



Introducing Granby Ranch Rising

A renewed commitment to this special place

With the support and vision of new ownership, we are transforming the experience at Granby Ranch in ways both big and small. As we went to press, more than \$4 million in major capital improvements were underway, of which a sizable portion is dedicated to notably enhancing the entire skiing and riding experience on the mountain.



200 inches of annual snowfall-and given the exigent threats of climate change-let's start with our reliance on, and massive investments in, snowmaking. We are tripling existing snowmaking coverage-from 38 acres to more than 115-to enhance our most popular runs on East Mountain, provide for a true ski-in/ski-out experience all season long for residents, enable earlier winter access to West Mountain, and elevate skiing and riding here to a world-class level with an alpine and freestyle training venue on Desperado. For our customers, this means more reliable and earlier skiing on higher quality snow surfaces.

That's one spectacular change, but collectively the smaller improvements are just as important. Connectivity will be far faster thanks to new fiber on both mountains. Guests can now expect extraordinary on-mountain dining experiences from our awardwinning food and beverage team. On the hill, terrain features and learning parks will dot the landscape. And we will continue our efforts to make Granby Ranch one of the best places in the nation to learn (and grow) with mountain sports.

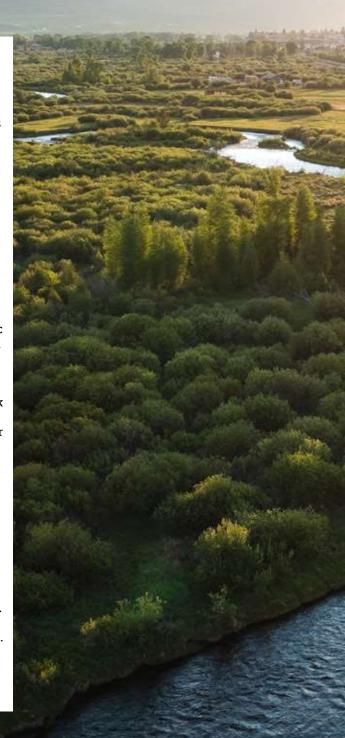
All the above is happening now, but Granby Ranch Rising is a strategic initiative that entails many long-term investments as well. Ownership has engaged the venerated SE Group to create a vision of Granby Ranch that the community will be proud of. Look for announcements and opportunities to contribute to SE Group's master planning in the coming months. But trust that Granby Ranch's approachable, friendly, and welcoming nature will remain unchanged.

Throughout it all, success starts with people. I am incredibly proud of what our team achieved this past year, despite the many obstacles we all faced. The team's hard work, talent, and passion for our community advanced Granby Ranch through turbulent times. Our team is our future.

So please rise up and join us this year. A bright future is on the horizon.

Jace Wirth

General Manager, Granby Ranch Ridgeline Executive Group







In the Deep Winter issue of Mountain, I wrote that to address overcrowded runs, the degradation of the ski experience—particularly with its relationship to nature—and the lack of economic and racial diversity, the mountain destination industry had to reimagine itself. Part of that fix, I posited, had to involve a resurgence of the nation's remaining small and midsize resorts that can offer the type of affordable and intimate experiences that the big box resorts have spurned in favor of volume.

Sounds great, a reader responded, but how? In my idealism, I still hope that communities will see the benefit of reviving defunct ski areas as four season mountain parks complete with free skiing for kids. Call that the Howelsen Hill model after the famous "other mother" town hill in Steamboat Springs. I've been proselytizing about such mountain parks for two decades, though, and haven't seen much progress.

Which means it's up to the free market.

That's exactly what's happening. Beyond the noise of yet another big box acquisition, local pushback to crowding, endless traffic gripes and a general malaise with industrialized skiing, smaller areas have been quietly figuring out how best to preserve the experience—while making money.

