

Colorado slopes' changing demographics: More senior skiers

Karen Schwartz Associated Press

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STEAMBOAT SPRINGS —If you've walked into a ski lodge the past few years, likely as not you've seen tables filled with gray-haired skiers wearing sweaters so old they're back in style. That's because the number of skiers on the far side of 50—some on the very far side—has been creeping up each year, according to the National Ski Areas Association.

Credit advances in artificial hips and knees that make it possible for skiers to continue enjoying the sport; shaped skis, along with better snowmaking and grooming that make skiing easier; and high-speed lifts and luxury touches like ski valets that make it more pleasant.

"There are no excuses," said 93-year-old Klaus Obermeyer, the Aspen-based skiwear designer. Despite breaking his leg in a wipeout two years ago, Obermeyer still skis each day.

Sure, younger people still make up the majority on the slopes—the average skier is 38.5 years old—but, "The person who skis the most in a given year is 65 and older," said Michael Berry, president of the NSAA, based in suburban Denver.

Bragging rights go to those age 68 and older, who averaged 9.5 days skiing last season. Boomers—those age 49 to 67 this year—also skied more than the national average of five times per year, according to an NSAA survey released in August.

"You don't want to sit in your rocking chair and look at the view," said 70-year-old Billy Kidd, who won a silver in the slalom at the 1964 Olympics. "You want to remember your days of youth and you love that feeling of adrenaline and dealing with the variables of skiing."

Clearly, others old enough to remember Kidd in his heyday feel the same way. Those ages 45-54 made up 20 percent of skiers last winter, up from 14 percent in the 1997-98 season; the 55-64 age group made up 12 percent, up from nearly 5 percent, and those 65 and older rose to 5.5 percent from 2.5 percent, according to the NSAA study.

Kidd, who skis nearly daily in his role as an ambassador for the Steamboat Ski Resort, said one thing that has changed as he's gotten older is his gear.

Indeed, Kidd is a walking billboard for the latest innovations. His skis and poles are lightweight carbon fiber. His Osbe helmet does away with goggles and replaces them with a built-in visor that provides better peripheral vision. He traded in traditional ski boots for soft Apex boots, which provide support through an external frame. (For putting on traditional ski boots, many older skiers swear by the Ski and Snowboard Boot Horn.)

"At 20 years old I didn't care about comfort," Kidd said. "I still have to have control . but the top priority for me is comfort."

Certainly, there are challenges as skiers age, not the least of which is finding friends who are also still skiing.

Clubs like the 70+ Ski Club, based in North Kingstown, R.I., with more than 4,000 members, and the Over the Hill Gang International based in Colorado Springs with 3,000 members, offer camaraderie, discounted tickets and ski trips near and far.

Even those who retire to Florida still pursue their passion. The Florida Ski Council has 17 clubs in the state and at least one trip going every week of the ski season. The largest club, the Tampa Bay Snow Skiers and Boarders, takes about 1,000 people a year skiing, said Clair Quenzler, the council president.

These dedicated watchers of the discounts for skiers agree that the perks seniors used to get from ski resorts have been reduced as their numbers increase.

Several resorts have raised the eligibility age for discounted lift tickets, or they've limited deals to weekdays

"To be fair to the ski areas, it's a business for them as well," said Doug Lofland, 56, one of the owners of the Over The Hill Gang International.

So what suggestions do experts have to help the rest of us ski into our Golden Years?

—Stay in shape.

—Try to choose slopes with less traffic so you can safely ski a little slower.

—Think about afternoon sun and shadows. A west-facing slope will have better definition.

—Be cognizant of higher altitude and hydration.

—Walking in ski boots can be more challenging than skiing, so companies have developed lightweight shoes, like Pakems, that you can carry with during the day for a quick change.

—Consider taking a gondola or chair lift down the mountain if weather sets in or you're tired.

—Consciously chose your danger level. "The repercussions of making a mistake are too great," Kidd said.

And finally, enjoy, like the 89-year-old who sent the 70+ Ski Club a photo of herself skiing with her great grandchildren.

"There are not many sports four generations can do together like that," said club president 42-year-old Richard Lambert.