

Sierra's cat on the prowl to perfect riders' experience – especially in terrain parks



Sierra has a four-year lease on its snowcats so the fleet doesn't get too old. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

TWIN BRIDGES – It's not your grandfather's Bombardier.

That's the impression of Sierra-at-Tahoe's new addition to its terrain park grooming fleet – the Prinoth Tier 4 Bison X. The workhorse of a machine runs smoothly like a Cadillac, but acts like it has the conscience of a Tesla electric car when it comes to protecting the environment, an underlying goal the ski resort 12 miles west of Meyers has focused on for years.

Benny McGinnis, Sierra's terrain park manager, has welcomed the new member of the family of 12 grooming machines – some of which like this Bison are geared for the terrain parks. The \$200,000 machine comes equipped with more torque, more features and more fuel efficiency – while throwing out fewer emissions. As numbers go, it emits 90 percent less in noxious fine particles compared to past generations, according to McGinnis' fact sheet.

The output is right in line with Lake Tahoe's environmental movement.

And if wondering why else this machine is important, one need only look at what in recent winters had not been falling from the sky in Tahoe to understand. California is coming off four years of unprecedented drought. If not for reliable and capable grooming machines and their operators, the ski seasons would not have lasted as long as they did. They can save a season. Think of it this way, in drought, there's only so much snow that can go around.



Benny McGinnis is a veteran snowcat driver at Sierra specializing in terrain park

work.

“In the wake of the drought, efficiency is key. That means efficiency in on-mountain operations – the way we move and preserve snow and also efficiency in environmental practices. This cat gives us the chance to accomplish all of those while continuing to create progressive terrain parks,” spokeswoman Thea Hardy told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Progressive terrain parks are breeding grounds for Olympians.

In 2014 Sierra was celebrating the cultivation of three Olympic gold medalists – Maddie Bowman, Jamie Anderson and Hannah Teter. There’s a reason they ski and board here.

“The terrain park has definitely influenced Jamie Anderson in becoming the huge athlete she is today,” said McGinnis, a 14-year veteran terrain park builder who operates heavy machinery for the U.S. Forest Service in the summer months. In winter though, it’s all about Sierra – and all its users.



Drivers sit in the middle of

the cab with a slew of controls at their fingertips.

The Prinoth machine has a smaller cab than older models while maintaining the track size. That helps it maneuver more easily – especially at the “take offs” and “landings” associated with terrain parks.

“I like that this job gives me the opportunity to create something and to let a normal person come up and feel like an Olympic athlete. Tourists want to come up and get out of their lifestyle – to speed up or to slow down, and be an athlete,” McGinnis told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Prinoth groomer, clad on the outside with a camouflage design, has more than 30 possibilities to manipulate the tiller and blade through a joystick attached to a panel that resembles an airplane. The blade can even pick up terrain park features.

This machine also provides more visibility with heated wipers and larger windows as well as more comfort for the operator with a Bluetooth sound system and heated seats. McGinnis admitted operators might get work fatigue just like a plane pilot or even someone who operates a computer for eight hours. His crew of six machine operators works two shifts encompassing between eight to 10 hours, the latter if the ski area gets dumped on. The job requires 80 hours of training.

Some are set in their ways and like to stick to the older machinery. But the handful of terrain park builders like the challenge of the new toy. All like to create a culture that embodies play.

“These cats are expensive to run. If we’re not managing the business responsibly, then we as a culture we love can’t exist,” he added as if a poet.

Call them poets of the night, writing the fate of the mountain

slopes the next day.

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Notes:

What else is new at Sierra-at-Tahoe this year?

- The Learn-to-Ride program is enhanced for all ages wanting to try their hands and feet on the Burton Backhill snowboard design.
- The addition of a safety program called Helmets are Cool has come on board.
- The WiFi has been beefed up in the base area, so guests will be able to connect with family members and friends more easily.