

## Hero and goat of 2014 Rose Bowl Game

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Thursday, December 26, 2013

DailyBreeze.com

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In the short ride up Mammoth Mountain's Facelift Express before Christmas, I caught myself reminiscing to the days when that lift was one of the scariest rites of passage on the mountain.

Forty years earlier, I'd started in this sport that became a defining part of my life, and riding the old fixed-grip double known only as Chair No. 3, then negotiating one's way down the backside first, then eventually the front side, were benchmarks for improving intermediate skiers.

Flash ahead to earlier this week, and again it was a rite of passage, this time for a 17-year-old daughter who had made her athletic marks in two traditional sports and now wanted to share the mountain her parents have loved for their entire adulthood.

Allie was learning to carve her way down the groomed run called "Face of Three," but I was thinking about the changes in the sport through the years.

Forty years means perhaps 1,400 days on the mountain for me. In my first 20 years in the sport, I was on the hill 50 days a year. Things have slowed in the last two decades to more like 20 days a year. In short, I've been making turns on some mountain for nearly four full years.

Mammoth remains my home away from home, the mountain where I have enjoyed the sport more than any other, but I have had the fortune of visiting other ski areas. I've skied 75 areas covering 14 states and three Canadian provinces. California and Colorado are tops on my list with 14 visits each, with Utah and British Columbia next at nine and eight, respectively. It's still a goal to reach 100, but I'm going to have to work at that and stop letting things like a real job get in the way of ski travel.

So what's changed in 40 years? Nothing and everything. Nothing, as in you're still challenging yourself athletically to turn two skis which are attached to your boots and maneuvering down a mountainside. Everything, as in better equipment, better mountain maintenance, better methods of getting to the mountain and better everything at the hill.

But everything comes with a price, of course. Mammoth's daily ticket during the holidays this year is \$107, up from \$10 on that day when I learned in 1974. That's part of the major change. Few skiers buy daily tickets, with probably 30,000 purchasing reduced-rate season tickets, and others buying some form of discounted ticket via electronic purchase.

What the ticket price includes is snowmaking to guarantee access to the sport during dry weather spells like the current stretch at Mammoth. Coverage of the mountain includes much of the lower half thanks to snowmaking and excellent nightly grooming. High-speed

chairlifts dominate the landscape, whisking skiers up the hill in a few minutes and gobbling up lines faster than they can form.

Twenty years ago, we had attitudes about man-made snow and knew it was inferior to nature's product. But improvements in the science of combining water and cold air with pressure have led to a time when we are comfortable gliding across either surface. Mammoth and other resorts with major investments in snowmaking will do well during this holiday season, for example.

The equipment we use is constantly evolving, with shaped skis, release bindings and flexible molded plastic boots making it easy for all to transition from beginner to intermediate and above. The percentage of snowboarders continued to rise until recently and still make up a large percentage of those we see on the hill. Last weekend, our group included three skiers and two snowboarders, for example.

Safety is another aspect a time traveler from another era would notice. Most of us wear helmets now, spurred on years ago by several high-profile celebrity deaths, but also by the fact this made as much sense as wearing a helmet while biking.

Ski boots had just started to evolve when I started but have become comfortable and functional. Many of us go to professional boot-fitters when we acquire new ones and custom orthotic insoles help the boot guide the ski.

And what about changes in skis? Aside from trading in long, straight racing skis for shorter shaped turning machines, we've also noticed a change in cosmetics. I once might have been on a pair of traditional Rossignol boards adorned only with the designation 4S, but now I ski a pair of Dirty Bears with great graphics depicting a sketch of that animal.

The days when ski areas built "warming huts" and sold chili and hot chocolate are another foggy memory. Ski lodges have diversified their cuisine offerings, meaning you enter a food court for lunch with serving stations offering pasta or Mexican food cooked to order, as well as a variety of soups, salad bars and even health-food choices.

We get to the mountain with ease in our 4-wheel-drive vehicles, another improvement over the days when we scrambled to put chains on our family sedans before heading up the hill on snowy days.

Now, as we worked to perfect turns at Mammoth, I couldn't help but savor the similarities and differences between my learning and that of my daughter. It's the same sport Dave and Roma McCoy brought to the Sierras 60 years ago, but the differences are part of the reason we continue to savor it.