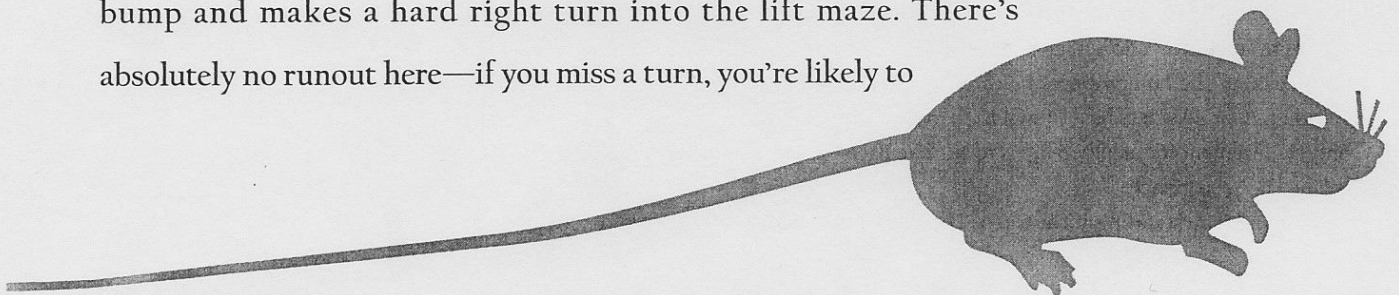


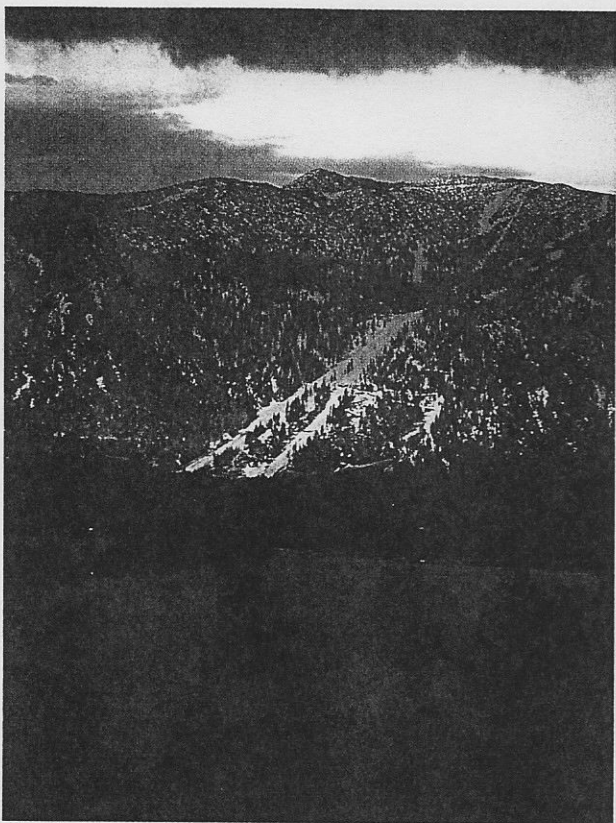
FACE

These 40-something skiers have been pounding the same bump trail at Heavenly for a quarter-century—and they wouldn't have it any other way. By Reade Bailey

RATS

It's a miserable day in early April at Heavenly, Calif. The rain is coming down so hard that the lift operators at the base of Gunbarrel are wearing yellow rain slickers. The only skiers in sight are a few soggy Japanese tourists, who shuffle up to the lift and disappear into the fog. ■ I approach one of the lift ops, who looks as if he's counting down the minutes until the end of the season. "Have you seen any of the guys who call themselves Face Rats?" I ask. "They only ski the bumps on The Face," I add, pointing at the slope rising sharply above us. ■ "Just that guy Jerry who skis here every day," the lift op replies. "He should be easy to spot—he's the only one on The Face today." ■ Moments later, a solitary skier appears out of the fog, snaking his way down through the large, slushy bumps on Gunbarrel. He absorbs the final bump and makes a hard right turn into the lift maze. There's absolutely no runout here—if you miss a turn, you're likely to





Gunbarrel in sight. No matter where you roam around Lake Tahoe, it's impossible to miss the Rats' hole.

go flying through a window of the California Lodge. I introduce myself to Jerry "Bump" Goodman. He wears his graying hair in a short ponytail and has a demure diamond stud in his left ear. At the moment, water streams down his deeply tanned and weathered face. I can't help thinking that the 53-year-old looks like, well, a wet rat. "I can't see. I'm soaked, but the snow is great," says Goodman, enthusiastically. It's just the spirit I would expect from a guy who has been skiing the same bump run every winter day for a quarter-century. "I love every run I make on The Face," he says. "Each time I get off the chair, it's like catching a new wave."

The next day dawns clear and sunny. By 1 pm, the bumps on The Face have ripened to a soft corn snow and The Face Rats start to crawl out. "I think the term 'Face Rats' originated because everyone always comes out of the woodwork in the afternoons," says Dick Bird, a 46-year-old original Rat. "Then we scurry up and down The Face like rats."

There are maybe a dozen hard-core original Rats who have been bashing the bumps since the early Seventies, says Bird. Another 20 or 30 skiers have joined the group since then. The only requirement for membership is to ski The Face—and only The Face—regularly.

Bird and I are standing at the top of The Face. The intense-

ly blue water of Lake Tahoe stretches to the horizon in front of us. "This view is half of why we ski only The Face," says Bird. "It's like being on acid every day."

