

Ride, Ride, Ride the Wild Snow

There's No Place Like Mount Bachelor for Mountain Surfing

By **GERRY LOPEZ**

“Are you nuts? Why would you leave there to come live here?” You can't imagine how many times I've fielded that question. Moving from upcountry Maui to live in Bend, however, was never a question in our minds when we did it.

Why indeed? When I think in terms of family, there are myriad reasons—the changing of seasons, the genuinely friendly people, the quality of life, the great schools, the clean air, the wide open spaces, the forest, rivers and mountains ... you name it.

Yes, the mountains are indeed special and when I revert back to selfish surfing habits, there is really one very good reason I could leave Maui behind with hardly a look back. There is a place during the winter season that can be as all-consuming as the best surf spot anywhere. My new, favorite surf spot goes by the name of Mount Bachelor. It is as complete a surfing experience as can be had outside of the ocean.

Falling on the edge of the High Desert, Bachelor's snow is reasonably dry, unlike the wet snow typical of the western coastal ranges. Crafted by the same winds that give Hood River and the Columbia Gorge their excellent windsurfing conditions, this snow often is sculpted into uniquely beautifully wind lips and snow waves as perfectly shaped as any wave in the ocean. Snowboard surfers with an eye and a yearning for these formations find Mt. Bachelor as attractive as any spot in the country.

Once the snow covers the jagged *aa pu'u* (cinder cone) that is Mt. Bachelor, the surf is up, baby—and how. Though not a large mountain, at 9,065 feet Bachelor is high enough to get plenty of snow. It averages 370 inches annually. With only slightly more than that, I got in over 100 powder days last year.

I turned into a powder snob. I never rode hard-pack all season. I got so spoiled that I didn't find time to enjoy (except in the terrain parks and Olympic-size super pipe) the outstanding grooming for which the mountain is known. So much powder has blurred my memory white. Other than a glimpse here or there, the details have melted, or perhaps are stored in some inner module of my mind that I'm unable to access.

It's the same in surfing. Only little moments, a turn here or a drop there, are retained. I don't remember the last ride as much as I live in anticipation of the next. Maybe one factor is that the snow season is relatively short. I do a lot of wishing and hoping beforehand for a good season. Good or bad, we get our rides, immediately forget most of what happened, live for the next ride, and keep smiling.

Surfing on Snow

Snowboarding is closer to the surfing experience than any other sport. Surfers who take up snowboarding bring exactly their same style from the water to the mountain. At a glance, I can look up the hill and recognize a fellow surfer coming down a run because I'm familiar with the body language he has when surfing a wave. Just as surfers

live in anticipation of the next swell, snowboarders love waking up to a fresh, powder morning.

Having surfed for the past 45 years, I have spent much time studying the North Pacific storms that create the waves. I'm still watching these same storms—not so much for the surf as for the snow they bring when they make landfall. The same exact storm that causes the giant waves at Jaws in Peahi Bay, Maui, or at Waimea Bay, Oahu, is guaranteed to dump a healthy layer of new powder all over Mt. Bachelor. It is in these soft powder conditions that snowboarding most resembles riding the surf.

On hard-pack snow, the snowboard feels like a surfboard without a fin. In the early stages of learning to snowboard this can have drastic effects. Like skis, snowboards rely on the sharp, steel edges to hold direction. That's fine if your edge is set and you're headed where you want to go. But changing direction requires a delicate weight-transfer technique. You must get off one edge and reset the other edge to go the opposite way. At the midpoint between edges disaster can and likely will occur.

Learning to snowboard in hard snow conditions is painful, even if you have terrific balance and don't fall much. Just the effort of pushing yourself up off the snow will have you waking up the next day wondering what you did to make your arms and shoulders so sore. You might want to wait for a good powder day when the runs are blanketed with a soft, forgiving cushion of snow, having first signed up for a lesson with the Mt. Bachelor snowboard school.

Expert skiers may prefer steeper pitches than many of the runs Mr. Bachelor has to offer, especially if there is substantial new snow on the ground. But on a snowboard the more snow the better. More planing surface gives a snowboard a decided advantage over skis in deep snow, requiring much less effort to float and glide. When you get stuck without ski poles, however, you just may have to unbuckle your snowboard, lay down and paddle it like a surfboard to get out!

Bachelor's Welcome Mat

From the beginning, Mt. Bachelor has been snowboard friendly. This was not always so with other ski areas, but most of them eventually changed their attitudes when it became obvious that snowboarding is here to stay. Today, while the total number of snowboarders may not approach that of skiers, snowboarding continues to grow at a faster rate than skiing.

In the early 1980s Mt. Bachelor founder Bill Healy asked his director of skiing, Richard "Hawk" Scherzer, if this new thing beginning to appear on the slopes was likely to last. Hawk shared two things about snowboarders that he thought were significant. One was a deep underlying passion for their sport. Second, he recognized the same fierce streak of independence he had seen in surfers of the early '60s when the number of wave riders was small.

Scherzer, who discovered his surf "stoke" in Southern California, understood that doing something because you love it—for him, surfing and skiing—puts you in touch with a deeper part of yourself—which in turn leads to a journey of self-discovery and a lifetime passion. Snowboarding, Hawk foresaw, fell into the same category.

