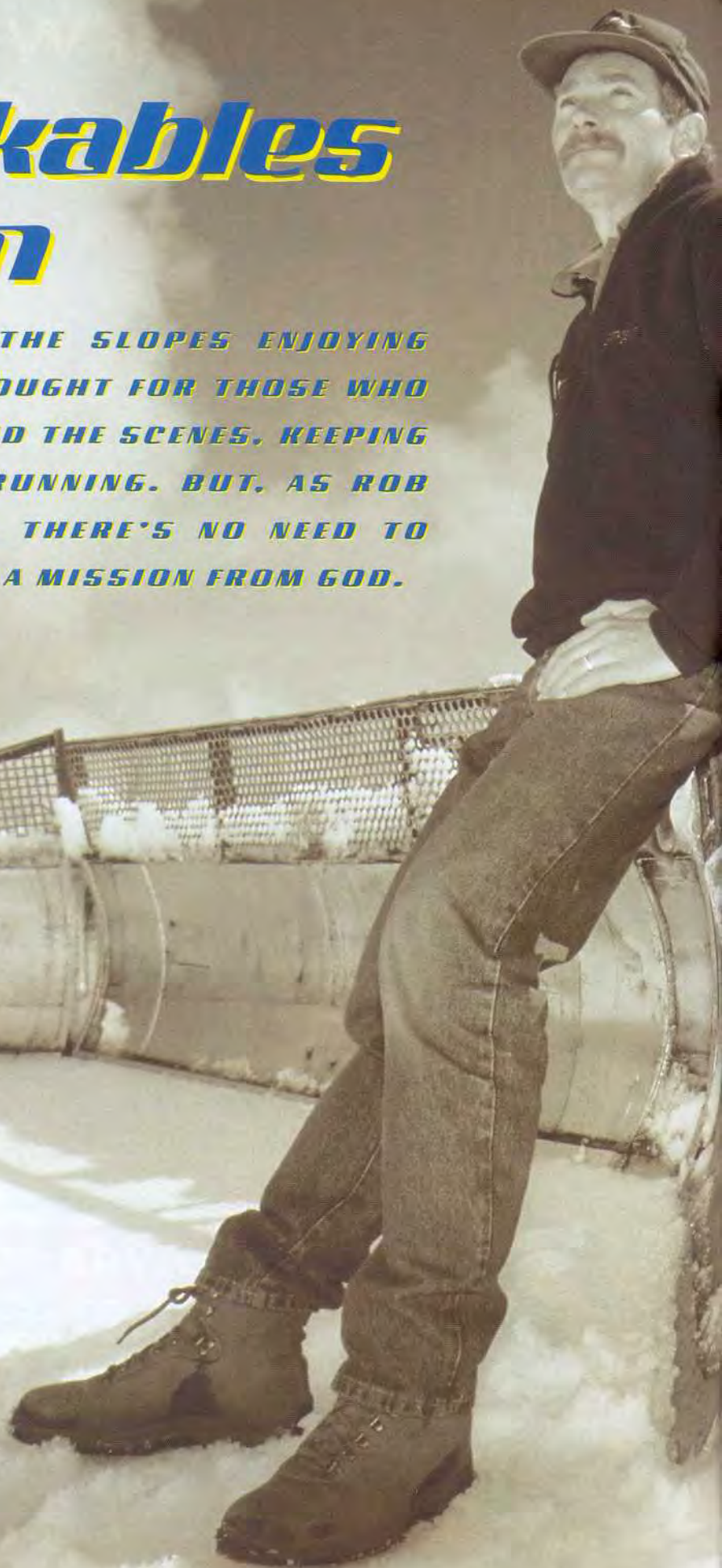


The Remarkables Religion

WHILE YOU'RE OUT ON THE SLOPES ENJOYING YOURSELVES, SPARE A THOUGHT FOR THOSE WHO ARE WORKING HARD BEHIND THE SCENES, KEEPING THE SKI AREAS UP AND RUNNING. BUT, AS ROB GREENAWAY DISCOVERED, THERE'S NO NEED TO SYMPATHISE — THEY'RE ON A MISSION FROM GOD.





