

# Can skiing really be a job? It's been Pete Wither's for 22 years.

By Randy Slater



## Overlooking old town Steamboat Springs from the ski area.

Pete Wither has been skiing for thirty eight years. He started skiing at Howelsen Hill when he was three years old because throughout his school years, Mt. Werner wasn't yet a ski area. In 1968, after spending six years with the Winter Park Ski Patrol, he came back to Steamboat and joined this patrol and has been here ever since. Last March he was promoted to director of the patrol. I (Randy Slater) recently visited with him and his department workers to find out about the ski patrol, how it operates, what the duties are, and how the patrol spend their days on Mt. Werner.

Pete began his story, "Of course, the primary

responsibility of ski patrol is the safety of the skiing public, and we respond to the skiers' needs. We perform first aid for our injured guests; we try to make the mountain safe by putting up controls for speed; we manage avalanche control and lift evacuation, we help with any trail maintenance which can be done on skis; we take care of and put up all the padding around the barriers; and generally, we ski around checking for anything which might be unsafe for the skier."

The requirements for ski patrol are really pretty basic. One has to have an advanced first aid card which he/she can get through the college. This is a requirement before ap-



## **Pete Wither: "I only spend a few hours a day skiing."**

plication. "Then, I'd say 95% of our people are Emergency Medical Technicians which is more advanced training. We have a three day hiring clinic which involves a training period in methods of lift evacuation, toboggan handling, and control skiing. Each person has to take the clinic to be hired. We train for the first two days, and we test the third day. People who do the training are also often the judges. We grade on a zero to ten basis and give an exam. The patrol applicant is graded on five different events. After the testing, we hire people with the highest scores. We feel that's the fairest way to hire, and we also feel we get the best people that way.

"We're having a hiring clinic soon, (past) and we have only five positions open with approximately 40 people applying. There are many who don't make the grade. We feel we get the cream of the crop by having it set up this way. And, of course, that's good for us too. We now have 42 full time members and 15 part-time members. We have two physician advisors, four supervisors and myself. So, we have about 65 people on the patrol."

I asked about the man/woman ratio of patrollers — "Out of forty people in our clinic

this year, I think there were only two women. We do have quite a few ladies on patrol but most all are part-time. I think the women do a very good job. It is really a physical job and the nature of the job doesn't seem appealing.

"Patrolmen aren't actually considered professional skiers because we aren't getting paid for our skiing ability; we're getting paid for our first aid skills. We do have to be good skiers to be on the patrol. There was a larger turnover when I first started patrolling; now it's becoming more of a career. There are a few people who do it for only a couple of years after college, but it's rewarding, and it is satisfying. We get to do a lot of skiing, it's a good experience, and we have a good group of people working here. Of course, the longer you're into it, the more seniority you have and the better the pay."

The ski patrol probably has one of the smallest turnovers in the ski corporation. "This year, we had one person quit, and we are expanding our patrol by two. We had one person who was a patrolman last year become a supervisor and two of the full time patrolmen went to part-time." To be part-time, you have to work a



## **Dave Hatchimonji keeps an eye on some skiers from his snowmobile.**



## **Hal Luce, Jon Adler and Matt Newman (left to right in foreground) spread out to “sweep” the lower mountain.**

minimum of fifteen days per season, and you get a season pass.

“After we have the hiring clinic, that’s when we really start our training. We get the people who are the best; these may be patrolmen who have patrolled at other areas and have come here to work. If they have had previous training, they have an advantage for being hired. We have a really intensive training program for the newly-hired and an on-going training program for all of our patrolmen. When Christmas comes there are many skiers here, and the patrol has only about ten days to train for that, and then each is really on his own. So that’s the reason we have a very intense training program.

“I don’t think being a good skier is the most important part of the job. It’s definitely an important part, but the medical part is really important. Having a general knowledge of the ski business is important too. There are many aspects of patrolling, but we have to have a good general knowledge of the whole thing. We’re looking at trails and trail safety and liability problems as well as the first aid. It’s a big

mountain now, and there are a lot of things we have to know. I don’t think about that now, but for someone new to patrol there’s a tremendous amount of information to be absorbed.”

The average patrolman spends probably an average of four or five hours a day actually on the slopes patrolling. “I get up there for about three hours a day. The general patrolmen have a lot of boundary work and hazard marking to do. I don’t know if you can consider that skiing all that time, but I’d say at least three or four hours on the average.

A patrolman’s day goes somewhat like this: “We’re on the lifts at 8 a.m. If it snows, we have to sweep off the sleds and everything else that’s outside. We have to clean off all the barriers and check for any hazards that might have turned up overnight. We have to put up speed control fences, and if necessary, we go up and do some avalanche work. All of that has to be done before 9 a.m. We have to check all the trails by skiing each of them at least once before the public gets on them. Some things we have to do every day,



**Greg Royer poses for a picture....**

**then continues his sweep of Tornado.**



no matter what, and that takes time and people. We ride up and one person usually stays at the top to answer the phone while everybody else checks the whole mountain. Then the patrol comes back to report and do whatever else is necessary.

"We have four duty stations, and we have patrol at all duty stations all the time in case someone does get hurt. We have four stations right now: base patrol, at the bottom of the mountain, Thunderhead, at the top of the gondola, one at the top of Storm Peak and one at the top of Priest Creek. Next year we're going to cut it down to three stations, with one large station at the top of the mountain. We'll run the whole top of the mountain from that patrol. The way the mountain is set up with three different peaks, we have to have a top station on each, and they are responsible for the area that station covers.

