Kirkwood expanding options for backcountry junkies

By Kathryn Reed

With more than a foot of snow on the ground before this weekend's storm arrived, Kirkwood is eager to power up the chairlifts to get people to all that powder.

"We haven't announced an early opening. We don't intend to do so until after this weekend and we see what kind of weekend it is," Michael Dalzell told *Lake Tahoe News*. With the forecast for the storm to go south, that bodes well for Kirkwood.

Skiers flocked to Kirkwood through late spring this past season. Photo/LTN file

Dalzell, spokesman for Kirkwood Mountain Resort, said Thanksgiving weekend is the targeted opening date so far. But, he added, fingers are crossed it will be top to bottom riding just like last year – which ended with 781 inches falling at the resort off Highway 88.

The bulk of the $6 million in improvements at the resort went to rebuilding the Mountain Club, which caught fire in May. It will open later this month.

Most of the units evolved from hotel-like units to two-bedroom condos. The Mountain Club includes a full workout room, spa, sauna and steam room. It is a freestanding building in the village that operates on a one-eighth ownership.

Besides the lodging, the bottom level has been overhauled as well as a result of the fire. This includes the popular Monte Wolfe's. A few food items will be changed, but for the most part it will be the same restaurant.

Guest services and the ticket office are new, too.

Across from Chair 6 is the $1 million Expedition: Kirkwood Outfitters building.

While Expedition Kirkwood has been in existence for years, it never had a great place to operate out of. The new facility is designed to be a gathering place, somewhere to get information about avalanche conditions, hire a guide on a whim or just hang. It's from here that cat skiing, avalanche clinics, backcountry programs and all things beyond basic school begin and end.

Meeting space allows for gatherings or classroom time. Retail, demo equipment – it will all be in this one building.

Three times as many cat tours are expected to go out this season. Improvements during the dry season to the winter road to the Martin Point terrain will allow snowcat access almost every day. Expedition Kirkwood also intends to expand nighttime cat tours and hiking tours to new areas.

Kirkwood and K2 believe the snow and terrain are so special the ski manufacturer has created the Expedition Kirkwood K2 Sidestash. It is an all-terrain shovel rocker adventure ski. And only 300 pairs exist.

The price of an all day lift ticket has not been set, but it will be just less than $80, according to Dalzell. What the

resort is touting is the inaugural year of having passes that allow riders to jump between Kirkwood, Homewood and Alpine.

Many of Kirkwood’s signature events are returning, like the North American Freeskiing Championships. But new is the Freeride Snow Festival on March 23-25 – which is billed as a winter version of Wanderlust. Women’s clinics have been expanded to a weeklong shindig – March 3-11.

All events and details about Expedition Kirkwood are online.