

Bridger Bowl: Where the big kids play

BY BRIAN SCHOTT • FOR THE TRIBUNE • MARCH 5, 2009

BRIDGER BOWL — I am standing at the top of Slushman's Ravine with 61-year-old Dene Brandt, a veteran ski patroller at Bridger Bowl since 1977 who is showing me around the nonprofit community ski area's first lift-served terrain expansion in 30 years.

He picks his way gingerly down the fall line toward the top of an exposed chute, then stops and reminisces about an avalanche that once carried him rolling and tumbling down this rocky spire.

"Are you intimidated easily?" he asks me sincerely, a wry smile visible through a gray, bushy beard as he sizes up my ski bravado.

"I'll be fine," I reply with as much conviction as I can muster while I stare down the 40-degree couloir, where a missed turn could mean missing the rest of the ski season.

His movements are fluid and sure-footed like a mountain goat as he leads me to the entrance.

I'm an expert skier and relatively young at 38, but Brandt — 23-years my senior — is making me feel old.

Skier With A Mission

I began my day with one mission in mind:

explore the nooks and crannies of 311 acres of new expert, lift-served ridge terrain that opened via the Schlasman's Lift in mid-December. The lift is named after P.B. Schlasman, a German coal miner who was killed in the first documented avalanche-related fatality in the Bridger Mountains in 1885.

While the name Slushman appeared on Bridger Mountain area maps over the years, mountain management deemed it appropriate to recount the story behind Slushman Ravine and restore its original "Schlasman" spelling in naming the new lift.

Appropriately, in this unforgiving ski zone, skiers are required to wear an avalanche transceiver to access the lift, and traveling with ski buddies and shovels is highly recommended. But just wearing a transceiver isn't enough. Bridger Bowl management constantly offers avalanche education to make sure that their guests are treating the snow with the respect it deserves and know how to use the tools.

"There are a lot more people who are educated about avalanche safety these days," Brandt tells me. "But there are still a few people who use the transceivers as a ticket to get on the lift, and don't really know what they're doing."



A pair of unidentified skiers hike above the new Schlasman's Lift at Bridger Bowl to access a few more turns while the winds blow off of Saddle Peak in the distance.

We verify the signal of our transceivers before we load and the wind begins to grow as we swing through the blue sky. The last time I visited Bridger, I hiked the 20-minute boot-pack to the Ridge above the uppermost Bridger lift. And although I'm all for "earning your turns," this lift ride is sweet. And I know I'll need all the leg strength I can muster from the looks of the steep gullies and cliff-studded faces that I stare at on the 8-minute ride.

Brandt tells me that the double chair is a reconditioned 1976 Doppelmayr, formerly known as the "Peruvian" lift, purchased from Snowbird Ski Resort in Utah. Lift mechanics fitted the historic lift with a brand new cable and chairs, along with other updates and modifications. The lift's vertical rise tops out at 1,700 feet with a slope length of around 3,800 feet. Brandt works as a surveyor in the summer months and saw firsthand the jack hammering and blasting required to imbed the 13 lift towers into the solid rock of the ridge.

On a narrow shelf 100 vertical feet below the ridgeline, we unload and do our own survey of the wide variety of steep and deep lines and aspects, choosing to jump into the expansive Mundy's Bowl just south of the chair. We're in the zone of no grooming and no marked trails, about as pure a ski experience as you can have without leaving through the backcountry gates — a place where you are solely responsible for your safety and welfare. We gaze at hikers slowly climbing up the spine of Saddle Mountain, an exposed pyramid-shaped peak just outside the boundary.

At least here inside the ropes, ski patrol is available and performs avalanche hazard reduction after big storms. But in my case, as I stand at the lip of a steep cornice at the top of the bowl, I begin to think that perhaps being toured around by a patroller may just present an additional hazard in itself.

We rip through Mundy's North and traverse to the south, then on over to the Bitter End where the boundary line hangs, cutting up the soft snow in the shade and diving into one of the narrow chutes that brings us to the bottom of the bowl for a quick wrap-around through low-angle trees back to the chair.

On our next run, we stretch our legs and take the short hike above the chair to the apex of the ridge, then hike and ski along the narrow spine across the top of Avalanche Gulch and over to the Knob chutes where my legs begin to shake as I convince Brandt to show me the goods.

Luckily, the sun glare off of my goggles hides the fear in my eyes and minutes later, trepidation is replaced by pure joy. Brandt offers me first tracks and I am knee-deep in the snow of the chute, even though a big storm hasn't passed through here in a week.

As I rest at the bottom and watch snow push up to Brandt's waist as he snakes his way down the u-shaped funnel, I am in total understanding of what he says has kept him coming back here year after year: "It's a great ski area that has awesome powder."

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