YOU'VE GOT TO HAND IT TO QUEENSTOWN. WHERE ELSE COULD YOU SELL VEGETABLES WITH THE SLOGAN "GET SPUNKY. EAT SPINACH"? OR FIND A WORKPLACE WHERE THE STAFF RUSH IN THE FRONT DOOR, KISS THE COMPANY LOGO AND COMPLAIN TO EACH OTHER HOW THEY'VE MISSED THEIR JOBS OVER THE PAST FEW HOURS —AND THEY'RE NOT CLUTCHING AN AMWAY CATALOGUE OR SOME OTHER RELIGIOUS TEXT.

"Working's not the right word for it," said one. "Every day is Saturday and every night is Saturday night," said another.

And how about this—"I love what I do. I moved into the industry at 18 to put something back. Don't know what I'd do without it." Hamish McCrostie, manager of the Remarkables ski area, said that last one. It's the sort of statement that could ruin any chance of a successful wage negotiation. The Remarkables ski area is the country's only ski operation born of one major commercial undertaking, requiring a \$3 million access road and another \$11 million to complete the area's facilities. Opened officially in 1985, the area employs 150 people during the season making it one of the biggest employers in Queenstown. The idea of this story was to get an overview of what it takes to run a ski area. Instead, it became a religious experience.

Duncan Smith is responsible for coordinating the management of the Mt Cook Group's three ski areas—Hutt, Coronet and The Remarkables—a total of about 650 staff. Duncan started skiing at 16 (around 20 years ago) pitching his tent in campgrounds around



Duncan Smith - manager of Hutt, Coronet & Remarkables.

Ruapehu and Mt Hutt, and stretching his student budget to get as many skiing days as possible. Now that he manages these areas he gets only about five full days skiing a season. Although Duncan has a permanent position—and once the estimated 125 days of skiing are over he and the rest of the divisional managers still have 240 days of work to complete—he still speaks of “winters” rather than years. It’s a foible of the industry and seems to imply that skiers have the ability to live longer than the rest of us. While Duncan has had “12 winters” in the job, some of his seasonal staff have been through twice as many in the same time.

You get a different perspective about the job once you’re actually in the ski area—and it’s a ski area that you are “in”, not at. The Remarkables is enclosed within a valley surrounded by towering peaks of rock and ice. Not unusual for a mountain range (or a Tintin comic) but quite different to most of New Zealand’s ski fields which are planted on the side of hills, with no feeling of enclosure at all.

The Remarkables terrain offers easy beginner and intermediate skiing at the lower levels, but then advances into runs through steep chutes and narrow couloirs with names like the Elevator, Escalator, Diangulator and, finally, the Terminator. The

world record for an extreme jump (almost 49 metres) was achieved (simultaneously with “the most stupid thing to do on skis” award) just outside the intermediate ski area.

Hamish McCrostie, the man who wouldn’t know what to do without The Remarkables, has the sort of background you should emulate if you want to manage a ski area.

Start by wagging school to go skiing until you get to work for a year as a ski patroller

“Can the road be used up and down; can the lifts be operated; and are the slopes safe? The first few hours of the day are spent checking those three things.”

(in Hamish’s case, at Tekapo). Head to Coronet Peak for five years and train as an avalanche technician. Get to Nirvana (The Remarkables, remember) in 1985 and become head of the ski patrol team. Nip off to Canada to pick up more avalanche skills. Set up the NZ Ski Patrol Association in 1987 and become the Mountain Safety Council member on the Avalanche Advisory Committee. In 1989 gain responsibility for coordinating the Health and Safety in Employment requirements at both Coronet and Remarkables ski areas. Finally, return to Nirvana in 1995 as the Ski

Area Manager. Easy.

Hamish’s typical winter day begins at about 5.00am, although if it’s stormy he arrives a little earlier to join the road crew who might have been working all night to keep the road open, spending a little of the road’s annual \$100,000 maintenance bill.

“I have a three tier check list,” Hamish says. “Can the road be used up and down; can the lifts be operated; and are the slopes safe? The first few hours of the day are spent checking those three things.”

By 6.45 he has distributed the first snow report and completed two live radio reports. Staff arrive around 8.00am and, after meeting and briefing supervisors, it’s straight into the daily routine.

