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Ski Area at Pere Marquette

Accent On Outdoors

By Andy Lindstrom

If a bone rattling plunge down the powdery slopes of Kitzbuhel or Snowmass is your idea of winter fun but the gasoline crunch has you in a bind, maybe you should consider Pere Marquette Ski Area in Grafton.

Just a long downhill away from metropolitan St. Louis Pere Marquette offers in mini-scale all the sport enjoyed by the jet set, including a double chair lift, beer stube for the apres-ski hours, and 29 snow guns when Mother Nature takes a vacation.

"We're the only ski area in the state south of Chicago and Galena," reported General Manager John Moore. "We attract skiers from as far as Springfield and Decatur as well as from the greater St. Louis area."

Moore explained Pere Marquette is approximately 25 minutes from St. Louis skiers. Chestnut Mountain, in Galena, the next closest area in the state, is 285 miles north.

"We have a main slope comparable to Chestnut Mountain," said Moore. "It's a half mile run on a 370-foot vertical slope. The double chair lift services the main line and there are four rope tows for the novice slope."

Moore also pointed out 75 per cent of Pere Marquette's skiers are novices, and the ski area is equipped to give lessons for beginners on a gentle bunny slope just right for practicing pratfalls.

"We teach the graduated length method, the latest technique in skiing," said Moore. "I instructed in Colorado and two of our instructors are Austrian natives living in St. Louis. We have an instructional plan for beginners and also a complete line of rental equipment at the ski area."

Moore added that special instruction sessions are offered Monday and Thursday evening during the winter season.

"Our package plan gets equipment rental, lift tickets, and an hour and 15 minute ski lesson," Moore said. "We also have regular ski lessons and a division of the national ski patrol on duty for emergency help on the slopes."

Another emergency provision necessary at a site so far south of ski country is the artificial snow maker.

"When Mother Nature forgets about skiers, we take over," boasts the Pere Marquette publicity brochure. "We frost the slopes with a deep blanket of real snow."

"Actually it's a little more like wet sugar at first," laughed Moore. "We have snow guns that use pressurized water and air like a glorified paint sprayer.

"Water is sprayed through a small nozzle in the middle of the hose, air blasts out around the water and blows a fog of 'snow' on the slope."

"The mix freezes in crystalline form as it hits the ground," Moore continued. "In about three hours it sets up like natural snow. We spray about 12 to 18 inches of snow on a straw base."

Despite the southerly latitude of central Illinois, Moore said a study of Pere Marquette Park over the last 20 years indicated approximately 65 days of ski weather each season.

Ski facilities at Pere Marquette open Dec. 15. Weekly hours are from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., subject to weather conditions. Weekend closing is 10:30 p.m. As John Moore says, "Think snow."

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