

LITTLE MOUNTAIN, BIG HEART

By Victoria Elizabeth Plasse

In 1948, Swiss Olympian Ann Janet Winn founded the Rotarun ski hill to teach the local kids how to ski. Seventy years later, Rotarun is reinventing that same legacy, only these days it's the Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation (SVSEF) managing the mountain and spearheading programs.

Executive Director of SVSEF Scott McGrew is wearing a few different hats for the South Valley initiative: program director, maintenance, food and beverage director, you name it. Managing so many roles is enabling him to achieve a long-in-the-making and

universally-shared vision of providing financial support to families and kids who would not necessarily have the opportunity. McGrew explains that it's more than getting on boards, it's inviting kids "to discover how to love and recreate in the winter mountains. This community-based effort represents the very best that Rotarun has to offer—a grassroots ski hill that belongs to the kids and the greater community."

McGrew affectionately calls the Hailey hill "the little mountain with a big heart," a phrase that seems to capture everything that Rotarun has to offer. "This little ski area is an opportunity for us to give this experience back to our children, to offer our community a place that is timeless and humble, and to inspire the continued cultivation of future generations of skiers and riders. The Cooper-Taché First Tracks fund, along with the work being done to re-envision and improve Rotarun, is shoring up our foundation and casting forward a vision that is powerful and transformative in the industry," McGrew.

The Cooper-Taché First Tracks Fund is a scholarship program founded by Wood River native Christin Cooper and her husband Mark Taché supported by several individual donors, foundations, and local businesses. Taché's father taught skiing for Sun Valley Company in the late '40s and '50s. Though Taché's four older siblings were born at the Lodge, Taché grew up in Aspen. "My father was a ski school supervisor and my mother worked as a bookkeeper in a ski shop. It was an era when ski towns were still affordable places, and all the kids up and down the valleys skied, or had the opportunity to. Families could afford it. The clubs have always been important to help it work, but ski racing was simpler and less expensive then," explains Taché.

Today, according to Taché, getting him and all his siblings on piste would be a real challenge. "In Aspen or in the Wood River Valley, I probably wouldn't have made it to the U.S. Ski Team, and my parents definitely could not have put all their kids on skis." Lucky for all of us, Taché and two of his siblings did make the U.S. Ski Team at various levels and all three have worked in the sport.

Taché recognizes a simple fact; that skiing is expensive these days. This new Rotarun partnership with SVSEF is shifting that reality from exclusiveness back to the original impetus of getting the local kids out to have fun. Taché explains, "Skiing has priced out too many families



Above: LASAR skiers are all smiles with coach Orlie Sather.



feature

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in mountain communities. SVSEF's management of Rotarun, and the range of their programming, is a great solution to this challenge. The hill is close by, it can accommodate lots of kids, and the night skiing provides after-school opportunities. Suddenly snowsports in the South Valley are on an even playing field with basketball, football, soccer. Even if a child drifts away from the mountains as they grow up, or can't afford to keep skiing as an adult, they'll have this great foundation to build on in life, as adults."

McGrew agrees, and he can't help looking towards what's on the horizon. "What makes Rotarun unique is its non-profit status and its legacy within the community. It belongs to us all and works to serve an incredible niche within the spectrum of recreation opportunities here in the Wood River Valley. From introducing children to wintersport, to providing a top notch-training venue for international focused-athletes, the potential of Rotarun for our community is tremendous," shares McGrew.

It's hard not to agree with McGrew in his belief that there is something timeless and imperative about keeping projects like Rotarun in the hearts and minds of the community. McGrew is inspired by the opportunity to provide an authentic outlet for youth athletes:

"The mega resort experience is an amazing thing, and it has a powerful allure, yet it also leaves us feeling a bit left behind. Rotarun, which began with a rope tow fashioned out of a pickup truck engine is still rooted in that sense of ownership for all. It is indeed a little hill with a big heart and it never fails to light up the faces of those who get to slide on its slopes. It is disarming, authentic, and helps us remember the roots of wintersport."

