

Review: 'Commuter' is no ordinary train ride

By Howie Nave

I think we can all pretty much agree that Liam Neeson is an exceptional actor with range, but it wasn't until "Taken" that Neeson became an exceptional action star with an extraordinary appeal. Not a super hero mind you no, but someone with that everyman kind of appeal that is instantly relatable.

There's also something about a dramatic movie whose stage is shot almost entirely on that of a moving train. You know there's no easy escape and you soon find yourself as one of the passengers on the train.



The thing is, do you belong on that train? Such is the premise of Neeson's latest outing in "The Commuter." Neeson plays 60-year-old Michael MacCauley, an insurance salesman who, for the last decade has been taking the same commuter train from his home in the New York suburbs to his work in Manhattan. Director Jaume Collet-Serra (who worked with Neeson on the movies "Unknown," "Non-Stop" and "Run All Night") creates an almost "Groundhog Day" routine showing Michael's daily routine getting up every morning

for work with his wife (Elizabeth McGovern) dropping him off at the station and wondering how they're going to stay above water affording to pay for their son's college tuition mortgaging the house. You know, everyday scenarios that life

throws at you. Michael's a good family man and lives a pretty non-exciting, ordinary life.

Then the dominoes start to fall. He loses his job and realizes he has no back-up plan because he lost all of his fortune in the Great Recession of 2008. You can feel his helplessness; a man at the age of 60 having no major savings plan (come to think of it this hits rather close to home). Not wanting to upset his wife he doesn't tell her because life as he now knows it is pretty much at a standstill. He drops by a local pub after getting canned where he meets an old friend, Murphy (Patrick Wilson) who's a cop. In fact, it turns out Michael used to be his partner before leaving law enforcement to go the insurance route. The movie doesn't explain why he took this career path, but will serve him well later as things unfold. After a few drinks Michael heads for home getting back on the commuter train.

You realize watching the movie at this stage that the good stuff is about to happen because once that train is in motion things are about to get anything but routine and ordinary. You know the adage that if something is too good to be true, it probably is? Well, that gets tossed out by the wayside when a mysterious woman named Joanna (Vera Farmiga) takes a seat across from him on the train and strikes up a conversation. Michael just assumes she's hitting on him and he reminds her that he's happily married. She doesn't want to have sex with him but makes him a proposition nonetheless. There's a total of \$100,000 waiting for him in a package in one of the train's lavatories and all he has to do is find someone on the train named Prynn who is carrying a bag and plant a tracking device on that bag.

Joanna gets off at the next stop and Michael now has a moral dilemma to deal with because once he crosses that line there is literally no going back. He finds the money and it seems almost too easy. She's off the train so why not just skip with the money and be done with it? Wrong. Things amplify at this

point because she is now monitoring his every move and strangers in and off the train are watching him. Oh, did I mention that if he fails to go through with her proposition that his family will be murdered?

It would be too easy to call this movie “‘Taken’ on the Train” but in some respects that’s exactly what it is as things start to unravel. Neeson followed a similar plot in the movie “Non-Stop” but that was set on a commercial plane. I know, it sounds at first like a tried and true formula, but it’s a winning one because the plot here in “The Commuter” doesn’t give you a clear-cut answer where you feel “taken,” that you know what is going to happen next.

Credit the storytellers (Byron Willinger, Philip de Blasi and Ryan Engle) for not making it too easy to connect the dots and for making Neeson’s character one you immediately like and cheer for. There’s been so many movies that I feel insulted as a moviegoer. There have been movies where the whole story is told just in the trailer giving us characters that you could care less what happened to them. Truth be known I tend to go for complete escapism in my movies because for a couple of hours I don’t want to see what’s going on in the outside world on the big screen. That’s why I’m sitting here in this theater: to escape my life in the real world and implant myself in another world happening on that big screen and in this case on a train. Oh, and I want to add too that the action sequences on this train are pretty intense. I haven’t seen this much drama on the railroad since Denzel Washington and Chris Pine in 2010’s “Unstoppable.” If this movie is a huge hit at the box office for Neeson, expect to see a sequel but it won’t run as long time-wise because the plot this time will take place nonstop on a bullet train.

“The Commuter” is rated PG-13 for some intense action/violence, and language and clocks in at a tight 105 minutes.