Skiers are called “guests”—anything less is a dirty word—and there might be between 1500 and 2500 of them at the field on a good day.

Of course, that’s on a good day. “The environment throws some incredible challenges at us, and the mountains show just how inhospitable they can be,” says Hamish.

This means he might spend a lot of his morning digging out the lifts, or worrying about what 200 km/hr winds are doing to the lifts. Such gusts have thrown rocks through the windows of vehicles, or just sucked the windows out and filled the spaces with snow. Neil Gavin, who manages the road and the area’s maintenance programme, was once blown

across the carpark in a 160 km/hr “breeze”. “We usually hide in the workshop,” he says. Once Hamish’s major tasks are out of the way in the morning, it’s a question of just being there and responding to

issues. Snow reports are updated, he checks on snow conditions, plans the groomers’ activities for the next night and briefs the groomer drivers. He might get home by about 6.00, and those 12-14 hour days continue for about a third of his year.

I expected the access road to be Hamish’s biggest nightmare. It would do any engineer proud, being flat in the middle and very steep on either side. A friend of mine once philosophised that two things bring out the worst in people: money and ski field roads. I have to agree, having taken on the task of closing the road to Whakapapa for a few



Hamish McCrostie - area manager

minutes at the start of the Mountains to Sea for several years, and receiving advice from punters that my best descriptives started with

Gary Steadman is head groomer, and operates one of The Remarkables' most expensive sets of skis—over \$300,000 worth. This is a short story that begins with the rider “don't try this at home”. Or when your boss is watching. Gary's been working on Coronet and The Remarkables for 18 seasons and he can drive a snow groomer like a good kayaker rides a wave. Sitting beside him in the cab of the machine is an act of faith.

As it crawled across a white slope I held myself away from the door, feeling at risk of sliding from the cab. “Can they roll?” I asked.

Guy shrugged his shoulders. “We had one clearing a road on the steep face just behind the building over there. Since it was late in the season, the outer edge had melted and the driver was asked to bucket some snow onto the bare areas. He took it too far and she went over the edge, and stopped on her side.

I got in to move her through the top door, fell into the driver's seat, opened that door and kept on going down the slope. We towed it out. No, they don't roll

fast, but we could feel the momentum that a machine of that size possesses. Eventually the tracks bit into the snow and we crawled back into the valley.

Guy looked back over his shoulder at the mess of tumbled snow behind us, with a grin. “You can't do that sort of thing while the area is open—it makes a real mess of the field.”

Snow groomers are a breed apart. The 13 operators at The Remarkables work mostly at night and try to sleep at the skifield during the day, but are on call 24 hours a day. They tend to miss out on the social activities that keep the rest of the team busy in the evenings.

Gary's operators are usually machine junkies, good skiers (so they know how best to prepare a slope) and are a close knit team. In summer though, they have no job in the area. “Some go overseas,” says Gary, “Sometimes it's hard to get work permits, but one of the team will be in Korea at the end of this season. Some drive taxis or get a completely different summer job.”

“I haven't yet met a groomer who isn't slightly grumpy after a shift, and by the middle of the season it gets worse. It's lonely working a machine in the dark by yourself, so it's good to get out of the area for the off-season.

We have a stable core of operators who



Neil Gavin - maintenance and road manager

“w”, “f” or “c” or all three of those letters. A lot of effort (and money) goes into keeping the road to the Remarkables in good condition for the up to 550 vehicles per day that use it in the season.

The road is also one of the best downhill mountain biking opportunities in the region.

too easily.”

He continued creeping the groomer across the slope until it was on a 30 degree lean and began sliding sideways, cutting a furrow in the snow. As the speed increased he turned the machine by locking one tread until it slid headfirst down the slope—not

come back every year, so it must be a good work environment. It's not good money, considering the hours, although you can save what you earn. It's not that different from driving in town—but you get a free season pass, meals are provided and there's no competing traffic.”



Kim Cassidy - food and beverage Manager

Wendy Linton drives another close knit team on the field. The lift operators—“liftees”—are the face that skiers see most often, even if it is only for an average of six to eight seconds when the liftee “bumps” a chair (slows it down to reduce the impact on the skier) or encourages them to sit beside a total stranger.

