

All-Mountain Parks

Evolution Or Extinction: The Future Of Freestyle Niche Resorts

By Brad Farmer

What constitutes an all-mountain park? The term has been loosely thrown about since 2001 when Southern California's Bear Mountain Resort moved its terrain park outside of designated areas or runs and allowed it to explode all over the mountain. This was done in an attempt to compete with neighboring Snow Summit Mountain Resort. Then, the following year, after Snow Summit purchased Bear Mountain, it was on. The entire resort was dedicated to the youth market and "The Park." "Our main direction with the all-mountain park was that any and all suitable runs and terrain would be used to build snow features, jibs, and pipes," says Chris Riddle, marketing director for Bear Mountain.

Over the last eight years, whether labeled "all-mountain park" or "all-park mountain," several resorts have claimed this status including Boreal, California; Echo Mountain, Colorado; Mountain Creek, New Jersey; Big Boulder, Pennsylvania; and now Mount Snow, Vermont. But what exactly constitutes an "all-mountain" park? Perhaps more important questions are: why are resorts making such an extraordinary commitment to this model? Does it work, and, if so, how can we all cash in on this slowly growing phenomenon?

Defining "All-Mountain Park"

At Bear Mountain, their original concept was that all suitable terrain would be used for the park, and Ian Oliver, director of freestyle terrain at Big Boulder agrees: "An all-mountain park is not limited to defined runs or boundaries. Terrain features can be found anywhere at Big Boulder."

Bill Benneyan, VP of marketing and sales for Mountain Creek, took the definition a bit further: "One-hundred percent of our two peaks, the base lodge, and two high-speed quads are included in our all-mountain park and every designated trail is populated with park features."

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Another important factor in defining the all-mountain park is the vibe of the area and the other amenities aimed at pleasing the youth market. "We offer a full-service lodge complete with a mini skate ramp, pool and foosball tables, flat-screen TVs, fire pits, and a bar," says Big Boulder's Oliver. "We made the place to hang out."

Mount Snow's new Carinthia all-mountain park is under the same ownership as Big Boulder, and they have created a similar scene in their base area. "The Carinthia base lodge is pretty hooked up," says Luke Stafford, communications manager at Mount Snow. "There's a 25-foot skate ramp on a huge outdoor deck, the whole place is wi-fi enabled, there's a core retail shop, a lounge with an Xbox, and a full cafeteria and burrito stand."

It's The Demand, Stupid

The reason more resorts look to make the leap into all-mountain park status is simple: the demand for parks is huge and only seems to be

growing. According to the Kottke National End Of Season Survey for 2007/08, 94 percent of resorts report having terrain parks and 57 percent have a halfpipe. The report also cited that among resorts that have terrain parks, 25 percent have one park, 34 percent have two parks, 25 percent have three parks, and 16 percent have four to eight parks, with an overall average of 2.5 parks per resort nationwide. There is no doubt that the importance of parks at resorts has increased dramatically over the last several years, and this has created opportunities for smaller resorts to either convert to all-park or take an entire peak or mountain in their area and transform it into nothing but jumps and jibs. "Fifty percent of our resort visits take place in the park," says Benneyan. "It's clear that the park is the new winter playground for a broad range of participants—it's what we call the 'sport families.'" Benneyan further explains that during a recent season-pass-holder survey they found that even more of their customers want to use the park but they are a bit intimidated by the all-park environment and would like more education opportunities.

The Upside Down

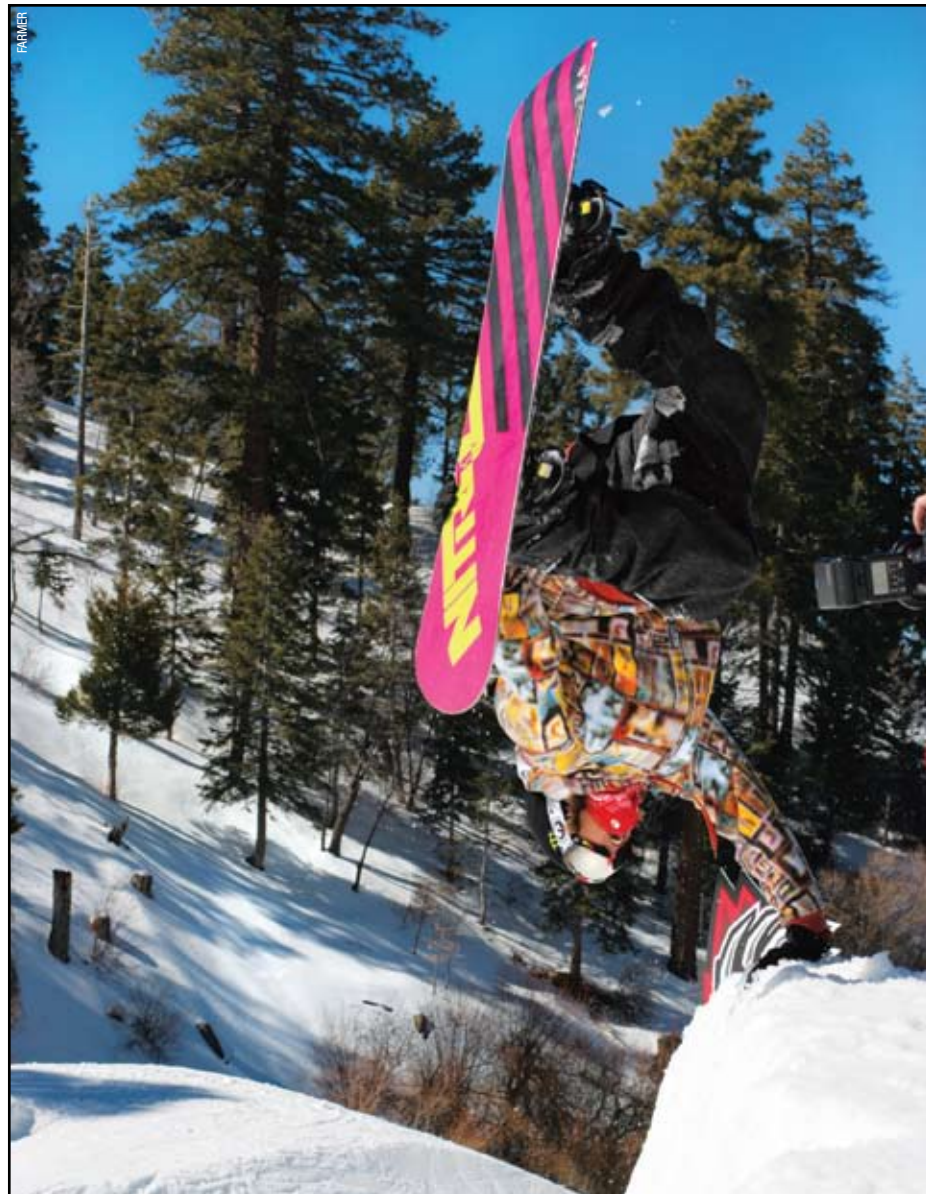
The first place to look to see if the all-mountain park has a future is to the mountain that has been doing it for nine years. "As a marketing strategy, we have backed off from the all-mountain park message a bit because we want to be more welcoming and less intimidating to the lower level and intermediate riders who are really the backbone of our customer base," says Riddle of Bear Mountain. "In general, it has been a very positive marketing element for us in promoting our dedication to our terrain park. The downside is that we are excluding those who are not interested in the park." So it's a fine line that you have to walk even as you push the limits of what a terrain park can be.