Howie Nave is host/emcee/manager of The Improv at Harveys. You can hear him Monday-Friday 6 to 10am on KRLT FM-93.9. He has been reviewing movies for years. They may be heard on four other stations each week where he does "A Jew Doing a Movie Review," and he occasionally writes reviews for Lake Tahoe News.

2017 was costliest year ever in U.S. for weather

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

Last year's devastating floods and fires in California combined with hurricanes and other natural disasters to wreak unprecedented financial damage on the United States, the federal government reported Monday.

The nation endured 16 weather and climate events that inflicted \$1 billion or more apiece in damage in 2017, tying 2011 for the most 10-digit calamities in a year and setting an annual total-cost record of \$306 billion, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The natural disasters resulted in 362 deaths.

Read the whole story

Nev. lawmakers urge Congress to change marijuana laws

By Gary Martin, Las Vegas Review-Journal

WASHINGTON — Nevada lawmakers said Tuesday that Congress must address federal marijuana laws following a decision by the Trump administration to lower the barrier on federal prosecutions in states that have decriminalized use for medical and recreational purposes.

Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., and Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., are working on legislation filed by Republicans and Democrats to amend the Controlled Substances Act and allow marijuana to be made available for medical research and use, and another bill allowing states to regulate marijuana as they do alcohol.

Read the whole story

9-day outdoor festival returning to North Shore

The fifth winter Alpenglow Mountain Festival, presented by Outdoor Research and DPS Skis, will be Feb. 17-25.

The nine-day festival in North Lake Tahoe is a celebration of human-powered mountain sports, events, clinics, equipment demonstrations, critically-acclaimed film and more. It will showcase more than 75 individual events and is almost entirely free.

Geared toward beginner and intermediate winter recreation

enthusiasts, the Alpenglow Mountain Festival includes backcountry skiing and splitboarding, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, natural history, yoga, live music, educational workshops, social gatherings and more.

In addition to local guiding companies Alpenglow Expeditions, Backcountry Babes, Rich Meyer Alpine Guide, and North American Ski Training Center a litany of professional athletes will attend the event in order to lead tours and give presentations. They Adrian Ballinger, Kim Havell, Noah Howell, Barry Blanchard, Zach Griffin and more.

Other Mountain Festival highlights include:

- The “Nachtspektakel” backcountry social with bonfire and three-course catered meal
- Backcountry Essentials clinics for beginners
- Backcountry Bartending with Adventure Dining Guide
- Adventure Writing Workshop and Cast Iron Cooking clinics with Charlotte Austin.

Registration for the event opens on Jan. 12 at 10am. The majority of events are free, so space is limited and participants are encouraged to register online to secure spots. Registration for most events requires a deposit that is refunded upon participation.

A complete event schedule can be found **online**.

EDC wants input on broadband

upgrades

El Dorado County is having public meetings Jan. 17 in Placerville and Jan. 18 in South Lake Tahoe to gather input for broadband planning and improvement.

The county is working with consulting firm NEO Connect to conduct a broadband feasibility study to evaluate current broadband resources and identify options for improving connectivity and expanding broadband across the County.

Meetings will focus on the needs of five audiences: business and professional; public safety; schools and libraries; healthcare; and the general public.

The meeting schedules are the same at both locations:

Business and professional – 9-10am

Public safety – 10:30-11:30am

Schools and libraries – 1-2pm

Healthcare – 2:30-3:30pm

General public – 5:30-6:45pm.

The Tahoe meeting will be at Tahoe Mountain Lab at 3079 Harrison Ave., South Lake Tahoe, and the Placerville meetings at board chambers at 330 Fair Lane.

18 states may introduce sports betting bills in 2018

By Wayne Parry, AP

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. – A new report predicts 18 states will

introduce bills to regulate sports betting this year, with 11 having a good chance of passing legislation.

Eilers & Krejcik Gaming, which tracks gambling legislation nationwide, says that's just the minimum; the firm predicts more than 30 states could introduce sports betting bills.

The U.S. Supreme Court this year will decide a case brought by New Jersey that seeks to overturn a ban on sports betting in all but four states: Delaware, Montana, Nevada and Oregon. A favorable ruling in that case could open the floodgates in terms of states adopting a new form of gambling.

