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SKIING

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Upper Midwest Ski Areas Reported Ready for Business

By Ski Writer
Minneapolis Sunday Tribune

Optimism springs eternal in the downhill skiing business. Although untimely thawing lopped off last season, Upper Midwest ski areas where Minnesotans normally circulate are adding 10 new chairlifts this season.

Five of them are in Minnesota, which now has a total of 42 chairlifts, many other lifts, a growing mountain of rental equipment, heavy snowmaking and grooming machinery, hotdog steamers, cider heaters, and grating stompers where skiers can knock the snow off their boots while entering chalet space of untold square footage, usually with fireplaces that burn real logs.

Responding to a questionnaire, the area operators rated last season close to average, most of them just a shade above, and affirmative answers predominated to the query, "Would you encourage a young person to enter the business?"

Sample answers: "Yes, if they realize it might take several years to obtain employment." "Yes, if they're interested in long hours and hard work." "Great, if they've got a lot of guts." Yes, if he would buy my ski area rather than build another one."

Since last season Minnesota has lost a downhill area. French Rapids, at Brainerd. It will limit itself to cross-country skiing and, because of vandalism, will drop out of the lift business. However, the state is gaining a new downhill area of impressive proportions.

It is called Coffee Mill and commands a Mississippi River Valley view from about 500 feet of vertical rise on the western edge of Wabasha. It's installing a 3,480-foot double chairlift and a 650-foot Pamalift for a beginners' hill. Coffee Mill has been about 10 years in the planning. Owner Richard Kastler, Rochester consulting civil engineer, has skiers in the family (wife and two sons) and plans a family operation. Elder son Kevin, 19, is working full-time at the area.

The area has a hill-bottom 8,000-square-foot octagonal chalet with cafeteria. A 21-unit motel is abuilding, to open Jan. 1. A pitched slope is ready for this season. A separate expert slope with T-bars is planned for next season.

Christie Mountain, a new Wisconsin area, plans to open with a chairlift, two rope tows, snow-making and a 5,000-square-foot chalet with rentals, cafeteria and bar. Day skiing Wednesdays through the weekends and night skiing Fridays and Saturdays are planned. The area is six miles north of Weyerhauser, Wis., which is 55 miles east of the Minnesota line on Hwy. 8. Owner is George Sorenson, Rice Lake, member of a skiing family of five.

Additional chairlifts are going in at Afton Alps, Trollhaugen, Buena Vista, Sugar Hills, Spirit Mountain, Big Powderhorn, Indianhead, Whitecap and Rib Mountain.

At the four-chalet Afton Alps area two chairlifts are replacing the area's T-bar and Pamalifts, bringing the area's chairlift total to 17. A sizeable addition is going onto the area's big central chalet and ski shop.

Trollhaugen's new chairlift, its second, will seat four side-by-side. It's the St. Croix Valley's second "quad" chair. Wild Mountain having installed one two years ago. Trollhaugen's will serve about a third of the area at the west end — 2,400 passengers an hour.

There has been some thoughtful rearranging in the Trollhaugen chalet, with bag-lunchers on the ground floor, food services on the upper two.

North of Bemidji, Minn., Buena Vista has added a second chairlift, a new Continental Divide run and a new chalet. Owner Earle Dickinson has "built a new hill" with dirt-moving machines and expects to add another 50 feet of vertical in another year.

Sugar Hills, Grand Rapids, Minn., has added a second chairlift. It serves the Big Thunder end of its "ski circus." Expanded are the ski and rental shops, the saloon (with more live entertainment), and the base lodge-chalet. There will be night skiing in all three valleys, Mondays through Saturdays.

Duluth's Spirit Mountain, overlooking the harbor, has added a fifth chairlift. The area roads are being paved.

Other new chairlifts have gone in, one each at Big Powderhorn and Indianhead in Upper Michigan, at Whitecap, Iron Belt, Wis., and Rib Mountain, Wausau, Wis.

Big Powderhorn is also adding a 2,500-foot novice trail and five new rental houses. Indianhead has a new Gay Nineties saloon at its hill-bottom chalet. Whitecap has a new restaurant, three new runs and a new wine cellar.

Further comments from Upper Midwest ski areas:

MINNESOTA

Buck Hill, Burnsville: We've put $15,000 into additional snowmaking, added parking for about 400 more cars. We've remodeled the base-area building and made an adults' retreat, without bar, out of the Hutch Chalet and given it a double fireplace and sundeck with glass windscreen and overhanging heaters.

Crestwood Ski & Tubing, Alexandria: Sliding with rubber tiretubes has been great here.

Detroit Mountain, Detroit Lakes: Added two T-bars to replace one taken out. Doubled the snowmaking by adding one more Hedco. Added a Tucker snow cat to the grooming equipment.

Eagle Mountain Ski & Camping, Grey Eagle: We are opening three new runs, installing a Pomalift and snowmaking, expanding the rental shop with 100 new sets, added new cross-country trails in wind-protective woods. Camping with electric hookups. Bunk house for groups. Tubing for non-skiers. Snowshoes.

Mt. Frontenac, Red Wing: We've added three big snow fans for a total of seven big snow-producers. Our pipes are going underground. Our policy is improvement on the status quo. We need to see growth at Lake City — four winter motels help a little.

Golden Gate to Fun Campground, Sleepy Eye: More rope tows and a new hill. Also, more inner tubes for the innertubers.

Hidden Valley, Ely: Additions — beginners' area, two ski jumps, ice rink, tobboggan hill.

Hole-in-the-Mountain County Park, Lake Benton: We serve enthusiasts of southwestern Minnesota and eastern South Dakota — downhill skiing, inner tube sledding, skating, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, all available. Also ice fishing at Lake Benton. Special arrangements for groups. Increased meal and housing service nearby.

Hyland Hills, Bloomington: As a result of a few shut-downs last year, we have redone all the electrical systems. This year Hyland will be offering child-sitting on weekday mornings.

Lutsen Ski Area, Lutsen: Snowmaking capacity doubled. Because of need for best possible grooming, we've bought a third diesel-powered snowcat. Reservations with advance deposits are 90 per cent ahead of last year. Christmas-New Year's about at capacity. Lutsen will refer guests to nearby accommodations in capacity times.

Powder Ridge, Kimball: Redid the bunny slope, remodeled and recarpeted the chalet. Thursday-night steak broils. Adult seating has been increased during the last year.

Quadna Mt., Hill City: Hedco and new SMI snowmakers for improved

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