it will be held at night — because it's a torch light parade and will be best visible when it's dark! We have stayed away from night events in the past because our day events have been so successful, the weather is better, the crowds are bigger, etc." Camelback events coordinator Keri Oney says. "I don't think cold weather will keep any guests from participating; after all they're here to ski/ride in the first place."

The cold can be a factor though. "If it's warmer the crowds will be bigger, if it's colder the crowds will be smaller," Wachusett's Meyer says. But as Oney said, people come prepared to be out in the cold.

"Some bring hot cocoa and everyone dresses in their snow gear," Heavenly's Xistra-Rich says. "Audiences like the cold, crisp mountain air and the night lights really create the 'big game' ambiance."

While night events begin happening as early as November and continue throughout the season, one of the biggest nights is definitely New Year's Eve. Taking off on the festive atmosphere already created by the holiday, many resorts choose to offer events that day. Winter Park, Colo., holds its Jingle Rails Rail jam, featuring invited professional and amateur athletes on Dec. 31. In Connecticut, Ski Sundown holds a family party featuring skiing until midnight, food, music and a parade. At Wachusett, Meyers says New Year's is the biggest night of the year.

"We do a big fireworks display around 10 and then leave the lifts running until midnight. What we've really established is a great night for people looking to do something fun as a family," he says.

Another popular option is to highlight one or a few days a season and keep the lifts running all night. At Keystone, Colo., 36-hours of Keystone is an opportunity to ride for a day-and-a-half straight. It even includes a team challenge actually encouraging people to do just that. The goal is to complete one lap every hour for a total of 36 runs in teams of two, three or four. Those who complete the challenge are entered in a drawing for cash.

Another all-night event at Ski Roundtop takes on a good cause. "Ski 4 Life" is a 24-hour ski and snowboard marathon to benefit the Leukemia and

Lymphoma Society. At Paoli Peaks in Indiana, there's no need for special events, the lifts run 24 hours every weekend. Wachusett also considers all-night skiing an event in itself, staying open 24 hours one night during February vacation.

"It takes night skiing to another level," Meyers says. "It's amazing how popular overnight skiing was, even in the first year. We have an average of 1,000 visits."

Keeping skiers on the slopes all night isn't always the goal though. At some point it's nice if they head down to the village and take part in après-ski festivities, which night events definitely help facilitate. Many resorts opt to hold awards ceremonies off-hill, to avoid the cold, and also get people into the bar. Many events continue the fun right into the after-party. At Mountain Creek for example, its annual shop employee event Tour de Creek includes a rail jam, photo contest and huge after-party where winners are announced and there is also an additional competition at the party, such as karaoke.

The general consensus from the ski industry is that night events are a great way to increase traffic at otherwise slow times, but there are challenges. It makes for long days for staff members. Additional lighting may need to be brought in to make the event friendlier for riders, photographers and spectators. Nighttime is typically when grooming is done, so considerations must be made for that. And of course it's cold.

"When the snow guns are blazing and the wind is howling, it can get pretty chilly," Mt. High Director of Marketing John McColly says. "But for the most part, they are not that much more work than day events and they may even be easier at times because you have less hill traffic to worry about." ■



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