



ALL MINE:
Dropping into the
bottom of Black
Bear in Arapahoe
Basin, Colorado's
Montezuma Bowl.

THE SMALL ARMS RACE

INDEPENDENT RESORTS ARE COMPETING WITH THE BIG BOYS BY EXPANDING TERRAIN. BUT WILL MORE SKIABLE ACRES TRANSLATE INTO MORE POWDER FOR EVERYONE?

By Devon O'Neil

ON A WHITEOUT DAY IN JANUARY 2008, Arapahoe Basin dropped the ropes for the first time on Montezuma Bowl, a long-anticipated expansion. The 400 acres of alpine terrain increased the gritty little Colorado resort's size by 80 percent. While the expansion raised the ire of some local backcountry skiers, it also made the resort a more enjoyable place for ticket holders. All the tempting new terrain lessened the crowds on the resort's frontside crown jewel, the popular Pallavicini steeps.

By adding both groomers and cliffy chutes, Montezuma Bowl, which cost \$3 million to open, drew praise from many quarters, including the press, which eats up expansions like free filet mignon. It wasn't until the season ended, though, that ski-area executives learned its business impact. A-Basin's skier visits increased by 34 percent over the five-year average (from 321,000 to 431,000)—an enormous swing for a midsize ski area in America's most competitive market.

Montezuma was the Basin's most significant expansion in its proud 62-year history. Less than five years later, A-Basin proposed another expansion, this one

to add 434 acres and a chairlift on the resort's western boundary. The project is still in the permitting process, but if approved (as all indications so far hint it will be), the Beavers/Steep Gullies expansion would add everything from gladed north-facing powder shots to walled-in avalanche chutes.

A-BASIN IS FAR FROM ALONE IN ITS GROWTH STRATEGY. If the biggest trend in megaresorts is corporate conglomeration, the biggest trend among smaller ski areas is terrain expansion. Wolf Creek, Monarch, Eldora, and Loveland are all planning expansions in Colorado. Farther north, along the Powder Highway in interior British Columbia, Red Mountain, Whitewater, and Kicking Horse all recently completed major expansions, following the 2007 opening of Leviathan Revelstoke Mountain Resort and its 3,121 skiable acres. In Idaho, Brundage is working on its second significant expansion in seven years, while Jay Peak, a revered midsize area in Vermont, plans to expand in 2017.

Why the sudden small-arms race? For starters, none of the ski areas sees it that way. "Obviously we're all competitive with each other, but I can tell you we've never once said, 'We've got to do that because so-and-so is doing something,'" says A-Basin GM Alan Henceroth, who has worked there for 27 years. "It's always been, if we do this, will people like it, will they use it, will they come? We're just trying to do what we think people want."

Not everyone wants a bigger ski area—especially when it comes at the expense of backcountry runs. "You want to appeal to all levels of skiers, and stepping through a gate and taking that responsibility on your own is a great feeling," says Shevy Rashidi, an A-Basin local for 25 years. "I know a lot of people from around the state and the country who come to ski the Basin for that reason. If you open it up to everyone, I think you are going to lose that skier at a certain point."

Every inbounds skier—and, in turn, every ski area—covets what Brundage managing director Bob Looper calls "the low-density skiing model," a.k.a. more powder per person. When Brundage added 160 acres seven years ago, it boosted the resort's skier visits by 10 percent. This time, it's adding 500 acres in the

next two to three years, a move Looper hopes will generate a 20 percent gain. Red Mountain opened 1,000 new acres last winter—the largest expansion by an existing North American ski area in 40 years. CEO Howard Katkov declines to share skier-visit numbers, but he says the resort’s group reservations jumped, and the expansion generated so much positive press that Red made a “brag book” out of the clippings. It plans to open another 200 acres on this winter.

“I think everyone has to believe there’s an ROI [return on investment] to it,” Katkov says of the trend. “ROI can come in many different forms. It doesn’t have to be more people, but just spreading out all the people. The ROI for us is bringing more people.” He pauses, then adds with a laugh, “It’s all about taking share from somebody. We’re not picky. We’ll take share from anyone.”

Last year’s expansion at Red came three years after Whitewater, an hour north, completed its first significant terrain expansion in 34 years. New owners enabled Whitewater to add 749 acres and install the Glory Ridge triple chair, which brought the ski area’s vertical drop to more than 2,000 feet. General manager Kirk Jensen says the expansion has generated a 40 percent increase in skier visits over the past four years and created a more intriguing overall product.

“You can’t ski the mountain in a day anymore,” Jensen says. “You need a weekend or a few days. It puts us on the map in a way.”

ALONG CANADA’S POWDER HIGHWAY, where much of the marketing is done collectively, the expansion trend creates an interesting dynamic. “As much as we’re all working together for the same common goal,” Jensen says, “we’re vying for those available dollars and those visitors who are willing to travel. You need something to draw them in, and it takes an expansion in some cases to get the word out. It’s usually effective.”

Glory’s success is a large reason why Whitewater is two or three years away from expanding again, this time into a popular backcountry zone known to locals as the Trash Chutes, whose 200 acres will be accessed by an existing chairlift. But before you wonder if the trend will ever end, consider Red’s situation. Thanks to last year’s 1,000-acre expansion, Katkov is planning a high-end hotel. He points out that there are still 750 acres onto which Red could expand in the future.

Does he plan to develop them anytime soon? “No,” he says. “We don’t need to open any more terrain right now. We have plenty for everybody.”

We’ll check back a few years from now. ♦



Kari Medig slices the cream on Whitewater, BC’s Glory Ridge.

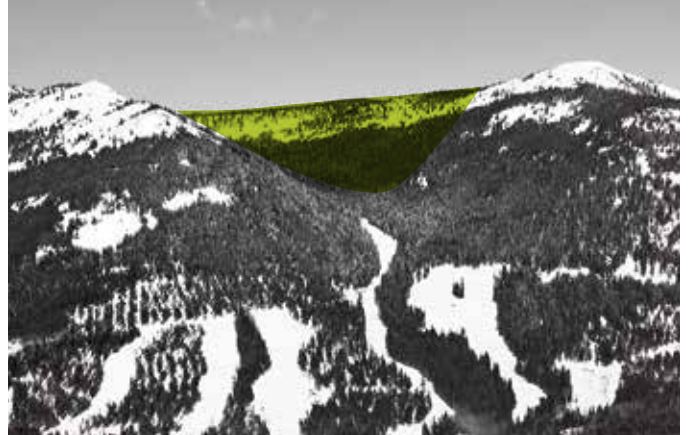
Devon O’Neil is a staff writer at ESPN and frequent contributor to *Skiing*. He lives in Breckenridge, Colorado.

750 **UNGROOMED SKIABLE ACRES**
Wolf Creek, Colorado, would add to its current 1,600 acres under a proposed expansion into the backcountry.

1 **HOUR** How long you have to return your lift ticket at Brundage, Idaho, if you “don’t like the conditions.”

1,000% **JUMP IN SKIER VISITS**
at Arapahoe Basin during its second season of operation, in 1947–48, after it installed a lift. In 1946, there was just a rope tow that required a ride on an Army four-wheel-drive vehicle to reach.

Red Mountain opened Grey Mountain (left) last winter and Mt. Kirkup cat terrain this season (right).



FROM TOP: STEVE OGLE; COURTESY OF RED MOUNTAIN (2)