

[**BIG SKY, MONT.**]

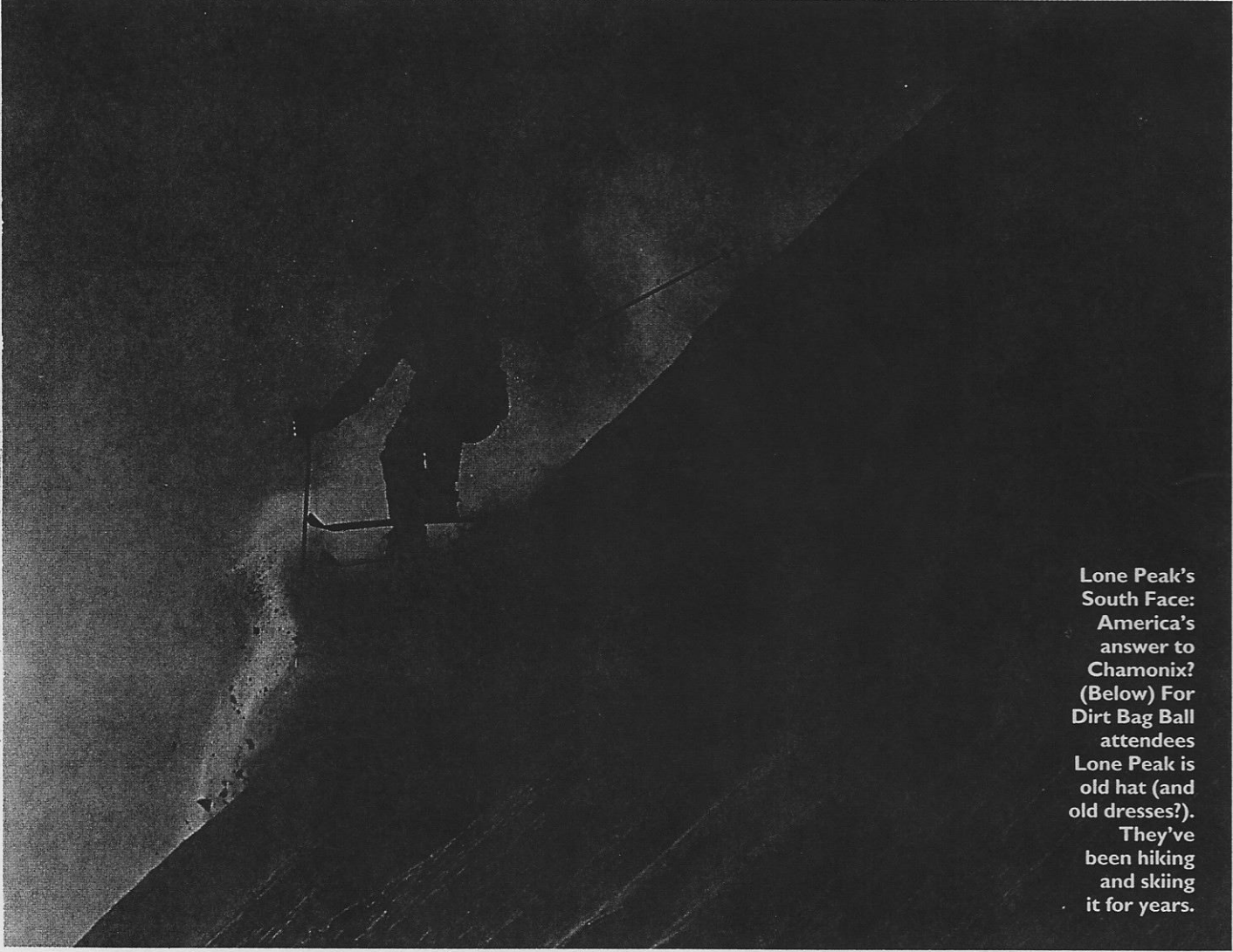
THE NEW

Is the 30-year reign of Jackson Hole and Corbet's Couloir over? Big Sky may now have the continent's most hellacious terrain. BY READE BAILEY



T'S 20-BELOW OUTSIDE ON THIS SATURDAY NIGHT IN early February. But inside the Grand Ballroom at Big Sky, Mont., the temperature is 70-above and rising quickly. Nearly a thousand people are packed into the ballroom hall for the 15th Annual Dirt Bag Ball, a Mardi-Gras-meets-Halloween midwinter celebration of everything local—and loco. It appears the nearby thrift store

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT MARKEWITZ



**Lone Peak's
South Face:
America's
answer to
Chamonix?
(Below) For
Dirt Bag Ball
attendees
Lone Peak is
old hat (and
old dresses?).
They've
been hiking
and skiing
it for years.**

SULTAN OF STEEPS

has most definitely sold out of polyester and large size dresses—at least 50 guys are swishing the night away in everything from mini-skirts to floor-length gowns. One guy is masquerading as Jesus. Seventies rockers Humble Pie are prancing around a small stage on one side of the Ballroom and singing “Thirty Days in the Hole” at eardrum-splitting levels.

