

GREATER FRANKLIN BUSINESS PROFILE: Ski Depot



Kenny, left, and Ron Jacques, owners of Ski Depot

For Ron and Kenny Jacques, lifelong ski racers and owners of the Ski Depot in Jay, running a booming ski shop and e-tail ski business has one little downside: They get less time to ski nowadays. But that's a price the two brothers are more than willing to pay. Because they love what they do, and the success of their locally grown business shows it.



"It used to be that we could hang the 'Gone Skiing' sign on the door, but we can't do that anymore," laughs Kenny Jacques.

In less than 10 years, Ski Depot has become one of the largest ski sales and rental shops in Maine. Its affiliated internet site, www.raceskis.com, is North America's largest dealer of Fischer racing skis, topping every other online and traditional retailer. The company has even developed its own custom-made, patented Alpine ski, The Claw, whose unique vibration-damping system has found a niche with high-end skiers around the U.S.

From the Slopes to the Shop

Ron and Kenny Jacques have been skiing together for more than 35 years, from racing on the local junior ski team in Jay to skiing the Austrian Alps and the Rockies. They've met and skied with some of the biggest names in the sport, from Picabo Street to Bode Miller, Phil and Steve Mahre, and many others. And their experience and dedication to the sport translates into the kind of customer service that few ski shops can match. That, Kenny says, is what's made them successful.

"It all boils down to customer service. People want you to sell them the right gear and back it up after the

sale, and we do that. We have people from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island who come here in the summer, and they do their ski business with us while they're on vacation. They pass a lot of ski shops on the way to get here, so I think that says something for us."

They're not the only ones who are satisfied with Ski Depot. The company sells more than 2,000 pairs of skis every year, Jacques says, and they've now expanded into kayaks, skateboards, and even paint-ball supplies. It's a far cry from their early days, when Ron and Kenny started the business with their brother Steve back in 1996.

"I think we ordered 40 pairs of skis that year and 60 pairs of boots," Kenny remembers. "We sold most of it, so we doubled our order the next year—and it didn't snow. And it didn't snow the year after that. But we were gluttons for punishment, so we kept doing it."

The hard work paid off. Last year, Ski Depot moved into a new year-round home on Main Street in Jay, where the store now has more than 4,000 square feet of floor space to showcase its huge array of alpine skis, boots, bindings, snowboards, and more. The company's Internet site, launched in 1999, now accounts for about 40% of total sales, Jacques says, and is growing every year. The Jacques also operate a seasonal ski shop at Black Mountain in Rumford.

What lies ahead? "We definitely will be trying to expand our web sales, and as far as opening another shop, you never know when opportunity comes knocking," Kenny says.



"A lot of people have jobs they don't enjoy. We look forward to coming to work every day. For a long time it was just the brothers doing everything, but we have more help now, so we're able to slip out and get some snow time once in a while. After all, you can't sell it if you don't know how the product works! But it comes back to work. You get out of it what you put in, and we don't plan to stop working hard."

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Winter 2005/2006

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Welcome to our Winter issue!

For many folks here in Franklin County, winter is the best time of year—because when the white stuff hits the ground, it's time to hit the slopes and the trails.

Skiing and snowmobiling are a major part of our economy, bringing over a thousand jobs and generating millions of dollars every season for locally owned businesses throughout greater Franklin County.

It's no wonder why. With Sugarloaf and Saddleback, we have some of the best skiing and snowboarding on the entire East Coast right here in our own backyard. And Franklin County boasts one of the most extensive and scenic snowmobile trail systems in New England, with an endless variety of riding for the whole family.

In this issue, we celebrate winter with a look at what's new on the ski mountains and what's happening on the snowmobile scene. I hope you enjoy reading—see you out there!

Alison A. Hagerstrom

Executive Director



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Skiing in Franklin County:

Local Flavor, Big Mountain Fun

There's nothing like a toasty fire in the lodge after a day of schussing the slopes or shredding the halfpipe in the crisp mountain air. And when it comes to great skiing, snowboarding and après-ski dining, shopping, and relaxing, it doesn't get much better than Sugarloaf/USA and Saddleback Mountain, Franklin County's two top-notch ski resorts.