Mountain Creek first opened their all-mountain park in 2007, and they consider the first year a success. "It's been nothing less than 100-percent positive," says Benneyan "The move to shift our park to an underutilized part of the mountain and to expand the terrain by more than double has had a good impact."

The model for Echo Mountain is unique in that it is solely a park and is relying on a customer base that only wants to ride park in a state known for big-mountain resorts. However, it seems to be working. "This past season we increased our revenue by about 75 percent," says Chris Harris, industry marketing director for Echo. "Our goal for this upcoming season is another 50 percent increase by changing up our prices and making it more accessible to more people."

Getting In On The Action

All-mountain parks create a unique marketing opportunity for brands similar to summer camps in that you have a captive audience of young snowboarders. "We initially chose to align ourselves with Echo because we felt that a resort so close to Denver with such a strong focus on the park would be popular," says Kristin Cusic, VP of marketing for 686. "Echo has done a great job placing the resort into the Colorado scene. It's proven to be a solid all-around investment for 686. We have branded jib features in the park, provided uniforms for the



Zac Hale working on his one-handed push-ups at Bear Mountain.

staff, and enjoyed lots of promotions with events and on their Web site."

Sims has also found a great partner in Echo Mountain. "We are trying to tap into the younger jib riders, and Echo attracts this demographic better than any," says Marc Vitelli, director of product design for Sims. "We held a couple of pro-camps there over the past couple of years and have had good success." Echo is on private land, so they've been able to offer unique sponsorship opportunities that resorts on public lands could never get away with. "We sponsor one of their lift towers and feel like it's unique and effective branding for Sims," added Vitelli.

Bear Mountain has a massive park and grooming staff, upwards of 40 deep, which creates some great branding opportunity for the right companies. "Nomis and ThirtyTwo are two important and unique sponsors for Bear Mountain," says Riddle. "They outfit our park staff in their outerwear and boots as a uniform. ThirtyTwo manufactures a custom Bear Mountain boot, which is something I feel is very special for us and them."

The Winter Dew Tour is taking over Mountain Snow's Carinthia January 8-11, 2009, with live coverage on NBC and additional spots on MTV, Fuel TV, and USA Network, creating by far the biggest event ever at an all-mountain park and some amazing marketing opportunities along with it. "It's the only East Coast stop for the tour, and we're super excited to have riders like Shaun White, Kelly Clark, and Danny Kass in our park," says Stafford.

While there are only a handful of major pro contests each year, all-mountain parks are known for hosting a lot of grassroots events and private film and photo shoots, all of which can be great promotional opportunities for brands, shops, and resorts. The best thing about hosting your events at all-mountain parks is that they are far more likely to have the resources to pull it off. "We've held team photo shoots at Echo over the past two years," says Vitelli "They're super easy to work with and make things happen such as building custom features for us."

Looking To The Future

It's never easy to predict the future, but it's clear that all of the resorts that have put this model in place plan to continue as all-mountain parks. Therefore it seems likely that there will be more popping up around the country and the model will continue to evolve. "I don't see any dramatic change for Bear Mountain in the near future. We feel that we are ahead of the curve even though we've reached a bit of a saturation point. We don't need more jumps and jibs, rather we need to focus on the design, flow, grooming, quality, and maintenance. Our test for the future is how to keep it fresh, fun, and well maintained."

The consensus is similar on the East Coast. "At this point, the model is pretty fresh for us," says Stafford. "We just want to see how it goes these first few years. We'll be taking feedback the entire way and tailoring Carinthia to fit our riders." ■■■