Although Heavenly boasts 4,800 acres, 79 trails and 25 lifts, the Rats stick to the 1,700 vertical feet of The Face (essentially Gunbarrel run and Gunbarrel lift). "There's no lift-line, no runout and you can get a tremendous amount of vertical," says Bird, who used to work summers only to leave the winter months free for full-time Rat packing. Now he's a county road inspector year-round, working the 6 am to 2 pm shift. "Then I punch in here and ski for two hours," he says. "I can ski more on The Face in two hours than most people do elsewhere all day."

As if to prove his point, Bird takes off down The Face. I follow. At the top of Gunbarrel, the moguls are only a couple of feet high and the trail is about 75 yards wide. Bird skims over the tops of the bumps and I gamely try to keep up. We're right under the lift and I hear some loud yells of appreciation. I don't think they're for me.

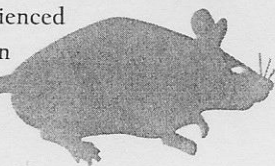
Bird stops briefly and then drops into the steepest section of Gunbarrel. The trail funnels to a mere 50 feet wide and the bumps are suddenly taller than I am. By the time we reach the bottom, I'm sucking for air and my legs feel like yesterday's lunch meat.

I ride up the lift with Dick Bird's wife, Lindsay, a UPS driver who moved to Lake Tahoe in 1977 at age 18. "I had \$40 in my pocket and a Datsun 240Z full of clothes," she remembers. "I learned how to ski bumps on other runs and then I came to The Face. It's showtime here—everyone sees you when you're on The Face."

She met Dick on the Gunbarrel lift in 1982 and they were married a year later. "There are probably 20 couples that have met on The Face," Lindsay says. "A lot of Face Rat girls are married to Face Rat guys. We all ski The Face because that's where the cool guys are."

By 2:30 pm, the bumps are getting bigger and softer—and Jerry Goodman has logged 25,500 vertical feet in 15 runs on Gunbarrel. "Skiing is what I do, so I keep track," says Goodman, pointing to his Avocet altimeter watch. "The same way a truck driver clocks his mileage." Goodman's ultimate vertical day was Feb. 22, 1983, when he and Dick Bird skied 40 runs on The Face. "It was a perfect day," he remembers. "We skied almost 70,000 vertical feet in seven hours." That Face Rat record still stands.

Goodman figures he's skied almost 40 million vertical feet of body-pounding bumps on The Face during the past three decades. Still, he's never experienced any knee or back problems. In fact, many of the





Bottles of Advil are now standard flight equipment for The Face Rats and their aging knees.

Rats say skiing The Face keeps them strong. "The Face is our gym," says 50-year-old Timber Roff, a local bar owner who wears a faded black one-piece ski suit and a large blue knee brace on his right leg. "This is where we get our workout. You go up, you go down."

Tom Bork, a landscape contractor, agrees. "I haven't gained a pound since college," says the 39-year-old who came to Lake Tahoe in 1980 for "one year" and has been here ever since.

Like Goodman and many of the other Face Rats, Bork used to compete in bump contests. But when "the young guys started throwing huge air, I knew my competition days were over," says Bork.

Although they may not be competing against other skiers, the constant challenge of The Face keeps the Rats coming back day after day. "Skiing bumps is addicting because you learn something new on every run," says Scott Cummings, a 47-year-old carpenter who didn't start skiing until he moved from Oklahoma to Lake Tahoe in 1973. Now he's one of the best skiers on The Face—fast and smooth, his knees pinned together as he rips through the bumps.

Cummings calls The Face "a built-in social club. You can go skiing by yourself and always run into friends. The social scene is a big, big part of The Face Rats."

The next generation of Face Rats hits Gunbarrel at 3 pm when school lets out. A dozen kids in Heavenly's junior freestyle program, ages 10 to 17, yo-yo up and down The Face. They zip down through the bumps, occasionally leaping high in the air and throwing spinning, twisting aerial tricks.

Jere Crawford, a former pro mogul competitor, is their coach. "I don't think there's a better place to ski bumps in the springtime than The Face," says the 40-year-old, who moved to Lake Tahoe in 1984. Then, he says with a smile, "Because I coach, I'm the only Face Rat who actually gets paid to ski The Face."

Although they're not in Heavenly's official freestyle program, young Kristin and Courtney Royce are certainly part of the new generation of Face Rats. Their father, Tom, moved here in 1969 and has skied The Face ever since.

On winter days, Tom picks up his daughters promptly at 3 pm and takes them skiing. "I used to pick them up at 2 pm, but the principal didn't like that," he says. With Tom's coaching, Kristin, 10, and Courtney, 7, have both become highly ranked junior mogul competitors.

After 4:30 pm, the Rats head for the California Bar deck on the west side of the base lodge. The sun is still high in the sky and we sit in its warmth and toast Dennis Thorne's 50th birthday. "There are only three certain things in life," says Thorne, a maître d' in a casino showroom. "Death, taxes and you can always get better in the bumps. That's why we keep skiing The Face."

Someone mentions that all The Face Rats are either over age 35 or under 18. "Most of the 20-somethings are snowboarding, not skiing bumps," adds Goodman.

"We're getting so old now that the Rat drug of choice is Advil," jokes Cummings. Everyone laughs. "How about Geritol?" asks Andy Reiter, a Rat since the late Seventies. Everyone laughs harder.

"If I come back in 10 years, will you all still be here, skiing The Face?" I ask the group. "Well, we may not start skiing until 3:30, but we'll still be here," says Cummings. Everyone laughs for a long time.

Finally, at about 6:30 pm, we finish our beers. A half-dozen of us clomp down the stairs in our ski boots to the shadows of the parking lot, where The Face Rats have strategic parking spots. I stop and fumble with my car keys. When I turn around, the Rats are gone, scattered. Then I look back up at The Face, still bathed in spring sunlight, and I know they'll be back tomorrow. Same Rat time. Same Rat channel. ♦

