Heavenly tuning up its ski school, upgrades trails

By Kathryn Reed

While it's fall at lake level, the top of Heavenly Mountain Resort is covered with white stuff. Snowmaking usually begins Nov. 1, but with the overnight temps well below freezing last week, the guns were fired up Tuesday night.

All that snow will bode well for the anticipated opening day of Nov. 18.

Visibly, the newest addition to the mountain is the permanent ski school building that is to the right of Tamarack Lodge. Considering the general manager of the resort rose through the ranks via ski school, it seems logical Pete Sonntag would want something more than a yurt to represent his roots.

It's a short walk (or snow skate) from the top of the gondola. It looks much like a mini version of the year-old lodge. (SMC Contracting built both structures.)

About 100 kids can have lunch at any given time. Instructors will be able to show video of their charges to assist with learning.

Food used to be brought to the two yurts from an outside vendor. Now lunch will be made by Heavenly's staff, which allows more control – with the goal of serving something a bit more nutritious.

"We make sure there is

a heavy focus on fun.” Mike Allen, director of snow surfaces

Heavenly’s ski school started with the legendary Stein Erikson. This year’s crop of instructors includes three members of the Professional Ski Instructors of America’s National Demonstration Team and six who belong to the Western Demonstration Team.

Mike Allen, director of skier services, has seen plenty of changes to the ski school in the 20 years he has worked for Heavenly.

“We are seeing a little trend to parents being more open to kids starting snowboarding at a younger age,” Allen told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He said Heavenly’s instructors are trained to teach kids – not just teach a sport.

“We make sure there is a heavy focus on fun,” Allen said. After all, a parent’s first question is often, “Did you have fun?”

Teaching comes in many forms. When playing in the snow kids are learning why it’s important to keep their gloves on –

frostbite, that sort of thing.

A new learning component this season for kids' ski school is Black Bear Hollow. But it's open to everyone and might be something big kids would have fun visiting, too.

"It's a low-angle, low-risk boardercross trail for kids," explained Josh Spoelstra, who designs the ski school curriculum. "It creates a lot more adventure for kids."

Ski school isn't always just about time on the slopes, according the Heavenly's philosophy. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Groomed rollers through the trees are what this trail is all about.

Carved wooden animals dot the landscape, with information about them so kids are learning a bit about the environment. Plus, there is a play structure that can be used even with ski boots on.

Safety, fun, learning – that's the mantra of ski school.

"If it's safe and fun, you are probably learning," Spoelstra

said.

Other upgrades

Heavenly has made improvements for older, non-rookies, too.

While the painfully slow two-seater Galaxy lift will still be churning this season (it's in the master plan to eventually upgrade it), there will be new trails in that area. Called the Galaxy Pod, the intermediate trails on the Nevada side add 20 acres of skiable terrain.

This will be a bonus on windy days with more access to lower elevation terrain via Stagecoach and Galaxy chairlifts.

Five trails on the California side have been widened – Ridge (at the top by the wind fence), Ellie's (making it more uniform), Liz's, High Five and High Roller Park.

The Umbrella Bar will now be found at Snow Beach.

"I think people will be psyched. It will have a beer garden atmosphere and good food," Russ Pecoraro, spokesman for Heavenly, said of the revamped Snow Beach.

Even more Adirondack chairs will be scattered about for those soaking up the rays.

Heavenly keeps upgrading its snowmaking to be more efficient, while also putting in guns to cover more of the mountain. Seventy-three percent of Heavenly's trails can be covered with the fake stuff. In an hour, 1 acre can be covered with a depth of 3½ feet.

New to Heavenly and Northstar (also owned by Vail Resorts) is Epic Photo – a component of EpicMix. Action and still shots will be available for free via a rider's EpicMix account (which is free). They can be shared immediately on Facebook or Twitter, or high-resolution shoots may be purchased for $19.99.

While individual lift ticket prices are not set until the opening, Heavenly has long been big on touting its season pass. With the change of ownerships at various Tahoe-area resorts, pass deals are abundant – but Vail Resorts says it has the best value, either through Epic or Tahoe Super passes.

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