

Ski industry gurus share decades of experience

By Kathryn Reed

For those who are schussing down the slopes, it's all about having fun. And while it can be fun for those responsible for the operation of the ski resort, the bottom line is it's a business – and with that reality comes some not so fun aspects of the job.

In a wide-ranging conversation last week, two ski industry titans shared what their experience during past 40 or so years has been like.

Locally, Tim Cohee is known for having run Kirkwood Mountain Resort for years. He is director of the ski business and management program at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village. He also owns China Peak Ski Resort near Fresno.

John Rice is at the helm of Sierra-at-Tahoe.

Both are well regarded in the industry and are fixtures in the Tahoe community.

Their professional lives have been intertwined for decades, starting when they both worked for a Southern California ski resort. While they were competitors in Tahoe, the respect they have for one another was evident during the Feb. 28 talk.

Outdoor photographer Corey Rich, whose business is in the Ski Run area, was the moderator for the evening. The event at Blue Angel Café was part of the Ski Run Presents series, which is designed to bring the community together over relevant topics.

Cohee and Rice acknowledged the industry isn't the same as when they started out. It's more serious. Employees aren't as apt to want to work long hours.



Corey Rich, left, moderates a talk Feb. 28 between ski industry mavericks Tim Cohee and John Rice. Photo/LTN

The terrain park as we know it might not have ever been born under today's workplace constraints.

Rice is credited with taking snowcats for "joy rides" when he worked at Sierra Summit, which is now known as China Peak. He was bending frames and breaking tillers to build jumps on the side of the mountain.

He moved to Bear Mountain and continued to build features through trial and error. It was in 1993 that he moved to Tahoe.

"Today it's way more complicated. There are so many regulatory things," Rice said. "The competition is more fierce and cutthroat."

Now 70 percent of the ski resorts in the United States are owned by two companies – Vail Resorts and Alterra. Both have a presence in the Tahoe area – Heavenly, Kirkwood, Northstar (Vail), Squaw and Alpine (Alterra).

Rice is one of those industry leaders who believes in giving athletes what they need.

“They need a playground to do their thing. It takes a lot of resources. The mountain has to commit to that,” Rice said. Sierra-at-Tahoe has a long history of Olympians, with two (Jamie Anderson and Maddie Bowman) competing in South Korea last month and two others (Hannah Teter and Kyle Smaime) each missing the team by one spot.

Cohee and Rice know it’s an expensive sport, admitting it can cost a family of four \$1,000 a day.

“At the end of the day, they will only do it if the value is there,” Cohee said.

Demographics are changing. Rice said five years ago 78 percent of Sierra’s guests were Caucasian, today that percentage is 53 percent.

“There is an opportunity with the ethnic market to bring in new skiers,” Rice said.

It’s millennials who have been a disappointment. They aren’t skiing. That’s why resorts are now focused on the younger generation.

Cohee believes skiing is affordable for those who do it regularly – they buy passes and seldom eat at the resort.

Rice admits Tahoe needs to raise its game when it comes to service as well as food and beverage.

Resorts make about 40 percent of their revenue from day tickets, 20 percent from season passes, 13 percent food and beverage, 13 percent ski school, 13 percent retail, and 1 percent miscellaneous.

And while millions of dollars may be collected each season, it’s not a highly profitable business because of the expense

and need to reinvest in the product. China Peak recently installed a new lift. It has sat idle most of this winter because of the lack of snow. The resort reopened this weekend.

Climate change is something very real to these men. They see the swing in snow years, which isn't what it was say, 20 years ago.

They recognize it's expensive for young people to get started in the industry, especially with housing an issue in most every ski town. Sierra is working on ways to improve that situation.

As Rice said, "It's more than a job, it's a lifestyle."