

# Hard Choices (and Work) Revive Burke

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OWNING a ski area has never been easy. It's labor-intensive. You need natural and financial resources. Poor economic times shrink your client base. There are liability issues.



Photographs courtesy of Dennis Curran

*The Burke ski area in Vermont has a 2,000-foot vertical drop.*

And that was before global warming.

So maybe this isn't a great time to buy into the ski market.

But some people are jumping into the ski business anyway, despite the potential pitfalls. That's good news for us in the snow-sliding tribe.

In its 50-year existence, Burke Mountain in northeastern Vermont has seen everything the ski business has to dish out, and then some.

Today, Burke Mountain, which was bankrupt and sold at auction just five years ago, is poised to see something else: a rebirth. It is a Cinderella story for all the lesser-known, off-the-beaten-path ski areas out there.

The Burke ski area, a midsize mountain with 45 trails and a respectable 2,000 feet of vertical drop, has always been isolated, remote enough that even Vermonters think it's far away. Burke's location, closer to Montreal than to Boston, has long been a part of its charm. It's just outside East Burke, a village of only 1,600 wedged into the state's celebrated Northeast Kingdom. People came to Burke for an authentic New England skiing experience.

The problem was that, in many years, not enough people came to make the ski area profitable. Even now, Burke draws about 6 percent of the skiers and riders (65,000) that its downstate cousin Killington does in a usual winter.

But that was also one of Burke's charms - it was never crowded. Alas, charm doesn't pay bills.

Burke is most renowned for the nearby Burke Mountain Academy, the country's first ski-racing institution. The academy took in promising high school-age skiers, and with the secluded location as an ally for keeping the athletes focused, turned them into Olympians - 39 so far, including the 1994 Olympic gold medalist Diann Roffe. For decades, the academy was the constant amid the tumult that frequently enveloped Burke Mountain, which struggled to overcome changing ownership, shifting strategies, aging equipment and, of course, the occasional snow-deprived winter.

In 2000, a bankrupt Burke Mountain was put up for auction. Burke Mountain Academy board members and alumni decided to buy the mountain, although they needed help first.

At a town hall-like meeting attended by more than 400 local residents, Kirk Dwyer, the academy headmaster, explained that for Burke Mountain to open in the winter of 2000-1, it would have to double its season-ticket base of 1,100.



Photographs courtesy of Dennis Curran

*Small now, but there are plans for development.*

"We had local people volunteering to man the phones for us," Mr. Dwyer said. "Everyone pitched in, calling neighbors, working hard to get to 2,200 passes. People were buying 10 passes and giving them to local grammar schools. But we did it. That first winter, the mountain broke even."

Still, the academy, a nonprofit entity, didn't want to be in the ski area business. It spent the next several years looking for a financial partner, someone who could afford to turn Burke into a four-season resort and develop real estate near the mountain - the customary modern business model for making money in the ski business.

Last month, the academy found a suitor. The Ginn Company, a resort developer based in Celebration, Fla., bought the mountain earlier this month for \$3 million. The Ginn Company plans a real estate development around a new four-season resort. Plans include a golf course, luxury homes, condominiums, an inn and restaurants in a project that will most likely cost hundreds of millions of dollars. How many property units will be added has not yet been determined.

The Ginn Company has already invested more than \$4 million in a new high-speed lift, new snow-making equipment and completed a spectacular renovation of the base lodge.

People in Burke have noticed all the activity at the ski area, which is on state land and must remain open to the public. The local reaction has been mixed.

"Development is going to benefit the town, and most people feel positively about this," said Mike Harris, one of three members on the Burke Board of Selectmen. "But there are people concerned about too much development or too soon. Change comes hard."

After all, a lot of people live in the Burke area expressly because it is three hours from Boston, unspoiled and out of the way. They came to the Northeast Kingdom for its absence of resort living.

RYAN JULISON, a spokesman for the Ginn Company, said local residents and others who will visit the new Burke Mountain have nothing to worry about.

"The pristine setting of Burke is what drew us there, and we want to preserve it," Mr. Julison said. "Our clients have been to the places that are overcrowded, and they're migrating away from them. That's who we're catering to, people who want to come to a place like the Northeast Kingdom because of its heritage as a peaceful getaway."

Mr. Dwyer, the academy headmaster, said he understood why locals were concerned.

"There's no question this sale will forever change the area," he said. "But if a group didn't come in and develop, the ski area would likely have closed. It couldn't go on without it."

Given that alternative, even a historic place like Burke needs help to survive. Because running a ski area, in some places, is just too hard.

The drive to Burke will still be peaceful (and relatively long). There's time, and space, to keep rooting for authenticity, too.