

Jiminy Peak's One-Stop Shop

• BY KELLY COFFEY

Beginner Center Means Less Hassle for First-Timers

For someone trying to snowboard or ski for the first time, the most difficult part of the day rarely takes place on the snow. For novices, navigating the base area of a ski resort often is a double-black diamond experience. With different locations (and lines) for lift tickets, equipment rentals, and lessons, those new to snowsports typically have a tough time figuring out where to go or what to do. After one too many wrong turns, what once was thought to be an exciting vacation quickly spirals into a frustrating experience instead.



Jiminy Peak saw the need to prevent beginners from getting frustrated waiting in long lines before those beginners even got onto snow. The Hancock, Mass., resort sports 45 trails in the Berkshire Mountains. Most of its guests come from the New England area, averaging a three-day stay, says Marketing Director Betsy Strickler.

In order to turn new skiers and riders into lifelong participants, the resort focused on making the first day as easy as possible – especially at the start of the day. Ironing out the arrival experience for these first-timers would in turn create a more successful

lesson experience and more often produce more passionate skiers and snowboarders.

ONE-STOP SHOP

Jiminy Peak opened the Doc Maynard GET Center in 2002 to act as a one-stop shop for first-time snowboarders and skiers. This building is the centerpiece of the snowsports school's Guaranteed Easy Turns (GET) programs for beginners, which began in 1997. For beginning snowboarders, Jiminy offers the Burton Learn to Ride program.

The cost for a first-day lesson, beginner lift ticket, and ski rental is \$74. Guests have the opportunity to preregister online or walk in and register inside.

Prominent signs and guest service staff direct new guests to the Center at the base of the beginner area. Upon entering, new skiers and riders are instantly greeted by an employee, be it an instructor or shop cashier. Students register for their lessons, rent equipment, get their lift tickets, and store their gear and clothing in cubbies. Each step along the way, guests are guided by a pro who not only gets the students quickly through the process, but also answers questions about the day, allaying many fears.

"It's our job to make them feel comfortable," says Snowsports School Supervisor Vikki Fairbank.

Only beginners (adults and kids) involved in the GET programs use this building. That means smaller lines to wait in and one-on-one attention for new guests.

That individual attention is highly visible when a pro fits the student with the right boot. "The instructor or ski technician will be down on their knees, fitting each person one-by-one," says Rental Manager Steve Charon. He explains that the instructor will talk about what a ski or snowboard boot should feel like, asking questions such as whether they can wiggle their toes, whether their heel slides up, and whether they could comfortably stay in the boot for a couple of hours. ▶



About 4,000 skiers and riders went through the GET program at Jiminy Peak last season. Sixteen percent of GET One lesson participants bought the GET Two lesson.

Photo credit: Vicky Fairbank/Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort

Challenge: Jiminy Peak needed to get its first-time guests having fun in lessons without being stressed out from dealing with typical base area hassles.

Solution: The Doc Maynard GET (Guaranteed Easy Turns) Center. This one-stop shop for first-timers allows them to get their lift tickets and rental equipment, meet their instructors, and store their personal stuff.

Results:

- Higher overall guest satisfaction scores from participants in first-time lessons.
- Snowsports school only needed to make good on their lesson guarantee less than 1 percent of the time.
- Better communication between the snowsports school and the rental staff.

A GETSkiing video, which stars Fairbank explaining the program, is posted on Jiminy Peak's website and also runs in kiosks set up in the lobbies of a couple of timeshare complexes in the area. The video explains the lesson process and everything new skiers and snowboarders will need to do to get ready and get out on the snow. By showing exactly what goes on before and during a lesson, those videos help snare the ski-curious, says Strickler.

By making the start of the day as easy as possible for first-timers, they're set up for a great first experience. At the end of the lesson, it's up to the instructor to encourage students to participate in "GET Two," a discounted second lesson that builds off the first. This is part of the pathway to converting new skiers and riders into lifelong participants.

TRACKING THE NUMBERS

The most tangible results from the Doc Maynard Center and the GET program come from the resort's overall customer satisfaction survey. This survey asks guests about all aspects of the resort, from grooming to food to lodging, and includes questions about the snowsports school and the GET program. "If they have a good lesson, we can see it across the entire survey," says Strickler. "The survey scores from the GET people skew a little higher than the typical skier."

Roughly 4,000 skiers and riders went through the GET program during the 2008/09 season. Sixteen percent of GET One lesson participants buy the GET Two lesson, says Fairbank.

The program guarantees students will be able to turn, stop, and ride the chairlift after a single 90-minute lesson. If students aren't able to accomplish this, they are offered a free lesson at their convenience. The snowsports school only had to make good on that guarantee 15 times (less than one percent of the time) last season, says Fairbank.

An unexpected benefit from this program is the close communication that resulted between the rental staff and the snowsports school, says Charon. Feedback goes both ways – perhaps with an instructor advising the rental staff on the snow conditions and what wax to use, or with a ski tech running out to the beginner hill to fix a student's broken ski. Charon says this close relationship is one factor helping the two departments better work together to create a top-notch overall customer experience.

EYE ON THE FUTURE

Jiminy Peak's staff recognizes its inability to track the long-term effects of their GET programs on converting new guests into lifelong participants. To take a step toward solving that problem, the resort invested in a new customer relationship management system, says Public Relations Director Katie Fogel. This system will allow Jiminy Peak to better segment its customers, deliver target email messages to the right guests, and track the results.

Fogel says they will now be able to send information to guests more easily before their arrival, as well as shoot out follow-up offers once guests return home.

Other plans include using the system to email their GETSkiing video directly to two types of guests: those who took a GET One class but did not continue with a GET Two class, and families Jiminy Peak identifies as having at least one member who doesn't ski or ride.

By creating a central place for everything beginners need, Jiminy Peak lowered the barriers for guests entering the sport. The personal attention guests receive – from the moment they walk into the door of the Doc Maynard GET Center through the end of their first lesson – means that when they go back home they will remember the fun they had on the mountain, instead of the hassles they dealt with getting to the snow. Instead of guests dreading the inconvenience of their next ski vacation, they will have nothing to do but look forward to a fun trip next time.

"It just removes the stress of a first-time experience tenfold," says Charon. ■