“We aim to get every chair full,” says Wendy. “We can put through over 10,000 people an hour and try to keep the queues down to between two and five minutes for an average day and 10-12 minutes at maximum capacity. I’m definitely addicted to the activity. Most people do only one or two seasons on lifts, and then get back to their studies or other jobs. I got a bit stuck.”

On lifts?

“Yeah. Hooked on lifts. I just love them. I’m never going back to nursing and gungy old hospital wards. There’s no comparison to a 360 degree alpine view.”

Wendy originally took ski holidays during her nursing career, then started taking more time off to do odd jobs on fields in New Zealand and later in California and Nevada. Nine years into the job, Wendy now employs about 65 people a year to operate the lifts on both Coronet and The Remarkables. She’s responsible for selecting staff, training, organising work rosters, keeping safety routines on track and engendering the liftees’ culture.

“Most of the training is done on the job, and there’s an etiquette and banter that is needed. Lots of couples want to be alone on the

lifts, so they need persuading to share with others—although most people now expect to sit beside two or three others on a quad. Then there’s things like keeping the launching ramp nice for the next operator by shovelling snow. We work 30 minute shifts to reduce the risk of RSI and it’s very bad form

“Skiers want quick sustenance and not too many difficult decisions.”

to pass a messy ramp on to the next operator.” Operators have to be firm but gentle with guests who have neglected to purchase a lift ticket. “Nine out of ten people with old tickets will be shown back to the ticket office, but a few are out to scam the system—although the thermally printed tickets are now almost impossible to alter.”

The pay rates for a liftee in 1995 were between \$8.25 and \$8.85 an hour, with most operators working 48 hours a week and skiing any time they have off.

It’s not often that things go wrong. Wendy recalls the time in 1995 when two electrical problems caused two ten-minute lift stoppages. Not bad for machines that run full-time from 9.00am until 4.00pm every day. Two winters ago, a fault on the Greengate Chair took 15 minutes to fix. “In that time the wind got up and we couldn’t start the line again. It took an hour to evacuate the lift using static rescue lines. It was a bit like Police Rescue,” she says.

Since Wendy likes her job so much it’s easy to think she could do it forever.

“Forever? I’d like to be skiing at 70, although my knees might not last. Nursing doesn’t appeal. I might buy a ski area,” she laughs. While the lifts bring in the majority of The Remarkables income, food and beverage also make big contributions. Kim Cassidy has the task of managing the 120 staff who deliver meals at the three Mt Cook Group fields, requiring up to 3000 lunches per day. “Logistically it’s a bit of a nightmare,” he says. It was a shock to hear a staff member use what might be considered a negative term. A nightmare? Well, no. Just a very busy job, utilising modems and cellphones.

“It’s a job with a pretty wide scope and few similarities to hotel food and beverage management. Even getting to work is a different experience. I recall shovelling snow with dishes at Coronet Peak. We’ve had power cuts and have had to melt snow on barbecues for tea and coffee.”

There are different food demands at each field. For some unknown reason Mt Hutt skiers drink more flavoured milk and eat more spicy wedges than at The Remarkables or Coronet.

“There’s no need to be adventurous with food on the field,” says Kim. “Skiers want quick sustenance and not too many difficult decisions.”

However, according to Kim skiers are more cosmopolitan than in years gone by. Pies were once the staple, but now it’s venison medallions and meals that get assessed by food critics.

Take a look at the level of quality control that Duncan Smith, Hamish and the management team of The Remarkables seem to enforce and you could be forgiven for thinking it could be a stressful place to work. For example, ski chain hire on the access road was once contracted out but as soon as complaints were heard the contract was withdrawn. The service was internalised, had a training programme developed and was then offered afresh—tightly monitored and efficient. It’s all very ‘90’s, right down to the use of quality control programmes with titles like “The Achiever Group”. It smacks of the messages you might hear on self-motivation tapes, but it appears to be an effective recipe. And since skiing is virtually a religion—the business of delivering it might as well be too.

All PHOTOS: Rob Greenaway