

The Day They Threw Cow Chips in Las Vegas

For skiing's P.T. Barnums, no news is bad news.

BY JEFF BLUMENFELD



At its finest, skiing is both an art and a science—as is effective marketing. In 1993, Killington commissioned six artists to customize 45 cabins as part of the launch of the Vermont resort's new Skyship gondola. The public relations score was hauling a cabin to the Whitney Museum in New York City for an evening of celebration and national exposure. A legal kerfuffle ensued when an enterprising illustrator artfully claimed that his work had been exhibited at the Whitney.

It was about 6 a.m. on a chilly morning in the early 1970's when then-Sugarbush marketing director Chan Weller and Gary Black Jr. of the *Baltimore Sun* began a slow hike to the top of the Sugarbush Snowball ski trail to witness an event which may have been a first at any ski area in the East.

After lighting smoke flares, the friends used an old wind-up 16mm film camera to record pilot John Macone, perhaps best known as the top PR executive at the Squaw Valley Olympic Winter Games in 1960, perform one of the most audacious PR capers of all-time: landing a ski-equipped airplane on a ski trail.

After a short flight from nearby Warren-Sugarbush Airport, Macone guided the plane to an uphill landing, bouncing across the moguls. He managed not to bury the prop in a pile of snow, according to Weller's 2019 account on Sugarbush.com.

Soon, they realized their folly. "Macone could get busted and his flight ticket pulled. I could lose my job as marketing director at Sugarbush. Black would be the only survivor," Weller wrote.



CHAN WELLER

Right: Billy Kidd took the first run of the 1977 season on a ribbon of crushed ice in Central Park for NBC's *Today Show*. Arranged by Steamboat and the Ski the Rockies Association, the stunt did make it onto the show, though a heavy rain persuaded co-anchor Tom Brokaw not to partake in a planned ski lesson from Kidd. Above: John Macone landing his 1951 Piper Super Cub on Snowball trail at Sugarbush. The perpetrators of the early 1970s stunt have all moved on, but the airplane still flies in Montana.



TAMSIN VENN

"John cranks her up, I get ready to release the rope, Gary rewinds the 16mm and points it at the plane for posterity and we have 'lift off.'"

The two later chuckled that the Ski Patrol, none the wiser, were puzzled about two straight tracks down the mountain that simply vanished.

It remained a secret until the internet came along, and the clandestine escapade could be shared in all its grainy black and white glory with the world. (See it at <https://tinyurl.com/sugarbushstunt>)

CHANNELING BARNUM

You'll find them at Sugarbush and every other ski resort. At X-C touring centers. At gear and apparel manufacturers and at ski shows. Promotional stunts are skiing's modern-day version of P.T. Barnum, the American showman who in the 1800s sewed a monkey's torso and head onto a fish and called it a mermaid, and toured the country with a woman he said was George Washington's 161-year-old wet nurse.

In the ski business, promoters went to extreme lengths to grab

attention. The goal was to stage events so outrageous, so over the top, no media outlet could ignore it.

Consider some of the wackiest ski promotions of the mid-20th and early 21st centuries, which, so far, looks to be the golden age of ski stunts.

BOMBS AWAY

At the head of any publicity parade would certainly be Walt Schoenknecht (1919-1987), the entrepreneur who opened Mohawk Mountain in Connecticut in 1947, then ventured north to purchase a 500-acre farm from the man with the perfect name: Reuben Snow. Mount Snow, opened in 1954, went to extraordinary lengths to generate awareness, according to Thad Quimby, writing in the *Burlington Free Press* (Feb. 12, 2016).

"He put a pool outside in the cold and a skating rink inside. He started a ski club in Florida. He allowed a fountain to run in the winter to create a mound of ice large enough to ski down (and people did ski it). A showman? Maybe. Crazy? That's fair," Quimby writes.

"He even commissioned the Atomic Energy Commission to

explode an underground nuclear bomb to create a bowl for skiing and add more vertical feet to the resort. Thankfully, calmer heads prevailed, and his request was denied," according to Quimby.

By the 1970s, publicity stunts were as much a part of skiing as stretch pants and bota bags.

FOR PETE'S SAKE

In an inspired bit of Barnumesque showmanship, in 1977, Crested Butte promoters enlisted Tom Pulaski, then the 20-year-old director of the Gunnison Climbing School and Guide Service, to impersonate the fictional "Crested Butte Pete," then camp at Crested Butte's Monument Hill with his Siberian husky mix Charlie.

The plan called for Pete to remain on top from early November until he could ski all the way down, certainly no later than Thanksgiving Day.