Read the whole story

S'mores becoming a regular event in Kings Beach

North Tahoe Business Association and 12 Kings Beach shops are creating Get S'more Saturdays.

On select winter Saturdays from 3-6pm, attendees may head to participating eateries and shops for something extra and unexpected, track their visits on a play card, then stroll to the outdoor gathering area to redeem play cards for free S'mores and eight chances throughout the season to win valuable raffle prize packages, including a pair of skis.

Get S'more Saturdays will take place on Jan. 20, Feb. 24, March 10 (the same day as the Kings Beach Snowfest Parade), and March 31. Each participating business will offer shoppers and diners something extra and unexpected, such as complimentary beverages and snacks as attendees shop, free

appetizer or specialty menu items, complimentary balloon animals, artist demos, and more. The offers vary from business to business and may be subject to change.

Get S'More Saturday participating businesses include Blue Wolf Studios, Jason's Beachside Grille, Lakeshore Sport Shop, Las Panchitas, Taco Bell, Tahoe Biltmore Trolley, Tahoe Central Market, The Grid Bar & Grill, The Robin's Nest, The Stevenson Gallery, Well Being, and Whitecaps Pizza.

For more information, go **online**.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

- Team USA WinterFest will be at Squaw Valley on Jan. 13 from 11am-5pm. It is free. Olympians Daron Rahlves and Marco Sullivan will be there. For more info, go **online**.

- El Dorado County's Continuum of Care program received nearly \$400,000 in federal funding to help end homelessness, fund emergency domestic violence services, and enhance coordination among local agencies that handle those issues.

- The Washoe County Sheriff's Office Citizen Corps is offering an emergency preparedness and response training academy beginning Jan. 18. For more info, go **online**.

- Del the Funky Homosapien, plus Domino (from Hieroglyphics) and guests Black Rock City Allstars will be at Whiskey Dicks Saloon in South Lake Tahoe On Jan. 26. Doors open at 9pm Must be 21 to attend. Tickets are \$25.

Letter: Bread & Broth diner returns as sponsor

To the community,

As a young boy, Jeremy Woodford would attend Bread & Broth's dinners with his family at Grace Hall. Now, many years later, Jeremy is paying it forward by hosting three B&B dinners so others can also benefit from the same nourishing meals that helped him when he and his family were experiencing difficult times.

Woodford sponsored his first of three Adopt A Day of Nourishments on Jan. 1. He, along with his partner Melissa Brittain, and Melissa's parents, Craig and Barbara Brittain, showed up at 3pm to roll up their sleeves, put on B&B aprons and work alongside the B&B volunteers setting up the dessert and drink table and bagging give away bags filled with breads and pastries, fruits, vegetables and dairy products.

It was Melissa Brittain's first visit to a B&B dinner and she found the experience to be a very positive one.

"It was a great evening with great food," she said. "Look forward to volunteering again."

In addition to helping with the dinner's setup, Woodford and his sponsor team served the dinner guests and helped with the meal's cleanup. B&B would like to extend a very special thank you to Woodford and his hardworking team that come prepared to make sure that others would not go hungry that night.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Sierra, Squaw turn Olympic dreams into reality



Squaw Valley racer Marco Sullivan competed in four Olympics. Photo/Eric Schramm Photography

By Susan Wood

When the Winter Games in PyeongChang, South Korea, surge into our consciousness next month, retired alpine ski racer Marco Sullivan's snow-filled mind is sure to drift to another mountain.

Sullivan, like many before and expectedly after him, grew up gracing the slopes of Squaw Valley.

Squaw, like its southern Lake Tahoe counterpart – Sierra-at-Tahoe, has an uncanny knack for cultivating Olympians. Combine Travis Ganong, Julia Mancuso, and Jonny Moseley on one shore with Jamie Anderson, Maddie Bowman, Hannah Teter and Travis Cabral on the other – and you’ve got a powerhouse assortment of Olympic medalists and contenders.

“I’m really proud to say I’m from Squaw. Maybe it’s a similar vibe at Sierra,” Sullivan, a 37-year-old Truckee resident, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There’s a long tradition of people in the valley, ex-ski team, who have established a vibe.”

