

# Times Colonist (Victoria)

## Friends get together and build a ski resort

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Illustrations: Photo: Courtesy Jeff Jones / Helen Brown, the chairwoman of the Mt. Cain Alpine Ski Society, takes a shift on the slopes with the group's new groomer. Volunteers operate all the heavy equipment.

Photo: Courtesy Jeff Jones / Helen Brown, Emma Tayless and Donna Wilson paint the building that houses the ski lift terminus.

Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to the TC / Nearing the end of a perfect day skiing at Mt. Cain.

Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to the TC / The lodge gives skiers and snowboarders a place to warm up and have lunch, as well as providing overnight guests with rustic accommodation upstairs.

Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to the Times Colonist / The lodge is anything but upscale, but visitors -- whether gathered around the trestle table for a simple potluck supper or gathered around the woodstove for group music-making -- seem to enjoy themselves.

Anyone who's visited a ski resort can appreciate the effort and expense it takes to run one. There are lifts to be maintained, slopes to be groomed, access roads to be plowed, rental skis and snowboards to be kept in good repair ... the list goes on and on.

Now imagine running a ski facility with mostly volunteers. And doing it so well you win an award for "best community-run ski hill."

"You certainly have to put aside other things in your life in order to do what we're doing, as directors," says Helen Brown, the hard-working chairwoman of the Mt. Cain Alpine Society, which runs the Mt. Cain ski hill north of Campbell River. "It's pretty overwhelming. You're basically running an entire business from a volunteer standpoint."

While many of us on Vancouver Island -- even skiers -- have never heard of Mt. Cain, it's beginning to get some national recognition. A four-page spread in the latest issue of Ski Canada magazine extols its delights -- the powder snow, the small crowds, the 457-metre vertical drop, the underdeveloped beauty of the place and, not least, the tireless commitment of the volunteers who make this place come alive every weekend.

Two years ago, Ski Canada magazine recognized Mt. Cain as one of the country's best community-run ski hills. According to the magazine's contributor, Mark Mallet, "It's really the epitome of a community ski hill -- just a bunch of locals getting together to create a community-oriented facility where they can get out and just enjoy the sport. It's the antithesis of Whistler, and I love it."

"It's very different from the standard business model out there," agrees Jeff Jones, Mt. Cain's self-appointed historian and one of the Society's week-end volunteer warriors.

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The road into Mt. Cain from Highway 19, about an hour and a half north of Campbell River, leads you through 16 kilometres of towering mountainous terrain and evergreens heavily laden with snow. Because the road is narrow, traffic is limited to one

way: uphill in the morning, downhill in the afternoon. Little quirks like this alert first-time visitors to the fact that Mt. Cain is not your typical ski resort, flush with money.

Most of their equipment -- two graders, a "cat," two Bombardier groomers and five snowmobiles -- is used and has been donated. The original diesel generator, donated by Cominco and hauled up in the 1970s when work on the ski hill was just beginning, still powers the hill's lodge.

A hard-core group of about 20 volunteers does everything from plowing the road to grooming the lower half of the mountain to climbing the 20 T-bar towers each morning to knock off ice that accumulated overnight. There are about 30 to 40 staff, too, who work the T-bars, man the ticket booth, look after rentals and work in the lodge kitchen, but it's the volunteers who do most of the hard physical work and operate the big machinery.

In winters like this one -- when it has hardly stopped snowing -- the road crew works practically around the clock, says Jones. "I was talking to them, and they were saying, 'OK, you take the 7 to 9 p.m. shift with the bulldozer, another guy took the 9 to 11, a third took 11 to 1 and then our neighbour took the 1 to 3 a.m. shift.'"

Even when equipment is running well, it's a hard feat to pull off every weekend. When something breaks, the patience and dedication of volunteers is put to the test. Just before Christmas, for example, a bearing in the upper lift seized up. "The part was taken out, brought down to our house," says Brown, who lives in Campbell River. "My husband took it all apart that night. On Christmas Eve, we were trying to find parts, calling people to get parts. Then he put it all back together and sent it up on the bus on Christmas day and the guys were there to put it back in."

But that wasn't the end of the story. Even with the new parts, the bearing wouldn't work. A crew of about 10 volunteers worked all day Boxing Day and into the night until they found the problem. "They stayed up for hours on end, there was no sleep that night," recalls Brown.

But Jeff Jones, who lives in Sointula when he's not at his cabin at Mt. Cain, says the "coolest indicator" of the dedication and enthusiasm of the volunteers is the turnout at the annual work party in September. "We'll have 75 people there and it will be, 'we need to paint this building, we need to cut, split and stack five cords of wood for three different public buildings, we need to completely clean the lodge from top to bottom, we need to rebuild an engine, a cable needs to be restrung, all the Ts need to be put on or taken off.' And it'll be done. In one week-end. Everybody just shows up and pitches in."

The Mt. Cain ski hill shouldn't even exist. On paper, it's simply not feasible, or at least not profitable. In 2000, after struggling for a couple of decades, the society considered turning the whole venture over to a private owner. They hired some experts in the ski resort industry to assess the hill's potential and entered discussions with a private operator.

"Through that whole process, it became clear that Mt. Cain has non-profit society status for a reason," says Jones, referring to the fact that too few people live within close enough proximity of the mountain to make it a profitable enterprise.

And yet, almost 25 years after opening, Mt. Cain is still running, even thriving. A couple of years ago, the society came up with the idea of selling more lots for cabins to raise money to buy some badly needed equipment. They have sold 10 lots, with another five to be sold this winter (for a total of 50 cabins) which in turn, has attracted new members and -- you guessed it -- new volunteers.

"We had some brand new cabin owners show up at 9 [a.m. saying] 'what can I do to help?'" says Jones, smiling at the memory of finding more bright-eyed volunteers on a recent Saturday morning on the hill.

However, if the acid test of any endeavour is getting people to put their money where their mouth is, then Mt. Cain passes with flying colours. Three winters ago, when there wasn't enough snow to open, the Society was in a financial bind and had to borrow from its members. "We put the word out, 'we need money' and we needed to get through the year," says Jones. "There were things we had to pay for and everybody coughed up \$1,000, everybody who could."

Of course, it's understandable that people who have cabins on the hill have a vested interest in keeping Mt. Cain alive. But what about everyone else? The volunteers who drive for hours from Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Courtenay, even Victoria and Vancouver?

What about the skiers and snowboarders who put up with two slow, creaky T-bars -- no chairlift -- and a hostel-style lodge with no running water, mattresses on the floor and outdoor compost toilets?

You know it's not simply the plentiful powder snow that brings people here, as good as that is. Jones hints at the answer when asked how the society measures its success, if not by how much money it takes in at

the ticket booth each weekend. "Did we get a good crowd up? Did everything run well? Is the staff happy? Can we foresee future improvements? Did we have a good potluck dinner last night?"

Yes, a weekend at Mt. Cain is like a week-end with friends and family. Potluck dinners, musical evenings around the woodstove in the lodge, someone offering to give you telemark lessons simply because you asked about it.

As Helen Brown put it in an e-mail to members this month, "A hello and smile go a long way; that's what we're about!"

Suzanne Morphet is a writer and editor in North Saanich.

She and her family spent three nights at Mt. Cain over the Christmas holidays and loved every minute of it.