

COX ON SKIING: Small resort thrives in a giant's shadow

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KILLINGTON, Vt. - Just two miles down the road from the largest ski area in the northeast, Pico Mountain is a prime example of how the little guy has done quite nicely in the shadow of The Beast.

It wasn't always easy, and the little mountain went from family owned to mostly overshadowed and overlooked in the corporate culture, to a ski area that is exemplifying the model for success as part of corporate ownership.

There is a California parallel that might strike home in the Eastern High Sierras. Think of Killington as Mammoth, and Pico as June Mountain.

You remember June, the resort Mammoth purchased 20 years ago with the idea of eventually linking it up in a European-type scenario with Mammoth. June is closed this season as the mountain tries to define a way for the little ski area to survive.

When Killington was the crown jewel of the American Ski Company, as the corporation was gobbling resorts, Pico was the afterthought. Although a mountain with quality skiing (a 2,000-foot vertical) and a history of ski racing success, Pico (pronounced PIE-co) was thought of as an appendage to Killington, which has more lifts, acreage and skier-days than any other resort in the East. Employees were assigned back and forth, and all wore Killington uniforms.

Pico is where Andrea Mead Lawrence got her racing start before later bringing her Olympic medals to Mammoth. But it was not a viable competitor to Killington. There was an identity crisis embedded in the plan to link up the two areas, much like the plan for Mammoth/June that was strangled in environmental regulation and died early. Then the two resorts were sold to the Powdr corporation as part of the unraveling of ASC. New ownership saw a different identity in the little resort with the great natural layout.

A management team was put in place, rather than rotated in annually, and Pico was given a budget and a chance to succeed. As a family resort, where all trails wind up at the base area, with reasonably priced food and lift ticket bargains, it began to thrive. Skiers and boarders loved the fact the employees were wearing Pico uniforms, not Killington hand-me-downs.

They loved the serious skiing, as well as the oldest double chair in the region. They loved the venerable cafeteria and lodge, and they loved the ease of access.

They have come to appreciate the operating schedule, which is five days a week. Pico employees are all off on Tuesday and Wednesday, the two lowest ticket sales days of the week. Management saw a way to go back to basics and offer a unique product.

They also loved the pricing structure. Pico management has seen its niche grow as a feeder resort to Killington. Every school child in the state of Vermont receives a \$75 season pass for Pico. Parents and others from adjoining states qualify for different pricing options.

And this year, while celebrating its 75th anniversary, Pico has made famous the year of its founding, 1937. On Thursdays, members of the female gender ski for \$19.37. Day care for their children is also \$19.37 for the day. Other groups qualify for the \$19.37 lift ticket at different times.

Granted, Pico's successes do not provide a turn-key model for Mammoth when it re-opens June for the 2013-14 season. Nor are they a guarantee of success, because of the difference in location. Mammoth and June are separated from their population base by a five-plus hour drive. June is 20 miles further up the road than Mammoth. Pico and Killington are within 2 or 3 hours of major population centers.

But there are some lessons to be learned in the east.

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