To those associated with these athletes, there are various reasons why these no-holds-barred, homegrown resorts crank these top-of-their-field competitors out of the gate. Unique qualities ranging from the magnitude of the training program and the terrain to the abilities of the coaches and desires of the parents and resort management were cited from a host of people on the periphery. Plus, health care support like that found in Barton orthopedics is also commendable, U.S. Ski and Snowboard Chief of Sport Luke Bodensteiner outlined for *LTN*.

This year is no exception.

“I think we have the best team going,” Bodensteiner said boldly. There’s a whole crop of kids looking to carry on the tradition of excellence from the American team.



Tom and Todd Kelly are part of Squaw's skiing heritage.
Photo/Provided

And for Tahoe, it's part of a history dating back as far as 1960.

For his part, Sullivan dreamed of competing in a World Cup race as early as age 5. The ski team member traded good grades and his traditional physical education class at North Tahoe High School for hours on the mountain in the afternoon. As the ski team head coach, his late uncle Mark "Sully" Sullivan saw something in Marco that groomed him for competition.

“The guy paved the way for me,” Sullivan said. “I never questioned going to the U.S. Ski Team. It was a given.”

The rest is history – a storied one filled with trials and tribulations. He competed for 15 seasons and made 105 World Cup starts – the most of any American racer. Podiums were hard to come by – four total. But the memories carved an indelible mark on his life, proving the journey is as important as the destination.

When he retired from racing, it was emotional.

“I ended a big part of my life. It’s not something that came easily,” he said. “I guess looking back I wished I would’ve won (a World Cup race). When you’re getting in 15th place, sometimes you forget you’re representing your country. I appreciate it all now.”

He now sees that fire in the eye of teenagers while running the American Downhill Ski Camp. The last large outing brought out 30 bright-eyed hopefuls between the ages of 12 and 19, along with a superstar staff including the most decorated downhill racer-turned-skiercross competitor Daron Rahlves, also from Truckee and retired. Sullivan also works as a NASTAR pacesetter on tour. Essentially, the job coaxes the competitors to meet and exceed the race-time threshold of a veteran.

As the Olympics go, he competed in four – Salt Lake City, Turin, Vancouver and Sochi.

He likes the chances of the women as well as his Squaw comrade Bryce Bennett this year.

When the teams are announced Jan. 20, it will mark almost six decades since Squaw Valley hosted the Games. That date comes only a month after the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association announced a five-year agreement with the legendary North Lake Tahoe resort as an official training site of the U.S. Ski and

Snowboard Team. While hosting the FIS World Cup Championships last year, Squaw joins the ranks with Mammoth Mountain, Deer Valley, Copper Mountain and Timberline.



Sue and Maddie Bowman prove the power of family is strong at Sierra in so many ways. Photo/Provided

It takes a village – a familial one

An extraordinary ski team program is as crucial as the culture that created it, Squaw-Alpine Ski and Snowboard Team Director Todd Kelly insists.

Let's face it, when you have kids who see the exhilaration and

temptation for greatness as young as age 4, it's tough to deny their shot. And Squaw sees many. They learn early on who is Tamara McKinney, a four-time World Cup champion, and they see stars.

The program trains those who "bleed blue" (their uniform colors) in three disciplines – GS "giant slalom," slalom and downhill. The development segment runs from ages 4 to 9.

"You can spot these kids here and there at age 5 to 7 – the ones that can ski great," Kelly said.

Racing starts as early as age 7, and they grow into three age categories. From there, it takes a mature mental toughness.

"You definitely have to believe in yourself that you can win on that day," Kelly told *LTN*.

He should know. Kelly, 48, went through the ranks and made the same declarations more than three decades ago – at this same mountain. He competed from 1986 to 1994 and was rated as the top U.S. super-G skier.

The village is indeed a family.

Marco's uncle "Sully" was Kelly's mentor before he died three years ago. So the connections run as deep as a healthy Sierra dumping in February.

The simplest argument is the culture breeds ski royalty from Truckee to Squaw Village.

"When you make a right or a left turn into the valley, there's a culture for skiing and a passion that you learn at (age) 3 or 4," Kelly said.

Of course, it helps when your father paves the way.

"Basically, it's the mountain," said Tom Kelly, a giant in his own right.