He was only supposed to be there for 10 days, but needed to resupply to cover an eight-day delay. On Thanksgiving, a flock of sixth graders brought him a turkey. Meanwhile, thanks to a telephone

line in his tent, he conducted radio and TV interviews nationwide, racking up publicity for happy Crested Butte executives. Even Charlie became a star of Colorado TV weather reports.

After 18 days, there was enough snow to make the first triumphant run of the year, all filmed by three TV stations and witnessed by numerous fans, according to *Skiing Magazine* (February 1978).

Recently contacted in Gunnison, Colorado, where he is a retired woodworker and property manager, Pulaski says he still hears from people annually who remember the stunt.

"The promotion really worked. It was just kooky enough that it caught everybody's eye," he tells *Skiing History*.

Speaking of first runs, Olympian Billy Kidd took the first run of the 1977-78 season in New York's Central Park when Steamboat Ski Area and the Ski The Rockies association purchased a truckload of crushed ice and spread it on a tiny hill near Fifth Avenue and 72nd Street, exclusively for the *NBC Today Show*.

The idea was to give skiing enthusiast Tom Brokaw, co-anchor of the show, lessons in slalom racing.

Steamboat flew in 550 pounds of powder, which had congealed into hardpack, then spread it atop 8-1/2 tons of more hardpack ice purchased in Manhattan.

It didn't rain that day, it poured, adding to the not exactly prime conditions. Promoters asked the ice vendor whether he thought they should go ahead and spread the ice. "Why not?" he said, according to a story about the event in *Ski Magazine* (February 1982). "You paid for it."

To his credit, Brokaw showed up in a business suit, apologized and begged off the stunt.

Ski The Rockies promoters were as crushed as the ice. But there was a happy ending: later in the season, Brokaw and a film crew visited Steamboat to ski on the real stuff.

EYE IN THE SKY

In the early 1990s, war broke out among New England ski resorts regarding who had the most trails. If a trail from top to bottom is defined as Upper Middlebrook and Lower Middlebrook, is that one or two trails? Some resorts increased their trail counts by creative naming, without cutting a single tree. Killington, determined to put an

end to the nonsense, hired an independent aerial surveillance company to fly over their competitors' terrain and count trails.

Former Killington marketing director John Clifford recalls, "We picked the top 10 ski resorts in the Northeast and left the smaller areas alone."

Some fellow marketers thanked Killington for actually expanding their terrain; others requested that the "Beast of the East" mind its own business. The *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* lapped it up when the results were released.

In 1993, Killington created its high-speed heated Skyeship gondola. To add some sizzle, they commissioned six artists to create 45 artsy designs for the exteriors of 139 cabins, calling the result an "art gallery in the sky." So what better way to launch the new lift than at a private event at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art? A gondola cabin was trucked to the Whitney to impress otherwise blasé New Yorkers. The event generated enormous exposure for the resort but later resulted in a lawsuit. It seems one of the gondola artists claimed his work was exhibited at the Whitney. Technically yes, for one evening. But the buyer of one of the artist's other works sued for misrepresentation. Killington was happy about the promotion. The buyer of the artwork, not so much.

HUMAN SNOW GLOBE

How could this possibly fail? To create excitement at the annual Ski Dazzle ski show in Los Angeles in 2002, Greg Murtha, then the marketing director of Sugar Bowl, near Lake Tahoe, created an inflatable 18-foot Human Snow Globe. Visitors could step inside to enjoy a "blizzard" of shredded Styrofoam. Jeep, a corporate sponsor, parked a new car inside. It was a huge hit, although Guinness World Records turned down their submission because the globe didn't contain water.

The plastic see-through attraction toured California ski and auto shows until Murtha realized that it might not be healthy for visitors to breathe

in Styrofoam dust. Later, Sugar Bowl turned the giant plastic globe into a sumo wrestling arena. People lined up to don one-size-fits-all inflated sumo suits and have a go at it.

"It was hysterically funny. People would watch for hours," says Murtha, who now runs Xplorit, an interactive virtual travel company in Incline Village, Nevada.

"We succeeded in putting a smile on people's faces as they engaged with our brand. There were a few drunk rounds of faux wrestling, but those stories are best untold."

HOW NOW BROWN COW

It's not just ski shows and resorts that resorted to press stunts. The largest ski industry association also succumbed to the siren song of publicity. During a 1983 trade show, DuPont and Ski Industries America (SIA) hosted a cow-chip tossing competition in the Rotunda of the Las Vegas Convention Center. In the same hall where the Beatles performed in 1964, SIA encouraged the industry to bond and create publicity by throwing dried cow excrement, for distance.

