

# Skiing the white zone at Steamboat

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Special to The Denver Post

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STEAMBOAT SPRINGS--By January, the snow lies steep and deep on the slopes at Steamboat Ski Resort, in northwest Colorado.

Which is just how former Olympian and silver medallist Billy Kidd likes it. But Billy--everyone calls him that--doesn't need snow to feel his edges slicing through crust or the wind whipping across his face.

There's a thin layer of snow in his yard this morning, at the bottom of the mountain, 10 minutes from Steamboat Springs, but he doesn't give it a second look. Instead, he jumps up from the breakfast table to give a demonstration in the kitchen.

"I can improve your skiing right here in this room," the expansive 61-year-old tells visitors invited in for scrambled eggs. He reaches for a pair of imaginary ski poles, bends his knees and balances lightly, ready to power-carve through a feather-light drift.

"You don't believe me?" he asks, not waiting for an answer. "The secret is visualization."

We'd watched Billy in action the day before at one of his "Ski With Billy" clinics, held on most winter days at the top of the Gondola. The free clinics, about 90 minutes long, are one of the mountain's best-attended events.

By the time Billy showed up, wearing his signature cowboy hat with the pheasant feather hatband, a couple dozen skiers were waiting to meet the man whose face and career are synonymous with Steamboat Ski Resort.

Some were serious skiers, hoping for that perfect tip. Others were fans there to shake his hand, or to gawk. But few could resist Billy's high-energy enthusiasm. After the final ski-along back to the bottom, even skeptics went away convinced that sliding on snow was as natural as a Sunday stroll.

Steamboat's so-called "champagne powder," (locals claim that the phrase was coined right here), was one reason Billy long ago hitched his star to Steamboat Ski Resort. If there's a flurry within 100 miles, it inevitably finds its way to the Park Range, at the westernmost slope of the Rocky Mountains. The snowfall is so predictable, in fact, that climatologists come here to study it.

"It's our location that's so unique," said Mike Lane, formerly with Colorado Ski Country and now Steamboat Resort's communications director. "We get the south end of northern storms and the north end of southern storms. And we're the first real barricade Pacific storms hit after they cross the Wasatch Mountains."

Last year's total snowfall, 29 feet measured in late March at mid-mountain, wasn't a record breaker, he said. But that's OK. The snow fell frequently throughout the season, dumping anywhere from a few inches to more than a foot of powder and keeping the slopes white until the resort closed in mid-April.

Though Steamboat Resort looks like a single hunk, its 2,939 skiable acres actually jog over four connected summits -- 10,372-foot Storm Peak, 10,384-Sunshine Peak and 10,565-foot Mt. Werner--and a fourth hilltop called Thunderhead.

Twenty ski lifts access 150-odd trails follow sloping ridgelines, plunging down gladed steeps and dropping through aspen groves to intersect with long, dogleg run outs back to the base.



Double-black-diamond verticals aren't really Steamboat's forte and the relatively low elevation, always below tree line, means you won't find those high, open bowls. But there's plenty of glade skiing through aspen and spruce forests and enough narrow plunges off Mt. Werner to keep serious thrill-chasers contented.

This is intermediate country. More than half the mountain ranges from groomed cruisers to almost-expert trails. One-tenth of the trails are groomed for beginners; and all are a good place to practice self-visualization.

Ahead of his time by 20 years, Billy discovered the powers of the imagination in school in Stowe, Vt., where skiing was a physical education elective. While some kids were playing basketball, Billy was skiing. When he wasn't skiing, he was pretending.

"I realized I could sit in the classroom and build muscle memory by imagining how to turn," he says. "When I got older, I watched films and analyzed what the skiers were doing. Once you've got those mental images in your

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head, you just let it happen."

Where it happens today is at the Billy Kidd Performance Center, at Steamboat Resort. Designed for motivated skiers, the one-, two- and three-day Performance Camps offer Olympic-style coaching with a strong emphasis on what Billy calls "building the basics."

The coaches start with a natural stance and emphasize positive attitudes and winning strategies. They also carry video cams and use them liberally, to help you analyze your good and bad habits.

"I recommend the camps to people who want intensive coaching beyond the regular ski school format," said Suzy Good, Steamboat Resort's ticket manager. "Most of the coaches have either worked with Olympians or been ski racers themselves."