The new base lodge at Saddleback Mountain

Patricia Carrier doesn't have to worry about getting frosty fingers as a lift operator at Saddleback Mountain anymore. These days, she oversees promotions for the mountain from the comfort of Saddleback's beautiful new base lodge. And Carrier says there's a new excitement at Saddleback.

The new lodge is the centerpiece of more than \$20 million that's been invested on the mountain since Farmington's Bill Berry and his family purchased Saddleback in 2003. With all-new trails, new quad lifts, more snowmaking and trail grooming, new parking and improved access to the mountain, Carrier says people are now rediscovering one of New England's true skiing gems.

"The mountain has the same old feeling people loved, the friendly smiles, the good, warm rustic atmosphere, but now it's better than ever," she says. "We had a significant increase last year, and our goal this year is to have the same growth for this season."

On the Comeback Trail

Saddleback, which first opened in 1960, combines older-style New England trails with the big skiing of a 2,000-foot vertical drop and the welcoming feel of a family business. The mountain has 132 acres of skiing, with 54 beginner, intermediate, and advanced trails. But Saddleback's attraction isn't limited to its skiing, Carrier notes, "The mountain is wonderful for hiking in the summer, and we have great cross country skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. We have live entertainment every Saturday, and we love to have people just come and enjoy the lodge and being on the moun-

tain, even if they're not on the slopes."

Saddleback skiers come mostly from greater Franklin County and from Southern Maine. But Carrier says over time, the expansion of on-mountain accommodations will allow Saddleback to market to a wider audience. Thirty condominium units are now in development on the mountain, and a new timeshare project will start construction in 2006. An on-mountain hotel may also be in the works down the road.



For now, Patricia Carrier says Saddleback will continue to focus on the Maine market, with products such as its Franklin County season passes and initiatives like a program that brings students from schools in Rangeley Lakes and Phillips up to the mountain on Tuesdays and Thursdays to learn to ski. "We're working very hard to get the local community back up here. I think part of our challenge right now is just to tell the people in our area 'This is your mountain—come back and enjoy it.'"

The Beast of the East

While ski enthusiasts outside Maine may not know about Saddleback yet, skiers and snowboarders from Portland to Providence are already waxing up their skis for their next trip to Sugarloaf/USA, Maine's biggest ski mountain and the home of some of the most spectacular skiing in the East.

Sugarloaf is a major economic force in Franklin County, employing more than 800 people during ski season and attracting visitors from throughout the Eastern U.S. With 133 trails on 1,400 acres, three terrain parks, two half-pipes, and more than 60 miles of cross-country skiing, Sugarloaf literally has something for everyone.

"We do over 350,000 skier visits in a season, so that's a lot of people that we're bringing to the area," says Communication Director Bill Swain. Just over half come from in-state, while others travel from Southern New England and other states.

To keep these guests happy, Swain says Sugarloaf works to keep improving the quality of the Sugarloaf experience. As an example, he cites new machinery to carve bigger halfpipes for freestyle skiers and snowboarders, expanded grooming capabilities that let crews groom 75% of the mountain every single night, and increased snow-making for 05/06 "that will allow us to get more terrain open quicker in the early season."



Focus on Fun

First opened in 1951, Sugarloaf is one of five New England ski resorts owned by the American Skiing Company. Swain says the company's All-in-One Pass, a season pass introduced last year that lets customers ski any of American Skiing's resorts in the east, has given Sugarloaf more predictable business volume and boosted its benefit to the area.

"Last year was unbelievable: We had people here all the time, but at the same time we never got overcrowded. It's been a tremendous success for us. The pass gets people up here more often, which increases their economic impact on the surrounding communities."

Sugarloaf also offers Maine Day on most Wednesdays, where Maine residents can ski for just \$26, and Maine Family Day every Sunday in January and the first Sunday in February, which lets a family of four ski for just \$100.

And during two weeks in December, Sugarloaf is offering free lift tickets,

equipment rentals, and, for those 19 years and older, free morning ski lessons to residents of Eustis, Stratton, Carabassett Valley, Kingfield, New Portland, West New Portland, North New Portland, Freeman, Rangeley, New Vineyard, Strong, Phillips, and Farmington.

