

First Person

Doug Forseth

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bounds. There was very little disruption to the ground cover, we had a very light footprint.

The main run is Addagio, which is the widest run, and the other main run is just being called Founder's Run on the maps. We've taken the whole concept of fundraising to this run... and every year the Whistler-Blackcomb Foundation will auction off the right for people to put their own name on it for the rest of the year.

The only exception is this year, when the run will be dedicated to Jeff Harbers. He was the first president of the American Friends of Whistler who died in a plane crash this summer. In his honour the run will be called Jeff's Ode to Joy, which has a nice story behind it. He had two small children, and his daughter was doing a piano recital. Jeff was not a musical guy, but he learned the piano to be able to do a duet of Ode to Joy with her. We feel the name sums up Jeff's passion for music and skiing.

Next year it will have a different name on it, and every year after that as people are able to bid on the name.

PIQUE: There were a few slow years but after last season and a good summer, is there a sense that the excitement is back?

DF: There's a lot of energy, you can really feel it. I wouldn't be surprised if we had a record opening weekend. We made the decision to open the Creekside Gondola because the snow conditions allowed it, but also because we expect a strong turnout. Everything in the Roundhouse is

includes a lot of work on the ground.

The improvements to the Dave Murray Downhill are quite dramatic, a lot of changes had to be made for safety that will make it a better run in some ways. We've been working pretty closely with VANOC and FIS to ensure the end product is something we can be proud of and something that will compare favourably to the top downhill courses in the world.

experience. We've also widened the way to Coaches Corner and added a new hot air at the 'S' turns which should also improve the view from the finish line.

On the women's World Cup downhill course, we've made a lot of changes. There will be a whole new start. The run will be wider, but we've kept the special feeling of Franz's Run, the roller coaster feel that made it such a great run.

By keeping a lot of the natural terrain features and rolling feel of the terrain, we think we'll have a classic downhill course.

Really the guys and girls who have worked on the courses did a hell of a job, considering they were delayed starting for about six weeks while we waited to get our environmental approval from the federal government. All of a sudden we were behind the eight-ball, with three different companies involved waiting for the go-ahead. Fortunately they all stayed with the project, even if they could have moved to somewhere else, and we got back on track.

We had to work around everything, from the discovery of endangered frogs along the course, to the fire regulations that kicked in during the drought this summer.

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- DOUG FORSETH

totally open — even Steeps Grill is open, and I don't think it's ever been open this early before.

PIQUE: Will people notice any changes to runs that are being made for the Olympics?

DF: It wasn't in the budget, but I can say we spent a lot of time on those runs over the summer and a lot of our staff were immersed in the task of building these alpine venues. That

It's not totally finished. It was a two-year project, to be completed next summer, and there are two bridges we still have to put in, but it's going to be a very different experience this year.

One of the areas where we've done a lot of work is Fallaway, which is steep as heck with a 90 degree left turn at the bottom. We've widened the turn by 10 to 15 metres, which should create a much better ski

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PIQUE: I understand there's also been a lot of work on Raven and Ptarmigan.

DF: Part of that direction comes from talking to the local ski club about their needs, and these runs will be set aside as a training area during the Games. The snowmaking will be put in place next summer.

Some of these new runs will be tested in March when we have the Canadian Nationals here, and in 2008 we will be hosting a World Cup with the men and women both racing the Olympic courses. These are pretty big projects, and we want to have them perfect by the time the Games get here.

PIQUE: I know Whistler-Blackcomb has been looking to test wind power in the next year. Are there any other environmental projects that are new this year?

DF: We are continuing our work with Sempa Power Projects, with phase two of the Roundhouse expected to cost about \$250,000 for a hybrid gas boiler-electric system. This is a good

That's why we'll be closing Whistler early this year. We need about nine weeks to do the work and prepare for the summer season.

We'll still follow the same pattern, just on different mountains. Blackcomb will be open through the spring and May, and will remain open in the summer for glacier skiing.

PIQUE: What about the recent purchase of Intrawest by Fortress. Has that had any impact on operations, or is it related to any layoffs?

DF: The recent layoffs were not Fortress-driven but Intrawest-driven. As we were being looked at by other companies, and got down into the shortlist, we were being asked a lot of questions that really focused on things we weren't as focused on and made decisions regarding staffing that we would have made regardless of how things ended up.

There was not a big impact here for people; several positions that were opened up just haven't been filled, while others who were in positions that were eliminated have

"There are other factors involved, we're building a lift from Creekside to the Timin Flats, but we're also looking at building a new lift from Creekside to Kadenwood..."

