

The making of a mountain



Helicopters stood in silence, flags fluttered and people milled about on the broad plateau beneath Saddle Mountain, chatting or munching smoked salmon and other treats from a vast buffet spread on improvised tables carved from the compact spring snow. Mike Wiegele stood in the stiff April breeze and officially announced that Saddle Mountain Resort had received the crucial provincial approval it needed to go forward. It was an emotionally charged moment for Wiegele, one of heli-skiing's three original founders.

Wiegele took a lengthy pause while all the feelings flooded over him. His guides, staff and the assembled government officials understood what this meant—the boldness of the vision, the future possibilities, but also the risks Wiegele was embracing at a point in his career when many others would be content to relax on the porch. But some of the heli-skiing guests seemed oblivious to the implications.

"This is about creating the picture-perfect skiing place—the world's best," said Wiegele during a lengthy interview months later—just a few weeks ago, actually. "We've got eight big peaks available, with consistent, reliable powder from November through May, which gives us the

potential. The village will be central within the eight peaks."

This is a major departure for the skiing industry. Its backcountry portions—heli-skiing, snowcat skiing and touring huts—mostly exist as a separate world from lift-serviced resorts. True, it's not completely unknown for a major resort to offer snowcat or heli-skiing as an exotic extra, appreciated by few—conceptually akin to add-ons like dogsledding or wildlife viewing. Only one resort I know of, the new development at Revelstoke, is making a point of integrating snowcat and heli-skiing with its lift-based core. Wiegele's stands alone as the sole heli-skiing operation that will build its own ski resort.

Where other developers spew a stream of jargon about bed bases, warm versus cold pillows, costs per square foot, yields, price points and, of course, the overall dollar figure, Wiegele instinctively starts with the fundamental of skiing: snow. "Saddle Mountain's got the perfect combination of amount of powder snow and reasonable weather—anywhere from the Coast Mountains to the Rockies," he says with his irrepressible enthusiasm. Rather than talk about lift alignments or chairlift sizes, Wiegele enthuses about the newly gladed terrain on

Duffy's, one of the eight peaks ringing the heli-village at Blue River, and the great skiing this will open up for future Saddle Mountain Resort guests.

Saddle Mountain has been a long time in the making, and the exact shape of what's to come is something of a moving target. It's vintage Wiegele, reflecting the way his mind works. He'll have the glimmerings of an idea, then roll it around for years, testing it repeatedly against people's reactions. But if it's meaningful to him he'll cling to it stubbornly, altering its shape to bypass obstacles. So it evolves as he builds the conceptual structure log-by-log.

It had quite a different character when Wiegele first explained it to me almost a decade ago. Then he was concerned about offering some permanence for staff plus opening skiing to the local community. He worried about an endlessly revolving door of young people coming in bright-eyed and eager, but soon leaving because the valley offered little opportunity to build a normal life. For years, the huge peaks ringing the village and rising as much as 1,800 vertical metres from the valley floor had sat unutilized, simply being flown over twice a day.

What could be more natural, Wiegele wondered, than building some lifts? Non-guiding staff, spouses or other loved ones, the children sprouting from new relationships, and the local residents could all start enjoying winter, and something permanent would emerge. Runs were duly cut, and Wiegele explored the terrain. And thought some more. Eventually he realized the local skiing market just wasn't that big. A conventional development, with all its costly clutter and the huge risks of selling day tickets to whomever might show up, could be a fiasco.

So the chief driver evolved from the local community to Wiegele's own clientele. Heli-skiing is undergoing an extended, challenging transition. This heretofore elite industry, whose operators were accustomed to being fully booked one, two and even three seasons forward, seemingly regardless of economic cycles or price increases, quite suddenly found itself

scrambling to fill tours. Steady increases in industry capacity, combined with an unforeseen and still unexplained decline in overall guest traffic beginning in about 2003, altered the supply-demand balance. Nobody knows if it's short- or long-term. But everyone accepts that the clientele is getting older and skiing less intensely. The fat ski revolution of the '90s had enabled older clients to continue and less-fit skiers to enter the sport. It was hugely beneficial, but basically a one-time step-up.

With Saddle Mountain, Wiegele aims to alter the whole experience of heli-skiing. "We're not building for masses, but for membership—we don't need huge capacity," he says. "We want to create a good, healthy culture that is self-supporting." The resort will be based on a clientele membership, some of whom could also be investors. There's still a lot to figure out. Will the skiing slopes even be open to the general public, for example? Either way, it must be something unique, says Wiegele, "Because the conventional local ski area is not a viable business model. Even big areas don't really make

money on operations. We need to create a viable business."

Thinking about it in my own way, I realized Saddle Mountain could replace the whole quiver of adjectives that go with heli-skiing. Typical words now are awesome, gnarly, huge, steep 'n' deep, unbelievable, fast-paced, phenomenal, longest runs, most vertical—but also risky, unforgiving, stressful, competitive and arrogant. The best of these would certainly remain for the committed, hardcore heli-skier—the Cariboo and Monashee mountains aren't going anywhere. But the new village will create new mental images, Wiegele hopes: welcoming, congenial, reassuring, nurturing, joyful. This should appeal to a much broader spectrum of skiers, plus non-skiers seeking the mountain lifestyle.

We won't see much infrastructure sprouting right away. Wiegele is intent on initially getting the skiing right. The first of up to eight lifts, plus a small lodge and staff accommodations, isn't due until 2010—and this will be a short lift on flat terrain for children of guests and staff, plus first-timers or older skiers warming up for the

helicopter. Meanwhile, gliding and run-cutting will continue, and the eight peaks will get skied more and more by snowcat and helicopter. If he can make skiers happy, Wiegele feels, they'll naturally want to build houses. From that would eventually come a year-round village with every conceivable feature.

"Here's what differentiates us from anybody else," says Wiegele. "We're going to build nice places, but we're not going to BS people about what the skiing might be like. We're going to start with the skiing, and then we're going to build. People can compare it to every other potential skiing offer around the world. Then they can come here and build whatever they want—a \$5-million house on several acres or a modest cabin."

It's often been claimed there's a basic divide between North American and European thinking: one demands instant gratification, while the other seeks achievements for the ages. Born into a rural Austrian family but making a lifelong commitment to Canada, Mike Wiegele has made a career out of providing both.

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