

Sugar Bowl implements chairlift changes after boy's death

By Stephen Magagnini, Sacramento Bee

A year after John Henderson, an avid 7-year-old skier from Davis, fell off a chairlift to his death, Sugar Bowl has announced a comprehensive chairlift safety program inspired by the boy's parents.

The improvements recommended by John's mom and dad – UC Davis Medical Center doctors Helen Chew and Mark Henderson – include live video cameras at each lift and the lowering of the safety bar for kids under 51 inches, who aren't allowed to ride without adults.

"John had a certain light about him, and the best way to honor his memory is to do something positive," said Henderson, associate dean of admissions at UC Davis Medical School. "For a long time, we didn't even want to get up in the morning."

John, 43 inches tall, was a second-grader at North Davis Elementary who rode the chair with two teammates on the Sugar Bowl ski team.

At 11:15am Dec. 18, 2011, John was riding the Mount Lincoln express chairlift when he fell 52 feet. Though he wore a helmet, he died of head trauma two days later.

"It's very rare for somebody to fall out of a chair," said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association. "It's usually at the beginning or the end of the lift, not midride."

Sugar Bowl, on its website, said 13 new safety measures are being adopted this season because "ultimately our safety

program was insufficient to prevent this tragedy.”

The ski team coach allowed the three boys to board without supervision, and “we also believe the chairlift restraint bar was not lowered properly at the loading terminal and children of this age were unable to lower the bar themselves,” the resort said.

A 10-month investigation into the youngster’s death was inconclusive because of “conflicting accounts and few direct eyewitnesses,” but found no evidence of horseplay by the other kids.

Sugar Bowl’s risk manager, Nicole Lieberman, said the resort worked closely with John’s parents to craft the new chairlift safety measures.

“They have undergone an unspeakable tragedy and they chose to deal with that by working with Sugar Bowl and the industry to see what could be done differently,” Lieberman said. “Working with them has been amazing and inspiring. We had many meetings, phone conversations and emails looking at lift safety.”

The resort, 90 minutes from Sacramento on Donner Summit, averages 230,000 visitors a year and has 13 chairlifts and a gondola, Lieberman said.

The new safety measures this season include:

- The installation of a web-based camera at chairlift loading stations to monitor the loading process, lift operators and riders.

“The camera was our suggestion, so you can diagnose a problem and use it to change procedures and give feedback to a lift operator who isn’t putting the bar down,” said Henderson, who with his wife spent months studying ski-lift safety. “Most accidents occur because of problems with loading.”

Sugar Bowl believes it's the first resort in the country to have cameras at chairlifts, Lieberman said.

- Skiers and snowboarders will ski up to a 51-inch mascot, the "safety bear," and those shorter than that will not be allowed to ride the chair without an adult.

Henderson said they got the idea from the height requirement for rides at Disneyland.

Sugar Bowl developed the height stations with Mammoth Mountain, Lieberman said. "These are the first height stations I'm aware of," said Berry, who represents more than 300 resorts.

- Sugar Bowl installed bull's-eye targets on the chair seats on three of its chairlifts so far – an idea the Hendersons borrowed from Canyons Resort in Park City. "It's been really quite phenomenal to watch children and adults aim for those bull's-eyes to help riders sit back on the seats and be properly spaced apart," Lieberman said.

- Sugar Bowl installed a training chairlift in the base area that patrons can practice on, Lieberman said. "We plan to install another one," she said. "We're really focusing on education and outreach."

- The resort will train lift operators and ski team coaches in lifts and promote lift safety through the National Ski Areas Association.

Berry said a ski safety website, www.kidsonlifts.org, "was inspired by John Henderson."

"The legacy of this tragedy is that it's not repeated," Berry said.

Chew, professor of medicine and director of the clinical breast cancer program at the UCD Med Center, said she and her husband had no interest in filing a lawsuit against the

resort.

“That was never our intention,” Chew said. “If we could actually get the resort to make some lasting changes and lead the industry in chairlift safety, that would be the best outcome and could affect generations of kids.”

Henderson and his wife and son Paul, 17, still ski Sugar Bowl. “The anniversary of John’s death was Dec. 20, and it’s been a very difficult couple of weeks around Christmas without him,” Henderson said. “But I think these are wonderful changes.”