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investment for us, as the payback for one of these systems is three to four years. I don't remember how many tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions we've reduced with other Sempa projects, but there is a positive environmental impact as well.

PIQUE: What about the plans to build a temporary lift to the Timing Flats to move spectators around? Has that project started?

DF: It could be next summer, we're still working on that. There are other factors involved, we're building a lift from Creekside to the Timing Flats, but we're also looking at building a new lift from Creekside to Kadenwood for real estate operations. There are economies of scale there that would make more sense to do both projects at once.

VANOC and FIS would like us to put in the lift to the Timing Flats for the World Cup events in 2008, and we'll be working on it over the winter.

PIQUE: Are there still plans to close the Village Gondola next year for upgrades?

DF: In next year's capital budget there are plans to rebuild the gearboxes and drives, and other major components. It's a major workhorse for us — it carries more people, works more hours, and is open more days than any other lift on the mountains. We should be spending about \$5 million on that.

found work in other departments filling other vacancies.

PIQUE: How involved is Fortress in day-to-day operations?

DF: We've met with Fortress, we're a core business, and they want us to run that business well. We've had discussion over vision, core values, and they're comfortable with what we are and what we're doing.

One of the things they want to do is see the resort grow, and I know they are on the hunt for other (resort) properties, which we think is great and will only create a higher visibility for the brand. It will also create opportunities for people to grow within the resort group.

This is Fortress's first involvement in ski areas, of 75 other companies. They're very diversified.

PIQUE: Is there an advantage for Whistler-Blackcomb, now that Intrawest is no longer on the stock market?

DF: No doubt a public company is always looking to position itself for the next quarter report, and is in the earnings per share game. The goal is still to profit, but the company can take a longer-term vision how to grow and manage the company for success, which is a huge benefit for us.

PIQUE: Will it have an impact on the proposed Peak to Peak gondola?

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DF: That's still a work in progress. Fortress has indicated interest, but we're not in a position yet to say, "yeah, it's a go." They have given us the attitude to keep the ball rolling, so it's definitely not dead. I expect this thing's going to get done... and in the next 60 days we should have some kind of an answer. Fortress is doing their fact finding, their due diligence on this, to make sure they make a good decision.

Before, when we were a public company, there was always the debt issue, and looking for a partner made things a lot more complicated. Our approach will be different with Fortress — if we decide to do it, then we'll do it, and won't worry about partners.

PIQUE: Last year Whistler-Blackcomb made the decision to change marketing plans to focus more on regional visitors and the value message. Will this year's marketing be similar?

DF: One of the big priorities for us is to grow our destination business again. We had a record year last year within the regional market, and we'd like to keep that going on a price and value basis.

The destination market is down for many reasons. One of the main ones is probably the exchange rate, which is why travel to Canada is at an all-time low. Whistler is not unique in that sense; everywhere else in Canada is experiencing the same thing.

We do need to get that market back. We're going to continue to work on the value story, that Whistler is an affordable destination.

Air travel is more expensive than ever, which is something we really have no control over, so we expect the value message — whether it's bundling products and costs, or hotels and airfare — to hit home the

hardest. We offer competitive rates with other ski areas, that's a fact we have to drive home.

PIQUE: Are there any destination markets you will be focusing on more than others?

DF: There are three markets we will be doing most of our marketing. The first two are Washington state and California, which are in the same time zone as Whistler and can offer affordable rates to Vancouver by virtue of the fact we're kind of in the same neighbourhood. That lowers air travel costs.

The other market is Central Canada, especially Ontario. It's still a longer flight, but we have the same currency, and flights into Vancouver are still affordable.

We've been running national ads in The Globe and Mail, and so far we've had good response to our "book by" packages, which we expected to grow again this year.

PIQUE: Is there anything else you wanted to mention?

DF: Food. We're looking at some new concepts in food, and in a way we're going back to the basics this year. We're dropping prices on 20 to 30 per cent of various menu items, which means we're also reducing our margins there. It's more expensive to provide food on the mountain because of the transportation and preparation, but people still compare the prices in the Roundhouse Lodge with the prices in the village.

We're offering more value combination deals, where you get an entrée, drink and maybe a desert item for under \$10. There are going to be more soups, more sandwiches, all high quality ingredients. We're listening to our guests, and meeting their expectations and needs.

The test kitchen is the Roundhouse, and I think people are going to like what they find. ■



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