The two men provided a father-son perspective about Squaw with *Lake Tahoe News*. Their views were intertwined.

The elder Kelly, the resort's 69-year-old building services manager, was a former Olympic and U.S. Ski Team coach.

He points out that even if the conditions vary, (take the unseasonably warm slush World Cup competitors navigated through last March at Squaw), the systematic support makes all the difference to a ski area bringing an athlete up to par.

"They need tremendous support from the people who run it," he said with a nod to Squaw chief Andy Wirth.

Kelly and his son not only cite Wirth, the person at the helm of their resort, but Tom Kelly is quite familiar with the unbreakable reputation of John Rice at Sierra-at-Tahoe.



Jamie Anderson, Maddie Bowman and Hannah Teter celebrating in 2014 at Sierra. Photo/LTN file

The power of place of Sierra

After the last Winter Games, Sierra-at-Tahoe hosted a huge community party to honor three women who have all won gold medals for Lake Tahoe.

Snowboarder Teter, who earned hers in an earlier Olympics, with snowboarder Anderson and free skier Bowman having achieved theirs from 2014 – all say the same thing when asked where they honed their exceptional skills on snow. Sierra-at-Tahoe, a smaller resort than other properties owned by a conglomerate, is their home resort.

They let that be known in various ways.

Teter, who hailed from Vermont, released her version of maple syrup in an event at the Sierra Pub.

Anderson speaks often of freeing her in-demand mind by cutting loose in the stashes of Sierra.

Bowman, well, she's rather engrained in the culture – as her mom knows so well.

How many teenagers do you know would take the time to deliver homemade fudge to the employees spread out all over a ski resort during the holidays?

Maddie's mother, Sue, a volunteer coach who is celebrating her 52nd year skiing, makes 16 pounds of it. The mother-daughter duo thinks nothing of stuffing the secret recipe into their packs and making the rounds. It's gotten to the point in which the staff counts on it, waiting for the days when the younger celebrity takes time out of her busy schedule to come home.

The tricks Bowman performs on skis are only matched by her humility. That's because she knows where she comes from and lives by those died-in-the-wool, mountain-community ethics that make Sierra-at-Tahoe something other resorts may not get.

For one thing, the resort groomers and terrain park builders are known to move heaven and earth to create a masterpiece challenging enough for Olympians to be interested.

For another, General Manager Rice implemented a program at Sierra-at-Tahoe years ago that provides free ski passes for students at Lake Tahoe Unified School District making a 4.0 grade point average. Hundreds of passes have been doled out, students have excelled, and Rice set a benchmark for teens like Bowman to become the role model she is today. Bowman attributes part of her success to that program.

Then there's the attitude that starts from the top down. Sue Perpall told *LTN* she'll never forget when her daughter was about to make her debut on a Dew Tour in her "tore-up" ski pants. Rice took her to one of the resort's retail shops and bought her a "presentable" pair.

"When someone helps you out like that, it boosts your confidence," Perpall said.

Perpall has tried to put things into perspective because it's common for parents "to think their kids are superstars." Maddie was proving it on the Buddy Werner team among others, and Rice saw it.

"It never occurred to me (she would be a contender). But John skied up to me one day and said: 'I want to back her,'" she said. "How many general managers can ski up to somebody, first find their mom, then know when someone has promise?"

Bowman just thought she wanted to hang with the boys as sometimes the only girl in a daredevil group destined for greatness. They'd challenge her, and she delivered.

"She was always a tomboy from Day 1. When she's on top of the halfpipe, she brings it," Perpall said. "And Sierra bends over backward to build its halfpipe when it can. It's been amazing what they've been able to do."

Perpall emphasized the lack of dedication from other resorts.

That commitment is also noticed by the industry.

“Sierra is different. With Sierra, it may well be the culture for Hannah, Maddie and Jamie. I think the stuff they do when it comes to the Olympics fits with Sierra – that laid-back style,” California Ski Industry Association President Mike Reitzell said.

Then, there’s the obvious.

“I think Squaw is a no brainer. When you host the Olympics, you’re forever entrenched as the place that’s going to attract the Olympians. And Squaw totally embraces its Olympic heritage,” Reitzell told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s evident when you first see those Olympic rings off Highway 89.”

The Winter Games start Feb. 9.