

Bound by forest, Waterville is an alpine oasis

By Brian Irwin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WATERVILLE VALLEY, N.H. — His tiny 4-year-old's fingers fumbled with the bead, designed to replicate miniature dice. Winking one eye shut, he guided the thin wire through the bead's lumen, completing the bulk of the necklace he and his siblings were making.

"It's done, Daddy," he exclaimed as he held up the jade cord. "And it says R-E-I-D. That's me!"

One of Waterville Valley Resort's more popular retailers, I Dream of Beading is a small shop laden with endless trays of colorful glass and plastic nuggets awaiting their lacing from adults and children alike, the flexible chairs providing relief to legs tired from skiing one of New Hampshire's most unique areas. The store resides in the Town Square, Waterville's Colonial-style ring of condos, pubs, restaurants, and shops that rest in the shadow of Mount Tecumseh, birthplace of freestyle skiing and the East's most racer-friendly hill.

But it's not a hill. Over 2,000 vertical feet of terrain define Waterville, its slopes decisively plotted by former Olympian Tom Corcoran. In 1966 Corcoran founded the resort as it currently stands, a modernization, in the New England sense, of a ski hill that was first built and used in the 1930s by the Waterville Valley Black and Blue Trail Smashers Ski Club, which still operates today.

Waterville was built as a racer's mountain. Corcoran laid out the trails to accommodate high-quality, World Cup events. That was his passion, which he proved to the world on the US Olympic Team in 1956 and 1960, finishing fourth in the giant slalom in Squaw Valley, Calif., in 1960, the best finish in that event for an American until Bode Miller in 2002. During Corcoran's tenure as president of Waterville Valley, which he relinquished in 1993, the resort quietly carried on his mission of ski racing excellence, hosting more World Cup races in the United States than any other ski area.

The road into Waterville has a remote feel. The pavement threads miles of snow-encrusted confiners that frame the idyllic Mad River. Unlike its Vermont counterpart, the Mad River Valley is protected from development. It is mostly National For-



WATERVILLE VALLEY RESORT

Waterville's Town Square, with condos, restaurants, and shops, lights up at night. Below, kids hit the trail during ski camp.

est, like the 770,000 acres of untouched wilderness that surround Waterville Valley Resort. Reaching the ski area requires a patient drive through pristine wilderness, at the end of which is a clean, manicured, and timeless village.

An alpine oasis, Waterville's base area sits separate from Town Square, the ice arena, indoor pool, and racquet club. A few miles of road, which will someday be bypassed in an overland gondola, span the valley floor which, at 500 acres (some of it still undeveloped) comprise the only developable land in the valley.

"It's ordained in nature," stated Bobby Foster, Waterville's marketing director. "Our home can't be overrun and overdeveloped. It's boxed in by protected National Forest."

Waterville is home to around 300 permanent residents, most of whom chose it for the lifestyle and the beauty. They relax there, ski there, and their children go to school there.

Foster recalled that "in 1977, when I came to work as the director of marketing, there were only 16 kids attending the elementary school. And four of them were mine." Today there are 44 students, kindergarten through eighth grade, in three classes.

They grow up deep in a wilderness basin where skiing and outdoor recreation are the rule. Seventy kilometers of tortuous, groomed Nordic terrain laces the area. Kids ski to school, to hockey

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practice, and to the mountain. Some belong to the Sununu family. In October 2010 a group of investors, including a few members of the Sununu family, purchased Waterville Valley Resort. Today Chris Sununu, son of the former New Hampshire governor, runs the organization.

Perhaps more than its incredible views of the 4,000-foot Mount Osceola, or its ties to New



Hampshire politics, Waterville Valley Resort is known for its integral role in the development of freestyle skiing. In 1970 Corcoran organized the nation's first National Open Championships of Freestyle Skiing, a Chevrolet-sponsored event complete with prizes and a cash purse. While it was won by Vermont's Herman Goeller, it was third-place finisher Wayne Wong from Vancouver who put Waterville on the map as the birthplace of freestyle.

Wong and the other competitors twirled acrobatic moves on the gentle slopes, flung gravity-defying aerials from giant scoop-shaped ramps of snow, and jackedhammered their way down sheets of moguls toward cheering crowds. Wong later went on to become a K2 ski athlete and Waterville freestyle instructor. Wong's specialty, which quickly gained the blessing of the Olympic community and perhaps

more so the critical eye of the competitive skiing community, became a national sensation.

While Waterville Valley routinely produces some of the country's best freestyle skiers and racers, its terrain is less than extreme. With an eastern exposure, the 4,004-foot Mount Tecumseh pokes through the clouds approaching from the windward side, pulling down an average of 140 fluffy inches of precipitation each year. Immaculately groomed intermediate trails like Tippecanoe, And Tyler Too, and White Caps wind like bleached strips of perfect corduroy toward the base lodge. The White Peak Express Quad lift ensures short lines to the top, where summit dining awaits. More advanced skiers will find temptation in the more varied texture and topography of the mountain's southwest-ern face.

Trails like Gem and True Grit

drop precipitously down the fall line, their layers of smooth snow eating up broad, wide-radius giant slalom turns. And then there's Bobby's Run, named after the late Robert Kennedy. A ski trip to Waterville Valley was his last; now the uber-classic mogul run stands as Waterville's most interesting expert skiing offering. Bobby's is a world-class mogul run that regularly hosts competitions. Racers bounce down rows of bumps, which are interrupted only by two jumps that throw competitors upward, their bodies thrashing through the air with surprising control.

With hopes of completing a master plan that will include a new lodge and gondola, Waterville is waiting to finish growing up, a direction that will not please everyone. Those who live and ski here enjoy what Waterville is, but adore what Waterville is not. It's not overdeveloped with giant dance clubs, an abundance of knickknack shops nor scores of motels struggling to fill every last room. Instead it is a skiers' mountain, locked in the beauty of the White Mountains with just enough amenities to make a stay comfortable. Town Square holds almost everything even a spoiled après-skier could ask for, from a toy store to an ice cream shop, from a skating rink to a Nordic shop from which you can ski out the door. And it's quiet, unless a band is playing in the courtyard or the clock tower overlooking the bricks strikes 4 as the lifts close and the chairs hang in the breeze.

At the Diamond's Edge restaurant in Waterville, Reid was stretching out his new necklace, running his fingers over the bumpy beads one at a time. A magazine lay open on the table, displaying a photo of a skier bounding through the moguls on Lower Bobby's Run.

"That hill looks bumpy, Daddy. Just like my necklace. What do you get if you win a race down that hill?"

I replied, "Another necklace, Reid. One with a gold medal hanging on it."

He paused for a minute before breathing the same words uttered by countless Olympic skiers who learned their turns on Waterville's slopes.

"I think . . . to win a gold medal. That's what I want when I grow up."

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