# Northstar celebrates 40 years, looks forward

**By Kathryn Reed**

TRUCKEE – “Everything in the middle of nowhere.” That was Northstar’s motto in 1972 when the first lift started turning.

A lot has changed since Dec. 22, 1972 – owners, lifts, amenities, and definitely the fact that the Truckee resort can no longer be considered being in the middle of nowhere.

Its evolution into being a fixture in the greater Lake Tahoe area and a destination resort for those beyond the drive up market of the Bay Area and Central Valley was  heralded on its 40th anniversary.

In blizzard conditions year 41 started with snowboard legend Shaun White joining a group of riders for first tracks. While he is normally in the resort’s halfpipe (when it’s built), on this Saturday he was letting loose in the fresh powder – and not always on the trails.

The day before, White, who is now sporting a much shorter haircut after last week cutting off his locks for charity, did another charitable act. He made a Make a Wish come true by giving a young boy a snowboarding lesson.



Northstar’s Zephyr Lodge is one indication of Vail’s commitment to upgrade the resort. Photos/Kathryn Reed

On Dec. 22, White dropped in on the kids at the Burton Snowboard Academy to offer some advice.

Still under snowy skies, at 4pm it was time for White and Northstar COO Bill Rock to offer a toast.

Earlier in the day Rock had been at a celebration that was part reminiscing about the past and part looking forward to the next 40 years.

**A bit of history**

In 1949 a tree farm was started where Northstar is located. The land when Georgia Pacific owned it was called the Timber Farm.

It was the Fibreboard Corporation that opened Northstar-at-Tahoe in 1972.

The first snowboarders were allowed in the 1988-89 season. In the video that was shown at the celebration on Saturday the binding settings on the boards were much different than they are today.

Trimont took over operations of the resort in summer 1994. Two years later, Booth Creek Ski Holdings acquired Trimont/Northstar.

In 1999, Booth Creek and East West Partners agreed to a real estate agreement that led to the development of the village and various lodging properties. The first phase of the village opened in 2005-06. The village kept expanding, culminating with a third phase.

The Ritz-Carton, Lake Tahoe opened three years ago at mid-mountain – though it has separate owners.

(The Highlands Gondola that goes from the Village at Northstar to the Ritz-Carlton was in jeopardy of not operating this season. The funding partners for the eight-passenger gondola that opened in 2009 were having trouble finding resolution. A deal was reached Dec. 21. However, that same day a tree fell on the cable. It should be fixed by the end of the year.)

In 2010, Colorado-based Vail Resorts bought Northstar. In its first year more than $30 million in on-mountain improvements were made.

**The past and future**

Hank Schwarz, Zeke Straw and Paul Daily were highlighted in the video shown to a select group at Schaffer's Camp on Saturday. The trio talked about the early days, the dozens of romances developed in ski school and the fun that was had on the slopes.

Blaise Carrig, president of mountain operations for Vail Resorts, recalled how his first experience at Northstar was in 1982. He was impressed with the ambiance, sense of feeling from the people, but completely understood why it had the moniker "flat star".

In 2002, after Vail Resorts bought Heavenly Mountain Resort on

the South Shore, Carrig made it a point to return to Northstar. The transformation was remarkable. More of the mountain was open – which included steeper terrain.

As the top executive at Heavenly, he would bring his management team to Northstar each year to see what the resort was doing.

“We saw Northstar as an able competitor,” Carrig said.

But he also knew about the 40-minute lines on busy weekends and people having to eat on the floor of the mid-mountain lodge.

In 2010, Vail Resorts bought Northstar.

“We wanted to come in and capitalize on their success,” Carrig said. That meant an infusion of cash to disperse people around the mountain via a lift that opened last December, new runs, and a lodge at the top of Zephyr chairlift to provide more dining choices – and chairs.

And Vail is not done. The master plan is in the works.

As Carrig said, Beaver Creek is the template for what Northstar will become.

Beyond the infrastructure improvements, Carrig said it’s the people who come to the mountain that matter most.

“It’s not about customers, it’s about maintaining relationships,” Carrig said.

Taking on a trait from its Colorado properties, guests at Zephyr Lodge are now offered a tissue when they walk in – and more than one when dripping wet coming in from a blizzard.

In the end, it’s all about the experience people talk about long after they’ve left the mountain.

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