I’m trying to find out more about Big Sky’s new Lone Peak tram, which gives the area the largest *total* vertical rise in the U.S. at 4,180 feet and boosts its skiable terrain by 50 percent. (Jackson Hole, Wyo., still has the largest *continuously skiable* vertical rise.)

Has Big Sky’s \$4-million gamble paid off? Has Big Sky been able to change its dainty cruising image and reinvent itself as the OK Corral of ultrasteep chutes?

The locals in this Ballroom are the people to talk with—they have used Lone Peak as their exclusive playground for years by hiking 45 minutes to the summit. But at 10 pm on this Saturday night, most of the dirtbags are half in the bag. So I head to the bar to try to catch up.

I’m halfway through my third beer when Stuart Butterworth and Mary Reed are crowned the new Dirt Bag King and Queen. The coronation ceremony is simple: The reign-



ing royals hand over their cardboard-and-duct-tape crowns and then smash cream pies into the faces of Butterworth and Reed. A shower of beer completes the christening. I wait a few minutes, wade through the crowd, grab the new Dirt Bag King and Queen and pull them into the hallway, where it's quieter and we can talk.

"I've hiked Lone Peak hundreds of times," says the 33-year-old Butterworth, whose brown beard is covered with pie. "But I love the new tram. It's addictive." He offers to give me a tour on Monday—not tomorrow, he apologizes, because he'll be "recovering." Before heading back into the fray, Reed, a 29-year-old horse wrangler, leaves me with one thought to ponder: "This is our kingdom," she says. I'm not sure whether she's talking about the debauchery going on inside or the steep-studded, now lift-accessed Lone Peak.

the new Vacation

[T E R R A I N]

THE NEXT DAY I GET MY FIRST LOOK AT BIG SKY'S NEW crown jewel. The Lone Peak tram, with a pair of cylindrical 15-passenger cars strung on its wire, rises 1,400 vertical feet seemingly straight up a sheer rock face in just four minutes. It's a single-span lift, meaning there are no lift towers between the base and the top terminal, which is perched on the edge of a cliff just a few feet from the summit.

"People are amazed by the tram," lift attendant Dave Masquelier tells me. "They're awestruck on the ride when they see that jutting rock face right in front of them."

On my first ride, I'm joined by Big Sky marketing director Taylor Middleton, Big Sky mountain guide Vance Shaw and extreme skier/tram construction engineer Jim Conway. My stomach churns as the tram accelerates up the cable and I realize we're swinging more than 400 feet above the ground, but I'm distracted as my partners point out two chutes that split the rock face in front of us.

"The one under the tram is 'Big Couloir' and the one to the right is 'Little Couloir,'" says Shaw. Little Couloir, it turns out, is permanently closed except for movie shoots, but Big Couloir is open to the public. To ski it, you have to sign out with the ski patrol and you need a partner, an avalanche transceiver and a shovel. Not to mention guts.

"There's no question that Big Couloir is tougher than Jackson's Corbet's," says Shaw. "The entrance is probably 48 degrees in pitch and then it's a consistent 45 degrees for 1,400 vertical feet. You could put two Corbet's in Big Couloir." And then some. Corbet's, with an average pitch of 38.5 degrees, drops 500 vertical feet over a distance of 800 feet. Big Couloir, with its average pitch of 45 degrees, drops 1,400 feet over a distance of 2,000 feet.

Middleton is obviously ecstatic about the new company Big Sky is keeping: "Lone Peak now puts us in the same league as Jackson Hole. The tram and the terrain have exceeded our wildest expectations. Wind and visibility

haven't been much of a problem and we've been able to run the lift about two-thirds of the time, which is more than we had expected. Our skier visits are up 25 percent over 1994-95, and it's all because of the tram."

Middleton is a soft-spoken, silver-haired 38-year-old from Alabama who moved to Big Sky in 1981 and first worked as a desk clerk at the Huntley Lodge. Over the years, he says, Big Sky has tried to change its image as a blue-square mountain. But nothing, not even the 1989 opening of the Challenger Lift and accompanying expert terrain, helped much.

Until now. "There are a lot of people who own Fords but aspire to driving Ferraris," says Middleton. "Most skiers are intermediates, but they aspire to ski terrain above their level. We wanted to offer Ferrari terrain to Ford skiers."

AT THE TOP OF THE TRAM, WE HIKE ABOUT 30 FEET TO the summit of 11,166-foot-high, pyramid-shaped Lone Peak. It's a clear day and the scenery is spectacular—a 360-degree view of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming wilderness. We can see Yellowstone National Park and, 100 miles distant, the distinctive features of the Grand Tetons, home to rival Jackson Hole. I can literally see now why one-third of the tram's passengers have come up just to sightsee and then download.