"We have a relatively small avalanche area to the north side of Buddy's Run. We have three avalanche chutes up there, and one of them is open to Skiing (Chute #1). The other two are closed to the skiing public, but we have to control them because if they run, the deposition may go into an open area. Early in the year, there are other areas that we have to control. For example, underneath the Bar U-E there is a spot which might be considered an avalanche possibility, and a couple places under Priest Creek Lift line which must be checked. We really have no major avalanche areas. We have to check all the areas every day, but we don't have to control them every day. When snow conditions deem it necessary, we go up and throw 25 hand

charges. We have a snow crew to check the stability of the snow and how it's reacting to all the different temperatures.

"Also at the beginning of the year, we have to do boot and ski packing on the real steep parts to keep the snow in place. That means taking off our skis and walking down on the slope. Hopefully, the snow will pack to the ground because the ground doesn't normally freeze before the snow covers it. If we can get the air out of the snow, it's much more stable.

"We have to keep a constant eye on the snow, since we have had several avalanches here. We've had two this year about five feet deep that went clear to the ground."

Pete continued to tell me about the problems confronting the ski patrol. His conversation centered upon skiing within boundaries. "We lease our land from the Forest Service, and we have to stay within certain areas. The boundary markers show that area. We have control over the land inside the boundary, so if we want to close the boundary to skiing we close inside the boundary ten feet or so. If a person skis in the area between our line and the outside boundary, then they are actually in violation of the law and can be prosecuted. That is the only recourse we have.

"There is danger is skiing out-of-bounds because it's not patrolled. People can and do get lost; it's very easy to become disoriented. Many place out-of-bounds leads to an area which does not come back to the enclosed ski area. People on alpine skis cannot go up hills easily; they can only go downhill, and these downhill out-of-bounds slopes always lead into nasty canyons. A skier can get into trouble; they can get lost or confused, or get hypothermia and actually die out there. If the day pass skier doesn't know where to ski and they see all this powder below them, they think they can ski on down. There may be a flat area or a canyon, and then they get into trouble. That's why it's so dangerous."

I went on to ask Pete just how far the ski patrol's authority went. "Generally speaking, we're the ones who have to uphold the law on the mountain. We feel that if somebody gets his pass pulled, that's enough punishment unless it's something really severe. When it's a season pass, that's a lot for money, and that's usually enough of a deterrent."

Pete went on to say that he felt the skiers under 25 are the biggest violators of the rules, although he has no records or statistics. "We have to make the mountain safe for everyone, and the only recourse we have is to pull the ticket. If we don't feel that's enough, then we will get the sheriff or the police. We have done that. We have fined people, and we will actually put people in jail for some things. I would say skiing too fast, or reckless skiing, is the most violated rule. It's

not really speed, it's skiing faster than your ability or skiing too fast for the conditions. That's what gets people into trouble more than anything else. A person may ski more or less out of control and if something was to happen in front of him, he would not be able to avoid it.

"Skiing is a hazardous sport — if a person is out of control or reckless, there is a good possibility of an injury. I have had sprains and strains and I cracked my arm once, but a person can ski with a broken arm, so that didn't bother me much."

When I asked Pete about the basic structure and duties of the patrol, he responded, "Our patrol is set up this way. Our basic patrol is someone who has an advanced first aid card; the next level is a person with an EMT card. The third level is a patroller who is in training for a special team, one being avalanche crew, another being gondola evacuation crew, and we have what we call the patrol investigation team. These are the people who investigate any incident which might be a liability against the company. It must be more than a normal incident, and if that's the case they take pictures, measurements, and angles of the incident. With patrol investigations, we do an in-depth study on what happened. If it's a collision, or someone who ran into a tree or a lift tower, or whatever it happens to be, we do a thorough investigation.

"We have a special crew for gondola evacuation. We evacuate the gondola by having a machine which we call a "bike". It's not a bike at all; but it hangs from a cable. We climb up the



**Pete Wither winding up the day in his office with Jeff Sumskis.**

tower, hook it on the cable and slide down to the cabins. From the top of the gondola cabin, we open the door and go inside, and we have a special rigging that we hook up inside the car. We tow a rope up from the ground, then we hook the people onto the rope and let them down. Their speed is controlled from the ground crew. Chairlifts are also evacuated with ropes. We climb up the towers, put the rope over the cable, and then we just run the rope down to the chairs and evacuate from the ground. Training for the special teams is important. We have team members and team leaders. That is the fifth level and highest level one can reach in the patrol except for supervisor or director.

"At the end of the day when all the lifts are shut down, we have a patrolman ski every run to check and see if there's anyone who might be injured. When we "sweep" the mountain, we make sure there isn't anyone up there. That's also an important part of patrolling. Every patrolman takes this part very seriously.

"To be on the ski patrol I guess you have to be a pretty personable and a knowledgeable person. I think that we are one of the top patrols in the nation. That is what we are striving for, to be the best in the U.S. and I think we're very close to the

top. Most of the larger areas have just professional patrollers like we have here. I'm starting a program to exchange patrol with the larger ski areas in Colorado. One or two of our patrolmen will go to another area for two or three days, and patrolmen from that area will come here. We hope to gain a lot of information by doing this. We will see how they are doing things, and they will see how we do things. Hopefully, we'll be able to take good ideas home to tell our patrol.

"I have a great crew of people working for me, a group whom I don't have to be worried about all the time. I have very good supervisors who I can tell what I want to have done and they'll tell the patrolmen, and everybody knows that it will be done."

While doing this story, I spent time skiing with the patrolmen, talking with them, sitting around with them and just getting a little feel for their job. To me, the best part of the job is the sweep. Sweep gives you the feeling of total freedom because it's just you skiing and the mountain. There is no one around to run into or watch out for. One can just do his own thing and have fun, and make sure that there's no one left on the mountain. To me, skiing could be a very fun job!



**Two patrolmen take Burgess Creek lift for the last run.**