Taché's other half, Christin Cooper, sees similar programs in other ski towns building that same authentic community. Aspen has a similar program to get kids on skis, started by Bob Beattie in the 1990s, called ASK: Aspen Supports Kids. It puts 1,500 kids up and down the Roaring Fork Valley on skis, with gear and instruction, every Saturday all winter long. Steamboat

Springs is home to Howleson Hill (a "city park" owned by the town of Steamboat), which provides a vibrant backdrop for the kids of Steamboat. Buck Hill—a beehive of activity outside Minneapolis, which has grown a huge number of U.S. Ski Team and Olympians, is half the vertical distance of Rotarun.

According to McGrew, "It's a scary reality that these types of ski areas are rapidly disappearing. In the past 20 years, the United States has lost 100 or so ski areas. There are some forecasts out there that say we are going to lose. Many of those areas looked a lot like Rotarun, and simply ran out of relevance, snow, or interest. I think this is a huge tragedy and we have the opportunity to reconnect with the roots of the sport in a way that is unique to our community and in tune with our heritage here in the Wood River Valley."

Cooper sees the same problem, and believes that the loss of this accessibility is a loss to development of executive skills that athletes will take with them into their adult lives. "Access and affordability are simply crucial now,

and it's those of us who have benefitted from the sport who need to pitch in. Mark and I are successful restaurateurs now. What in heaven's name did we know about running restaurants when we started? Zero. But we brought to it all that skiing had taught us: teamwork, time management, perseverance, problem-solving skills, and... probably most of all, humility, and the ability to look for answers. Because if it's one thing skiing teaches you, it's humility and the ability to admit your weaknesses and try to fix them. If you're up (skiing fast, winning), it won't be long before you're down (skiing slow... or crashing, getting injured). Plus, skiing just makes you want to improve. It's more fun the better you are, which is true in life too. So the qualities we gained from skiing have totally been those that helped us succeed in the restaurant world."

Cooper is a celebrated SVSEF alpine alumna who grew up in the Wood River Valley and is an Olympic and World Championship medalist, World Cup winner, and six-time National Champion. Like many Wood River Valley partnerships, the opportunity

to work with McGrew and SVSEF happened organically.

"Our involvement actually started with an opportunity to auction off a day of skiing and a bronze sculpture, a miniature of the life-sized statue that will be part of Brian Barsotti's Olympic Ladies' Project. We wanted to be sure some of the money raised went to underserved kids, and that's when Scott filled us in on Rotarun. And of course, I had loved Rotarun as a kid—the J-bar that lifted us in the air for what felt like miles and miles. I think I liked that as much as the skiing. Which is the whole point. Skiing is fun and instructional in a thousand ways you don't expect."

The Cooper-Taché duo are not the only big guns spearheading robust programming and support for this era at Rotarun. Adele and Pat Savaria have been working on affordable ski programs at the area since 2003.

"My husband Pat and I saw a need for an affordable program to introduce more kids in this valley to learn alpine skiing. We came up with the acronym, LASAR – Learn to Alpine Ski and

Race. We sought out funding through some local donors and the Papoose Club to create the program to be free of charge to all participants. We were able to introduce 400 kids to alpine skiing. We continued this program for seven years until our good friend, Heather Daves, took over for three years and she introduced more kids to this free program."

Savaria herself has been skiing in the Valley since 1981. "I moved to this valley to join the Sun Valley Ski Team under the tutelage of Lane Monroe when I was 16 years old. I had many great coaches who instilled the love of the sport of alpine skiing. I enjoyed this sport so much that I came back to coach with this team when I graduated from college in 1993."

So what's on the horizon? Savaria and Cooper are chomping at the bit for snowmaking. And McGrew sees the chance to make Rotarun into a world-class training and development program athletes. With the SVSEF Air Barn at Sun Valley Community School's Dumke Family Sagewillow campus,

Above, left: Coaches Justin Stevenson, Jeff Enos and Orlie Sather set up gates for afternoon training. Above, right: A SVSEF LASAR skier drives through training gates.