Programs like these, Bill Swain says, are part of what makes Sugarloaf so popular with so many people.

"We work hard to keep the hometown feel, the uncrowded slopes, the spirit that have always been our trademark. Because we think it's important to preserve the thing that has endeared Sugarloaf to everyone all these years—and that's a brilliant outdoor experience in the mountains of Maine."



Sugarloaf/USA's ski village offers a variety of shops and restaurants.

Sledding The Trails

Family Snowmobiling Means Business in Rangeley Region

If you want to spend a vacation weekend at Rangeley Lake this winter, you'd better make your reservations now. Because once snowmobile season starts, it's hard to find anywhere around Rangeley that isn't packed with sledders who flock to enjoy the region's spectacular trails and magnificent views.

Snowmobiling is big business in Maine, with more than 100,000 sledders each year riding 13,000 miles of trails. According to UMaine and the Maine Snowmobile Association, snowmobiling contributes about \$300 million a year to Maine's economy and creates the equivalent of 3,100 full-time jobs.

The Rangeley Lakes Snowmobile Club's 150-mile trail system, named in honor of sledder Ronald W. Sargent, who originally broke many of the trails, is one of Maine's finest.

"What makes our trail system unique is the beauty of it," says Gail Gavigan of the RLSC. "We have the mountains, the lakes—the scenery is just fabulous. One of our major trails goes right to the top of East Kennebago Mountain, and that's a beautiful ride."

Booming Popularity

Clubs like the RLSC and the Arnold Trail Snowmobile Club in Eustis, which are among the largest of more than 275 organized snowmobile clubs in Maine, have played a major role in helping the sport grow in Maine.

During the season, keeping the trails groomed and safe and keeping up with a busy schedule of events can be more than a full-time job, says the RLSC's Gavigan.

"We have approximately 150 miles of trail that we groom at least five nights a week," she explains. "We have three big groomers and we're out there every night. Our trails are all passable in both directions, and we work hard to keep them safe."

Their efforts are paying off. The number of nonresident riders in Maine has tripled since 1995. Gavigan says two-thirds of the RLSC's members come from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and southern Maine. And 80% of those are people who bring their families to the area for weekend trips, school vacations, or family winter getaways.

"It's really what keeps the economy here going in the wintertime," she adds. "They're staying in the hotels,

they're renting cottages and homes, and the new timeshare units in town have drawn a lot of people, too. Between Christmas and the end of March, I don't think there are too many hotel rooms vacant around here. We have rental agencies that just handle home rentals for snowmobilers who own homes here and rent them out for part of the year. It's a big business."

And, as Gavigan adds with a smile, it's just plain fun.

"To me, there's just something about snowmobiling that makes it special, and I think snowmobiling in this area is really wonderful."



FOR MORE INFO

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Arnold Trail Snowmobile Club:

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In the News

Strong Gets Development Grant

The town of Strong has won a \$10,000 Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) grant to study new uses for the town's three recently closed mill properties. The grant will enable the town to do a structural evaluation and redevelopment plan for the former Cousineau's Lumber, Strong Wood Products, and Forster Manufacturing facilities.

DECD's Sarah Doscinski, who worked with the Strong Area Business and Civic Alliance on the grant application, says a redevelopment plan could be presented to the community by next spring.

Tourism Promo Meetings Open to Public

Interested in promoting tourism in western Maine? You're invited to join a working group to create an action plan for western Maine based on a new state tourism study.

Meetings are open to the public, and will be held over the next few months. Bruce Hazard, Director of Mountain Counties Heritage, says the group will be working from a study by the Fermata Inc. consulting group that targets the western mountains as one of three areas in Maine with outstanding potential to develop tourism business based on its cultural, historical, and natural assets.

One project already in the works is a regional map and guide highlighting the area's prominent cultural, historical, and natural sites.

For information on upcoming meetings, contact Alison Hagerstrom at 207.778.5887 or ahagerstrom@greaterfranklin.com. View the full study report at www.fermatainc.com/maine.