Healy, ever the visionary, saw the same truth. Not only would Mt. Bachelor welcome snowboarders, he said, the area would become actively involved in their sport. Local boarders like Craig Kelly, John Calkins and Chris Jamieson helped Hawk establish

a series of camps and other events that continue today, including a World Cup of Snowboarding. Among those who jumped into the sport with unrestrained zeal was Chris Klug, the Mountain View High School quarterback, who went on to win an Olympic medal. J.D. Platt also made a name for himself as a world-class rider. Peter Foley and Rob Roy gained recognition as snowboarding coaches.

By the late '80's, Mt. Bachelor's welcome mat had powdered over its reputation as a great mountain to ride snowboards. Its conical shape, lift placement, well laid-out runs and plentiful snowfall all made the snowboarding experience easy and fun.

Watching the Weather

Reading the weather is a major part of the experience. We want to know which way the wind is blowing and where it will carry the snow. Being aware of the elements and understanding them, whether we're surfing or snowboarding, allows us to be more deeply immersed in our chosen medium.

The early-morning snow report is the first thing any avid Mt. Bachelor enthusiast checks regardless of the weather in Bend. Often the mountain will have its own weather. While weather might be clear and sunny in town, there may be a blizzard on the hill. If the report says there's 3 inches of new snow, we definitely want to drag ourselves out of bed and be up there in time for the opening. There is no prettier sight than a fresh layer of snow. On a bluebird-clear day, as we drive up and around Tumalo Mountain, Bachelor is a sight to behold standing untouched in the morning alpenglow. I'll give odds that soon thousands of ski and snowboard tracks will crisscross every slope.

A snow report of 5 to 6 inches is prime time. Everything from the day before is covered up and all the snow we see will be fresh and new. At 10 to 12 inches, be warned that we need to pay attention and look ahead. With that much new snow, if we pick the wrong place to stop or fall down, we will be working awfully hard to get out. Even on a super-cold day with light, low-water-content snow, we may find ourselves dead stopped a long way up the hill from the lift.

When a lot of snow falls, the steeps fill up and just aren't as steep any more. Without a lot of speed and a plan—common in windy, white-out conditions—it's easy to come to a screeching halt buried waist deep or worse, upside-down in a snowdrift. If that happens, even on the coldest day, count on sweating like a horse after digging out.

Prevailing winter winds generally blow from the southwest, or from right to left as you face uphill from the main Pine Marten Lodge. This sets up all the wind lips on the boarder's left. In surfing vernacular, they are all "lefts" and favor the goofy-foot (right foot forward) riders who face toward them.

The backside of the mountain—accessible only when the summit chair is operating and the ski patrol has deemed the area clear of avalanche danger—is just the opposite. All the wind lips on the backside are rights and better suited to the regular-foot (left foot forward) riders. Every so often, however, the wind switches around and comes from the north, turning all the lips around.

Listen to the wind report in the morning. Light winds—anything below 20mph—are ideal. Moderate winds (from 20 to 60mph) are dicey. If the report says strong winds, we roll over and go back to sleep.

Streamlining the Experience

When comparing Mt. Bachelor to other ski areas—snow quality and quantity as well as terrain—the lift system is its tiara, unrivaled anywhere. Seven super-express quad chairs, the old Red chair, the almost-forgotten Rainbow chair and two baby, beginner chairs service 71 runs over 3,683 acres with a total drop of 3,365 vertical feet. Those chairs also happen to sit between the northeast and northwest side of the mountain, obviously the best place for a ski area to be.

One nice thing we usually cancount on is not spending a lot of time riding chairlifts at Mt. Bachelor. The high-speed ride barely allows time for a breath before a return the top ready to zoom down again. Skyliner is a great chair, offering a variety of good runs and a serious terrain park with sky-high jumps, rails and boxes. In my opinion, however, the Pine Marten chair has the best terrain and runs for some fast, hard riding in a short time. Vertical feet go by quickly. There is also the attraction of the half-pipe and slope-style park. The 2-mile-long Northwest chair rises some 2,300 vertical feet and has the best tree riding this side of the best of heli-ski operations in British Columbia.

On a clear day, the Summit chair offers a stunning view . Beverly Hills and Healy Heights are probably the best groomed runs on the mountain if you like to go fast. Cow's Face can be as good as it gets on a powder day. The Cirque Bowl is outstanding as well with a cornice jump that can be anywhere from two to six stories, depending on how fast you want to approach the edge.

Bachelor's backside is a world unto itself. Skate through the gate, drop over the edge of the south side and survey the panorama of the Cascade Lakes Highway as it winds among the numerous high lakes. Being suddenly alone in an area without any sign that it is a ski area shocks the mind alert; you can easily pretend you were just dropped off by a helicopter.

Like Bend itself, Mt. Bachelor offers a lot of space to be an individual. I always felt that surfing was the only life, but I never dreamed I could—and would—be continuing to do it on a regular basis so far from the ocean.

Surfing has a lot of answers to most of the questions in life. Surf is where you find it. Amazingly, there is quite a lot of it to be found here. Keep surfing.