Although the majority of the new 1,200 acres that the tram accesses is on the South Face of Lone Peak, we choose the North Face's First Gully for my initiation so we can ride the tram again. Being able to "yo-yo" the tram by skiing several runs on the North Face, including Big Couloir, is an unexpected bonus, explains Middleton. Good snowfall and extensive avalanche control work have allowed Big Sky to open steep chutes it initially thought to be off-limits.

Conway leads us down the 40-degree pitch of First Gully, which is essentially the route that locals used to hike to the summit. It's a route Conway knows well. "When I was living in Bozeman during the early Eighties, we had to drive up to Big Sky in the middle of the night and hike up to the top of the Lone Peak triple chair," he confides. "We'd break into the lift shack, spend the night and then hike to the top of Lone Peak for first tracks in the morning."

The 38-year-old has come a long way since his breaking-and-entering days. He's finished as high as fourth in the World Extreme Skiing Championships and he was the project engineer on the Lone Peak Tram. "There isn't another lift like this in North

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America," Conway says during our tram ride.

For our next run we drop into the vast South Face bowl. There are numerous runs down the above-timberline bowl, and we pick one right at the heart called Dictator Chutes. These chutes are lined with rock outcroppings and top out at 52 degrees. I've been to nearly 100 ski areas and for inbounds, lift-serviced skiing in North America, that's steep. *Really* steep. This terrain definitely rivals that of Jackson Hole, Snowbird, Utah, and Telluride, Colo.

After skiing nearly 2,000 vertical feet of ultrasteep stuff, you can take the Duck Walk catwalk back around to the north side of the mountain and ride the 6-minute Lone Peak triple to the tram base. Or you can continue down one of 10 blue-square trails that meander through the trees and are serviced by the new Shedhorn triple chair. (Intermediates can also access this new Shedhorn area from the Lower Bone Crusher trail without having to ski the sheer South Face steep.)

At the top of the Shedhorn lift, we stop to talk with Bill Smith, a 51-year-old architect from San Diego, and his wife, Penny. They've skied all over North America and Europe, but it's their first time at Big Sky—and they're eating it up. "This is the closest thing we've seen to Europe," says Smith, pointing at the South Face, which rises above us. "It reminds us of Chamonix, France."



HE KING AND I SKI TOGETHER ON MONDAY. I'M EXPECTING that Butterworth, now sober, will recant his professed love for the new tram and tell me how he really feels. Locals in most resort towns, after all, tend to have a fortress mentality—they want to protect what they already have. But Butterworth is candid about his mixed emotions.

"My first reaction to the tram was that I was for it, but I was also against it," says Butterworth, a local ski company rep who grew up in Idaho and has been at Big Sky for seven years. "Before the tram, we couldn't ski the Peak as often, but it used to feel like it was a world apart when you hiked it. Now it's more like another run."

Many of the locals wear helmets, and Butterworth is no exception. "It can get pretty scary up there," he says. "It's steep and there are a lot of rocks. It makes sense to wear a helmet." About 25 percent of ski patrollers and locals wear helmets and local ski shops are constantly placing helmet reorders.

Butterworth is also wearing a big, black plastic whistle around his neck. "It's the 'King's Whistle,'" he explains, with a mischievous grin, as we ride up the Lone Peak chair. "I get to call 'line fouls' on people who are zigzagging back and forth on a powder day or when snowboarders are heelsiding down and pushing all the powder away."

Butterworth is a hard-core skier. He claims to have been on the first chair of every Big Sky powder morning for the past two seasons and has extended some seasons to 250 days by hiking to summer snowfields. But even he admits he was "full of adren-

the new Vacation [TERRAIN]

aline the first time I rode the tram. People were just freaking out because the tram is so cool."

We unload the Lone Peak chair and traverse to the base of the tram. We're greeted there by a lift attendant, who bows to Butterworth and chants, "Hail to the King! Hail to the King!"

"The tram is addictive," Butterworth admits. Then he pauses and says, thoughtfully, "I guess it's the end of one era and the start of another." For a moment, I'm not sure whether he's talking about Big Sky or his new reign as the Dirt Bag King—or both.

EDITORS' NOTE: Thanks to the new tram and terrain, Big Sky racked up a record 300,000 skier visits for the 1995-96 season—a remarkable 25 percent increase. (Skier visits had previously been growing at three to four percent a year.) For this season, to help maintain its reputation for short liftlines, Big Sky is replacing the low-capacity Gondola II with a high-speed quad. Also new for this season: A number of hot skiers and snowboarders who sampled Big Sky last winter liked it so much they've moved there. Information: (800) 548-4486.



Lone Peak's North Face chutes aren't for the feint of heart—and neither is the tram ride.