

Revisiting the JFK assassination 50 years later, how would leagues and media react today?

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The big news at Mammoth Mountain isn't at the popular ski resort this year, but 20 miles up the road.

While Mammoth was going about the business of starting this season on the traditional first Thursday in November, and preparing for next week's rush of Thanksgiving skiers and boarders, mountain management was planning for the re-opening and re-branding of June Mountain after a one-year hiatus.

Mammoth skiers have been enjoying four lifts of access at the Main Lodge, serving a mostly manmade snow base for the last two weeks. Those coming for the holidays were looking at a slightly expanded coverage, but barring a series of significant storms, the terrain is limited for now.

For this weekend, the current offering of Chairs 1, 3, 4 and 11 was expected to expand slightly, perhaps including Chair 2, but expectations as always were keyed to the arrival of natural snow.

A storm front is expected to hit this weekend, which would allow Mammoth to offer more for the four-day holiday next week.

A slow start to winter throughout the west has been tied to limited natural snowfall.

But there is no limit to the planning going on at June, where Mammoth hopes to establish a presence that was never evident during recent years. When an operational decision was made to close June last year, there was a local outcry but few among Southern Californians seemed to notice.

Residents of the tiny June Lake community decried Mammoth's decision at the time, but few could dispute the fact that June has been a money-losing operation for the majority of the last 20 years.

While Mammoth might have drawn crowds of 18,000 on busy days, June almost never exceeded about 1,000 on the ski hill.

June will open on Dec. 13, assuming abundant natural snow. While that opening may have been overlooked as June was barely on the radar as an alternative to Mammoth, there is a decided push to re-brand and re-identify June as a unique location this year.

Part of that focus will be on a family atmosphere, starting with a decision that kids 12 and under will ski or snowboard for free. Not just on an introductory weekend, but for the entire season. That could be the kind of decision that brings young families to June on a regular basis.

"That's a huge deal," said Greg Dallas, Mammoth Mountain's new Chief Operating Officer. "No one else (in the industry) is doing this. Most places there are restrictions and asterisks in the fine print."

Not this year. Kids 12 and under will ski free every day of the season. Imagine the savings if you make regular trips to the hill.

Mammoth's decision to re-open June was part of a local community relations push to mend fences in the town that has always operated in the shadow of Mammoth. Part of that stems from the fact June never developed as a separate entity able to draw a unique crowd. In the 20 years since Mammoth purchased the property from the Hayward family, June was pretty much an after-thought to the main mountain. Mammoth season passes are recognized at June, but the daily lift ticket continues to be more economically priced.

Couple that with the kids-ski-free concept and you get the makings of a major marketing campaign.

"We are going to stop looking at June as an under-resourced, under-developed ski area in a small town," Mammoth CEO Rusty Gregory told a meeting of the June Lake community earlier this month. "Instead, we intend to make June succeed by differentiating it dramatically from Mammoth Mountain, versus allowing Mammoth Mountain to gobble up the vast majority of the resources."

June Mountain offers 1,400 acres of mostly intermediate and beginner skiing terrain, accessed by six lifts (four double, two quad), with a vertical drop of 2,590 feet from a peak of 10,090 feet. While Mammoth committed to improvements at June after the purchase, things have remained pretty much status quo in recent years.

While Mammoth has been adding terrain parks on an annual basis — there are now 11 scattered around the 3,500-acre facility — June is more a natural mountain.

Without half-pipes or terrain parks, June is not geared to the athletes who flock to Mammoth. The new focus will be on the kind of things that have worked in the Southern California mountains for years, giving newcomers to the sport a chance to grow their skills before taking on the big mountain.

"We're not looking for the same action-sports type of market as Mammoth," said Joani Lynch, director of communications for the two mountains. "June is going to be geared to the family skiing experience, starting with the kids skiing free."

One of the first decisions was to explore adding snow-making at June Mountain. This has long been the resource that allowed Mammoth to guarantee early-season activities. Even now, the mountain would not be open without snow-making.

At June, that will involve exploring for sources of underground water. Until snow-making is installed, perhaps for the following season, June remains dependent on natural snow.

And so far this year, that has been slow to materialize.