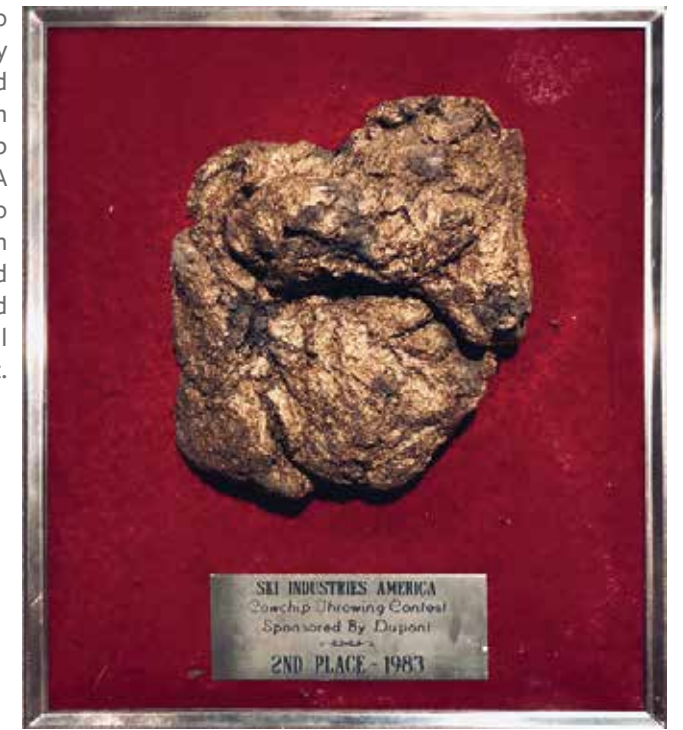
"The rules were simple," said then-SIA president David Ingemie. "Reps competed against retailers in an event well-lubricated by free alcohol."

Ingemie remembers the cow chips, on arrival, were, "very fresh – right off the ranch." They had, however, dried into fragile discus-shaped pies. It turned out that mere strength wouldn't win the contest: throw too hard and the pie disintegrated. Finesse and technique ruled the day.

I was in the room where it happened. After about an hour I looked at Ingemie. He looked at me through a cloud of dry cow chip dust, and we both realized how disgusting the event was becoming. The name of the winner is lost to skiing history.

But Ingemie managed to nail second place and has the plaque to prove it. "To this day, my wife still gives me, er, crap about hanging a cow chip on the wall, but I remember it as one of the funniest events we ever did at the Ski Show."

What better way to cultivate industry esprit de corps, and some publicity, than sponsoring a cow chip throwing contest? SIA and DuPont thought so at the 1983 show. Then SIA president David Ingemie still has the 2nd place plaque on his wall to prove it.



Another legendary SIA Show escapade began in 1982. A boom was on in polyester fleece and Gore-Tex skiwear, so journalist Bob Woodward (not the *Washington Post* Woodard) and friends thought it would be a hoot to dress for dinner in polyester leisure suits. Woodward dubbed himself The Right Reverend Lester Polyester of the Holy Church of Synthetics, and his flock convened at El Sombrero, a far-off-the-Strip Mexican restaurant. Dozens of reps and retailers dressed like extras in a John Waters movie for an evening of debauchery that is fondly recalled to this day. The Poly Party became a tradition.

"The '83 party was a ripper as word spread around the SIA Show that good times were to be had at a totally out-of-kilter party which would be the complete opposite of the typical corporate big bash," Woodward told the trade publication *SNEWS*.

By 1986 the party drew dozens of staid corporate ski executives channeling their inner *Saturday Night Fever*. Woodward needed a larger venue. In April 1987 *Sports Illustrated* reported, "One highlight of the convention was the 'Polyester Party' at the El Rancho bowling alley. People

who never wear anything but cotton turtlenecks and wool sweaters raided the Vegas boutiques for synthetic shirts and shorts, and prizes were awarded for the flashiest getups."

Woodward recalls, "The realization that we had created something really big came while waiting for baggage at the Las Vegas airport, and watching a ski show attendee's bowling ball rolling out onto the conveyor belt."

So next time you read about a crazy ski industry stunt involving former speed skiing legend C.J. Mueller strapped on top of a moving car, or click on a viral video of a two-year-old snowboarder at Jiminy Peak, or watch TV coverage of a ski area's sled dogs hauling along Central Park South, remember these stunts don't just happen. Behind the scenes is a ski promoter risking a job, just to get you to slide a little more often. ❄️

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Left: Speed-skiing record holder C.J. Mueller donned a pink speed suit and a tuck on a car moving at non-record-breaking speeds to promote skiing. Above: The self-promoting Poly Party becoming a tradition at the annual SIA show in Las Vegas in the 1980s.