Above: Keeping it fun; LASAR athletes and coaches take a moment to goof around.



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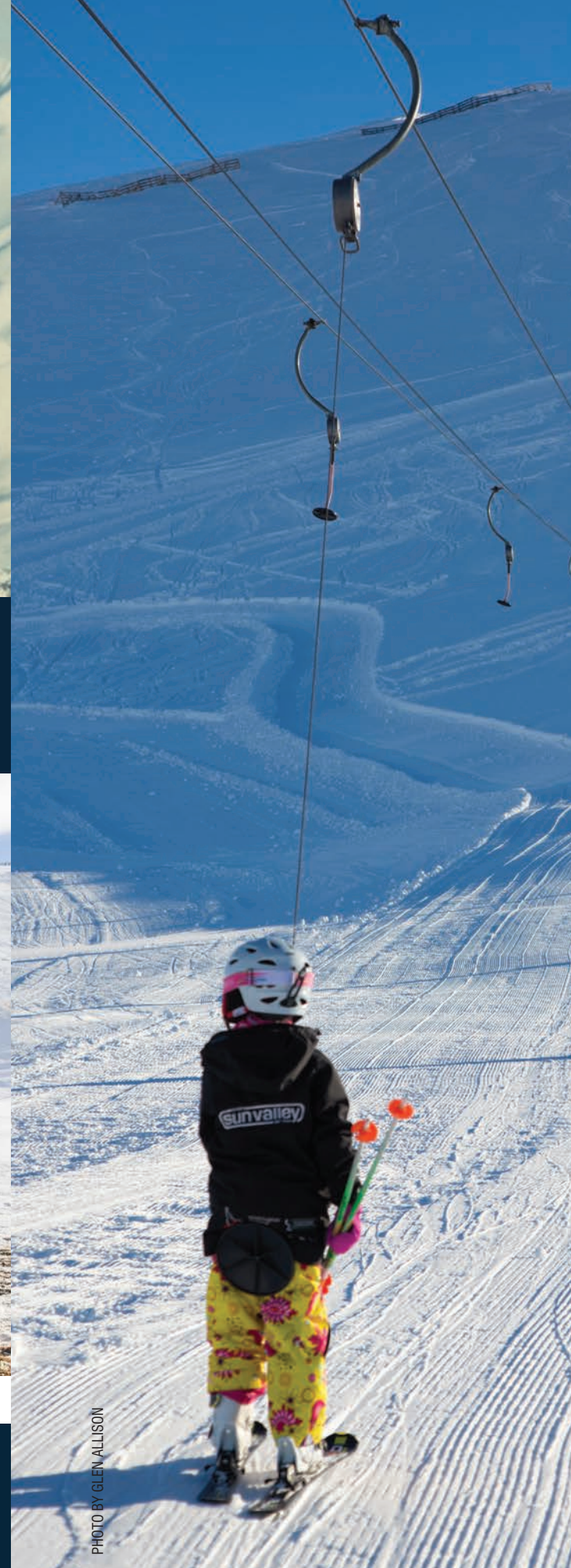


PHOTO BY GLEN ALLISON

the Engl Training Center at Warm Springs, the partnership with the Sun Valley Ski Academy, and accoladed and internationally recognized coaching staff, it's hard to disagree with McGrew that the Wood River Valley is setting itself up to become the premier destination for athletes to learn, train, and compete.

Rotarun Ski Area has an elevation of 5,895 feet with a vertical drop of 475 feet on its treeless north-facing slopes of Art Richards Mountain just west of downtown Hailey. A Poma lift was installed in 1998, which replaced the beloved J-bar lift that had served the hill since 1964. The primary lift before the J-bar was a rope tow. The front side of the ski area offers approximately 15 skiable acres.

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With so much love and support coming from the Valley, it's impossible not to feel the heart and soul radiating from that little mountain just down the street.

To learn more about the Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation, call 208.726.4129 or visit svsef.org.

Left: A sunny day for LASAR training – young SVSEF athletes ride the Poma lift.