Colorado's Arapahoe Basin is the most well-known example. It was only a few years ago that A-basin was part of the Epic Pass family. Because of its world-class terrain, consistent high elevation snow, and proximity to Interstate 70, though, A-basin quickly found itself loved to death by Front Rangers and destination skiers with Epic Passes. The parking, which had been a problem since the early aughts, grew untenable, as did the food and beverage and uphill capacity, neither of which could handle the volume play. But when A-basin dumped Epic,



connected with Ikon, and began metering crowds during Covid (and onward) a funny thing happened. The resort won't release details, but although skier visits went down dramatically—one industry source told me by half—A-basin, that same source told me, saw its best earnings ever last winter. There are similar tales from other mid-tier resorts like Monarch in Colorado (my pick for the best run mid-tier in the West for at least a decade), Mt. Rose in California, and Saddleback in Maine. Let them stand as proof of concept: By improving the guest experience and celebrating intimacy, the small and midsize mountains can rise up. Saddleback's motto is "The world doesn't need another ski area; it needs a different ski area."

The examples above are small resorts with relatively big skiing, though. To check out an example of a truly small ski area that's also resurgent, I drove to Granby Ranch after our annual Mountain mag

bike test in Steamboat. If you don't know, Granby Ranch and Grand County, Colorado are a short drive from Winter Park, and the western entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. You might recall Granby Ranch by its old name SolVista. More likely, unless your kid competed in high school bike races at Granby Ranch as mine did, or you were a stalwart on the downhill mountain biking circuit in the 2000s, you've never heard of the place.

That's understandable. The mountain sports all of a thousand feet of vertical and four lifts. And until quite recently, the base area, skiing, and riding were let to lie fallow. But as with so many long neglected mountain resorts—I've consulted on the "envisioning" of many—the potential outweighs the challenges. Granby Ranch sits at 8,000 feet in one of the colder high mountain valleys in Colorado. Up top, the views take in the Continental Divide. Access from the Front Range



only depends on a short jaunt on I-70. Alpine and nordic skiers, hikers, flyfishers, and cyclists migrate to Grand County year-round now. And a large community of second and primary homeowners already calls the place home.

There's no need to dwell on what Granby Ranch had become, the industry is rife with small mismanaged areas. But let's just say the neglect wasn't benign. Eventually, the bankers foreclosed. And then in

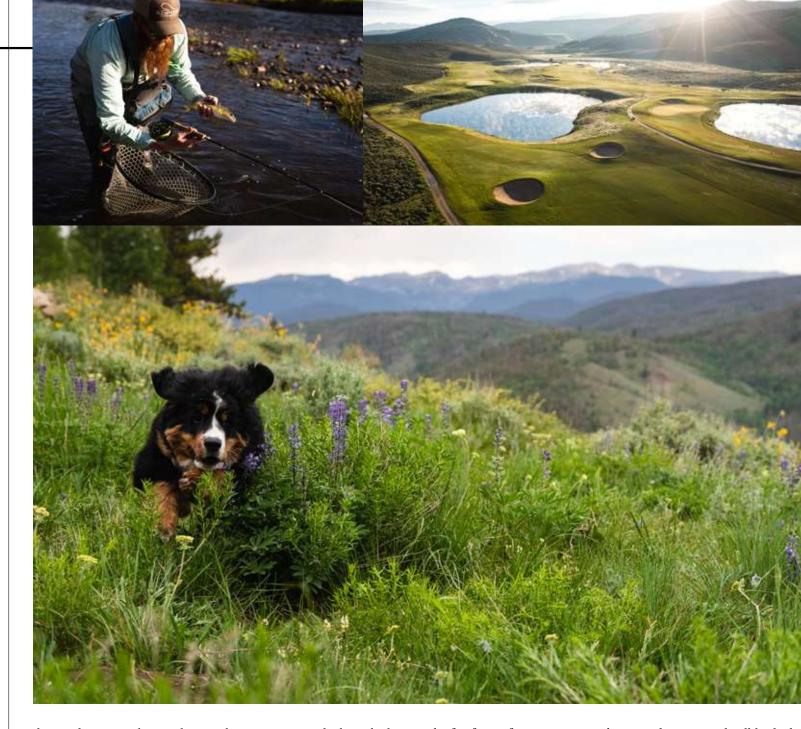
When you've come to a mountain to escape the guerrilla warfare and anxiety of the big resorts, the importance of human-to-human interaction can't be overstated.