Steamboat's other ski school programs for kids, recreational skiers, snowboarders and beginners, are highly rated. The snowboarding terrain at Bashor Terrain Park has been enlarged and redesigned. As for the look of the Gondola Square base area, we give it mixed reviews.

This is the way they used to build them, fanning the lifts out from a single base area, crowding everyone and everything together and building more condominiums and store space as needed. But the base area has personality, unlike so many other cookie-cutter villages popping up throughout the West.

So does Steamboat Springs, a traditional ranching community that predates skiing. Old Route 40 runs through the middle of town, and if you want to park, you pull up to the curb on the diagonal. The brick buildings are old timers, and so are most of the homes on the side streets. If you want a real look back through time, stop at the Tread of the Pioneers Museum, a vintage house on Oak Street.

"I guess we won't see any gongs," quipped our son, Paul, as we window-shopped on Lincoln Avenue, in the middle of town. He was remembering the \$15,000 oriental antique we'd seen in an art gallery in Aspen.

Instead you can stock up on cowboy gear at F.M. Light, 98 years in business and still selling hats, boots, overalls, belts and jackknives. We tried on the Stetson Billy wears, a smooth felt with a slightly rolled brim, but it looks better on him.

Instead of bar hopping we headed for the Western BBQ dinner at the top of the Gondola, an event that sounded like pure cornball but delivered an unforgettable evening. The dinner reservations are staggered so that diners arrive (riding uphill on the Gondola) in a slow but steady stream.

There's no waiting in the buffet line and the food—rare roast beef, chicken, pork ribs, a half-dozen vegetables, potatoes, rolls, salads and dessert—is continually brought in fresh and hot.

About 9 p.m., the Sundogs, a local country and bluegrass band, started their first set, playing "The Orange Blossom Special" and "Rocky Top" and singing Patsy Cline tunes. Adults, teenagers and little kids jumped up to dance while everybody else tapped their toes and clapped.

Although we were there in mid-March, there were few lift lines and no crowding on the slopes, especially on the upper mountain. We wondered whether high gas prices and the economy were keeping people away. But Mike Lane said that the official skier numbers were up over the previous season.

Maybe they came because getting here is easy. You can fly nonstop from Chicago, Dallas, Minneapolis, Houston or Newark, or rent a car and drive from Denver. Or maybe they came because it's so affordable.

More likely, say scientists at the weather station atop Mt. Werner, it's that very special snow. When the last bits of moisture from distant Pacific storms reach Steamboat, they form feeder clouds of tiny super-cooled droplets. Whirled and swirled into miniature flakes, they keep the slopes white and skiers coming back for more.

IF YOU GO:

LESSONS, CLINICS AND LIFT TICKETS:

In the last few years, ski resorts have adopted grocery store pricing. Ticket prices aren't announced until October, and discounts change throughout the season. New prices are posted on the resort's Web site as they happen.

At the time of this writing, adult one-day lift tickets are \$69. Adult five- of six-day lift tickets run from \$295 to \$335, depending on the date. For each adult ticket purchased, one child 12 and under can ski free. Children's all-day ski school programs start at \$80 per day and include lunch. If you want your 5 or 6 year old to have the same instructor all week, be sure you enroll him or her in the Jackalopes program, for \$390 per week.

Billy Kidd Performance Camps are \$199 per day. The three-day camp runs Monday through Wednesday; two-day camps run Thursday and Friday; one-day "trial" camps are held Monday or Thursday. To reserve, call the Ski & Snowboard School at (970) 871-5375, or (800) 299-5017.

MORE INFORMATION: Steamboat Springs Chamber of Commerce: (970) 879-0880. Steamboat Ski Resort: (970) 8796111. Or check [www.steamboat-chamber.com](http://www.steamboat-chamber.com).

GETTING THERE:

International Flights: Book a flight to a major U.S. city and on to Denver.

Domestic Flights: American Airlines flies nonstop to Hayden from Dallas and Chicago; Continental flies from Houston and Newark; Delta flies from Atlanta and Salt Lake City; Northwest flies from Minneapolis and St. Paul. Or you can fly through Denver. Steamboat Springs is 190 miles from Denver International Airport and 170 miles from the city center.

The ski area is 22 miles from Hayden Airport. Alpine Taxi runs 20-passenger ski shuttles to your hotel or condominium. Roundtrip fare is \$44 for ages 13 and up, \$22 for ages 6 to 12, free for five and under. Reserve a seat at (800) 343-7433.

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