

Under the Lights

Who says après-ski can't include more skiing?

BY DINA MISHEV

THERE WAS A time when I thought the only kind of skiing was night skiing. Embarrassingly, this “time” lasted a full decade. In my defense, this decade coincided with my tween and teen years, which were spent living in Maryland’s D.C. suburbs and taking occasional trips with my Camp Fire troop to “resorts” with vertical drops of about 800 feet. By the time I moved to Jackson at age twenty-one, I knew most skiing happened during daylight hours. And I wasn’t happy about it. I had come to Jackson Hole to ski and didn’t want ski days to stop at 4 p.m. I was particularly sensitive to these “short” ski days because I was the world’s worst ski bum: I had an 8-to-5 Monday through Friday office job, which meant I had only two ski days a week.

And then one evening I noticed a high-wattage glow illuminating the lower slopes of Snow King Mountain. The day after this

Sunset in Jackson Hole doesn't mean the lifts stop spinning.





Jackson Hole Ski & Snowboard Club members rely on Snow King's illuminated slopes for much of their after-school training.

revelation, I added a Snow King season pass to my collection, which, since it included only one other pass—a Jackson Hole Mountain Resort (JHMR) Weekend Warrior—wasn't actually much of a collection. For the rest of that season, every Saturday and Sunday I'd ski until the last lift at JHMR closed. Then I'd come into town and ski at Snow King for as long as my quads lasted. This usually wasn't as long as I would have liked. Still, I was in heaven. Since Snow King's lights were on most weekday evenings, too, I started skiing there after work. I got more days in at the King that year than at JHMR.

It's been twenty years since my first Jackson ski season. I no longer have a weekday office job. Working for myself, I set my own hours. Still, every season I get a Snow King season pass in addition to a JHMR pass; I do this specifically for the King's night skiing. I no longer have to go night skiing, but find that I want to. I'll take actual skiing over après-skiing any day of the week (at least for as long as my quads can stand it).

SKIING UNDER THE brilliance of lights so bright they illuminate the several blocks of town nearest Snow King's base area has a completely different vibe than skiing when the sun is out. The biggest difference is crowds. The night skiing I did on the East Coast as a Camp Fire Girl was crowded; my greatest standout memory from these adventures is of waiting in lift lines.

Another difference is the cold.

While Snow King's nighttime lift lines are benign—nonexistent, really—often the temperature is not. I have been colder than when night skiing on Snow King, but not too often. I'll admit this was my own fault, though. The few times I spent my lift rides shivering and my lips turning blue, I had dressed for day skiing, prioritizing cuteness over comfort. That lesson learned, today it's not unusual for me to wear two puffy jackets on top of my warmest base layer and a fleece midlayer, down mittens, and, beneath my helmet, a thick wool hat. The first time I dressed this aggressively, it

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felt bulky, but now it feels more like a hug and reinforces the sense of coziness I get from night skiing. Swaddled in so many layers, combined with often being the only skier on a run, which happens especially the last hour the King's lifts are open, night skiing is peaceful and meditative in ways I never feel when carving turns in daylight. Night skiing is not a secret—you can see Snow King's lights from miles in most every direction—but it feels like it.

SNOW KING HASN'T always had night skiing. The resort's current general manager, Ryan Stanley, isn't exactly sure when it started but says, "I think it was in the late eighties. At the latest it was 1994. I've got a set of plans sitting around dated to 1994 for some lighting." Lights were installed not with the main purpose of selling more lift tickets to the general public, but to give local junior ski racers a place to train. And that remains the case today. "Night skiing is critical for the Jackson Hole Ski & Snowboard Club (JHSC)," Stanley says. "Pretty much all their athletes train under the lights. If there weren't lights, they couldn't train after school."


If you hit the early side of the King's night skiing, say between 4 and 5:30 p.m., and stick to the Cougar lift, it's hard to miss the JHSC athletes zipping around. When they're not running gates, groups of these groms—only slightly less feral than a pack of wolves—zip around jibbing off the smallest features, launching off lips, and generally skiing better and faster than you ever will. (Local

Evening lift access at Snow King, where chairs spin until 7 p.m., starts at \$25. Early morning or late-night skiing is accessible by obtaining an uphill travel pass through the resort.

lingo translator: A "grom" is a young skier, boarder, or surfer. It's not unusual for Jackson groms to be ripping from the top of the JHMR tram by age five and skiing Corbet's Couloir for the first time the next year.)

Two-time Olympian Resi Stiegler and Olympic hopeful Breezy Johnson are just two of the JHSC's success stories. Fifteen years ago, Stiegler was the JHSC racer with tiger ears on her helmet. (And yes, she continued to wear them when she graduated to World Cup and Olympic races.) Maybe the young woman who added flair to her JHSC uniform with ribbons and a tutu, and who flew past you on Old Man's Flats, is a future Olympian or World Cup racer.

As fast as these kids freeski, you should check them out practicing in the gates, which you can easily do. Coaches set up the JHSC training courses on the skier's left side of the Lower Elk run. Take a break from your skiing and stop alongside the course to watch as the racers zoom past. There's no "whoosh" from the younger racers, but there is when the older racers—high schoolers—fly past.

The majority of Snow King's night skiing terrain is rated as intermediate. If you're looking for the easiest of these runs, head for the Rafferty lift instead of Cougar. (These, along with a short Magic Carpet lift for really young kids, are the only lifts open at night.) A benefit of skiing Rafferty is that it puts you in close proximity to Haydens Post, which, when you've had enough skiing and are ready for après, has food and drinks waiting. 

NUTS & BOLTS



SNOW KING IS open for night skiing from 4 to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday from December 2 until March 25. Lift tickets are \$30 for adults and \$25 for juniors (ages 6 to 14) and seniors (64 and older). The Magic Carpet Family Area is also open for night skiing, and a pass for the whole family to use this beginner area for young children is \$10. 307/734-3194; snowkingmountain.com