September of 2020, a new management team called Ridgeline Executive Group took over operations. This past May, after what can only be described as a remarkable turnaround, the bank and Ridgeline recruited private ownership. While reporting this story after my visit, the team released a new strategic initiative. It's called Granby Rising.

Take it as a case study in how a small resort can apply the lessons of big resort customer service and mountain operations to a more intimate model. It's easy to slam the big resorts, but they tend to get guest services and the product—snow and dirt—right. Last winter, Granby Ranch set to work improving signage, snowmaking, grooming, and the all-important "time to snow" metric—getting skiers from their cars to the

lift faster. The metric applies to ski school and rentals too. The existing staff, some of whom have worked at Granby Ranch for a decade or more—another upside to mid-ties mountains—were eager for the challenge after languishing for so long.

The metamorphoses was immediately noticeable. Even with the challenges of Covid—which in fact may have helped introduce new skiers to Granby Ranch—all aspects of the business boomed. For a time, Granby Ranch outpaced nearby Winter Park, which, to be fair, scaled back ski school lessons during

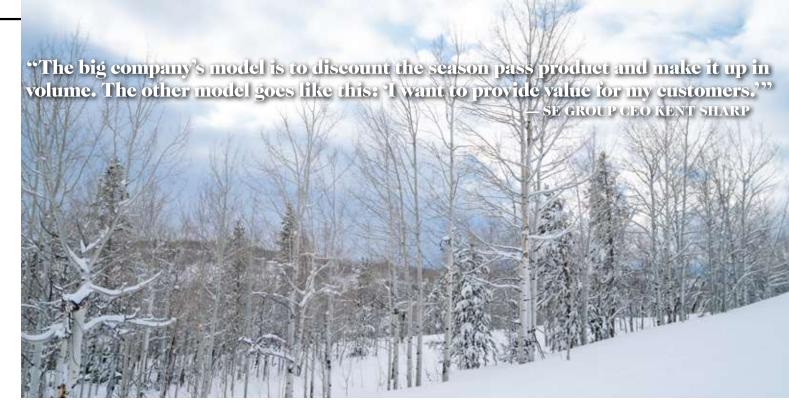


the pandemic. Credit Granby Ranch management, which pushed to get 50 percent of instructors certified with PSIA—a standard play with big resorts, but unusual with many smaller mountains. "It's not groundbreaking to focus on "time to snow" metrics, ski school, and the like," says Granby Ranch General Manager Jace Wirth, "and we aren't the only mid-tier resort to do so. But just by paying attention, we were able to improve. And the customers noticed. What I found really surprising this past winter was how many skiers we were seeing from around Colorado and around the country. Somehow they were finding this little place. Word of mouth matters." (Full disclosure, Wirth is a former Mountain Media staffer and ski tester).

Some small areas like to pretend that they're mom-and-pop businesses, but running a mountain well involves too many moving parts for a Mayberry approach. Wirth grew up racing on Howelsen Hill (and riding broncs), but he cut his ski industry teeth developing a new resort outside of Beijing that will be heavily featured in the next Winter Games. Part of what he learned there was to focus on technology. Vail Resorts—the biggest operator in the world—was on

the forefront of incorporating tech into its business and still leads the industry. But it took a massive investment to do it. Today, it's possible for a small resort to buy equivalent software off-the-shelf, or tap into an existing platform. The result is akin to what we're seeing in independent specialty sports retail. Half the brick-and-mortar shops in the Grassroots Outdoors Alliance run e-commerce platforms, which let them make sales during the pandemic closures and now allows them to compete with the big online retailers. Something similar happened with small ski areas. Prebooking lift tickets, lessons, demos and dinner suddenly became a prerequisite. Because it moved quickly to build those platforms, Granby was able to match the acceleration in demand. It might seem like a small advancement, but getting a sense for how many people are headed your way—and indentifying their needs—makes the guest experience more pleasant.

And that's fundamentally what the mid-tiers are about—keeping things mellow and pleasant, but without demanding sacrifices from the guests other than vertical feet per run. Hell, 15 years ago it was hard to get a decent meal at a ski area outside of Deer Valley. Thanks



to a captive audience, food was an easy profit center, so the quality tended to that Sysco gray of high school. But it doesn't need to be that way. When A-basin modernized, the F&B wasn't an afterthought. Now vacationers and locals alike head up for Farm-to-Table dinners and weekly Supper Clubs—in summer.

One of the first moves Ridgeline made last fall was to hire a new executive chef. For seven years prior to joining the GR team, Executive Chef Liana Aghajanian worked under the tutelage of the late chef Evan Treadwell (of James Beard Foundation fame) at the nearby luxury nordic skiing center Devil's Thumb Ranch. She's bringing clean, locally sourced foods to the mountain. It's been a hit. The team had to hire more waitstaff to keep up this summer. "I've worked in the small resort and boutique hotel business my entire career," says Aghajanian. "I want to change the status quo of the small ski resort dining experience. So many ski resorts see food as a commodity. There's a lack of passion behind it. And that's a disconnect because we're in the business of passion. With our food, we're creating a destination not an accommodation." This past June, Aghajanian won recognition for the turnaround she orchestrated when Colorado Ski Country USA awarded her their Double Diamond Award. This season, Aghajanian is cooking for 42 weddings.

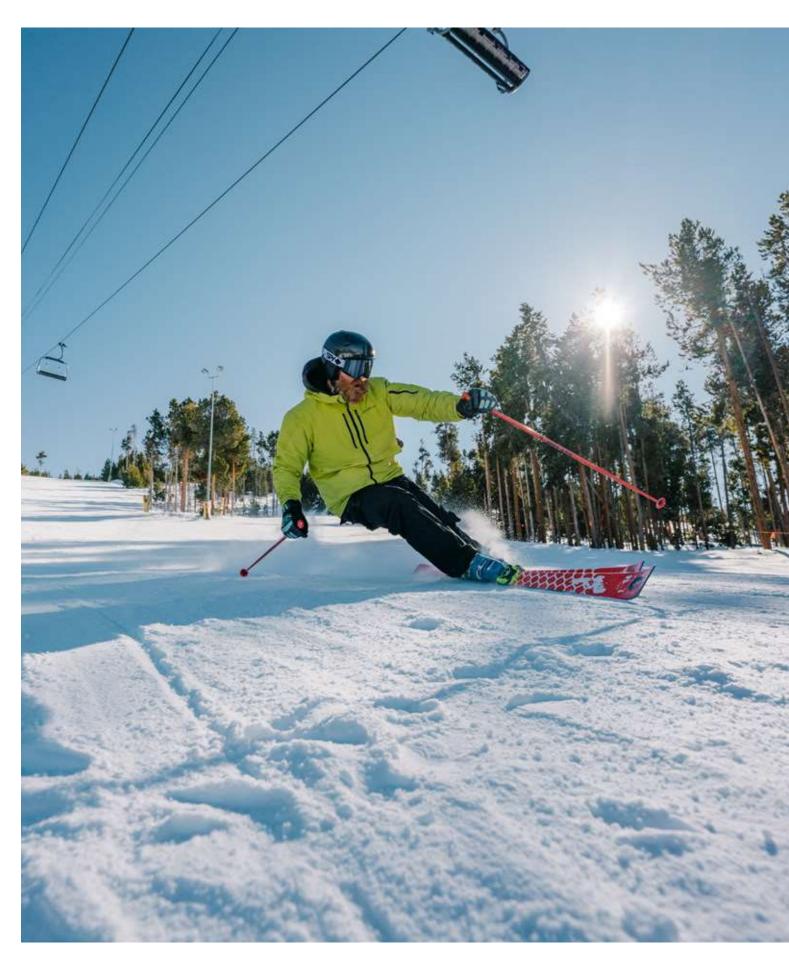
Which speaks to another way that the small operations are ditching the mom-and-pop mindset. In today's job market it's difficult to retain good people with year-round work. Beyond the added revenue that four season operations provide—it keeps a mountain's best people on the payroll. That's probably even more important for a mid-tier mountain. It's easy to forgive a surly liftie if you just skied 3,500 feet of untracked snow. It's harder when you've come to a mountain to escape the guerrilla warfare and anxiety of the big mountains, which can pack in 20,000 of your best buddies a day.

The importance of human-to-human interaction can't be overstated. When Shelby and Scott Kiernan were looking for a place to ease their nine-year-old son Lucas back into ski lessons, the cost, stress, and crowding of the big areas was a turnoff, so they looked to Granby Ranch instead. Placed in a group lesson with just one other nine-year-old, the instructor made him want to ski a second day. "He loved the instructor," says Shelby. "He was a young college-age guy. He

made it fun. And for a kid that isn't all that experienced on skis and tends to be cautious that made all the difference. But the cost is also important. We aren't the type of family that can buy a season pass and ski midweek all winter to avoid the crowds. We figured we could ski Granby and still get to work on Monday."

Which brings us back to the premise that for skiing to sustain itself there has to be more than the mega-pass, mega-resort play. As I wrote in my Deep Winter "prognosticator" column, the folks that run our mountain recreation industry aren't racist, in fact they're desperate to increase diversity, but the costs and psychological barriers to entry of the current big resort playbook set up a form of systemic racism The cheap season pass model favors those with the proximity and resources to ski 20-days plus. For new users, breaking into skiing and snowboarding and everything that comes with that lifestyle is harder "There seem to be two models in the mountain destination business right now," says Kent Sharp, the President and CEO of the 63-yearold ski area planning outfit SE Group. "The big company's mode is to discount the season pass product and make it up in volume As that moves forward, the demands for evermore skiers will only increase. The other model goes like this: 'I want to provide value for my customers. And that value doesn't have to mean 5,000 vertical feet of skiing or a Whistler style bike park."

For my part, my brother and I grew up skiing a few weekends and holidays a winter at a tiny hill in New Hampshire called Black Mountain—1,100 feet of vertical. Along with a gang of kids in torm snow pants and ski swap gear, we spent too many days trying to jump over a creek, but figured out how to turn as well. My parents had to save for the lift tickets, but they made it happen. In middle school, my folks signed me up for an after school ski bus that ran six weeks each winter. The destination? Mount Tom, Massachusetts, all 680 vertical feet of it. To my classmates and I, the place was enormous, especially at night under the lights. After the lessons, we all got to ski together. It was that kind freedom that made me a lifer. The size of a mountain doesn't matter all that much. What matters is if it feels like home. My hope is that we have enough skiers savvy enough to recognise that—and do something about it—before we're left with nothing but mega-resorts.





Get With the Plan

Want to know what's next for Granby Ranch? It won't happen without your input.

Back in skiing's cowboy era, owner-operators were famous for their ad hoc ways, stringing up lifts like Christmas lights, and erecting base lodges like they were pitching tents. Little thought was spared for the skill levels of guests, access to facilities, and the flow of skiers, pedestrians, and vehicles. Bikes weren't even a consideration.

Take the base of Granby Ranch for example. Like a miniature Whistler Blackcomb, it's essentially two disjointed mountains connected by a void. While it needs to serve a community of 5,000 homes and day visitors, the base area lacks a central gathering spot. There's no place for kids to swim or monkey around in summer; no obvious meetup locations; no bakery for the morning's doughnuts. Nothing anchors the square. Granby Ranch wasn't so much planned as it was grown wild.

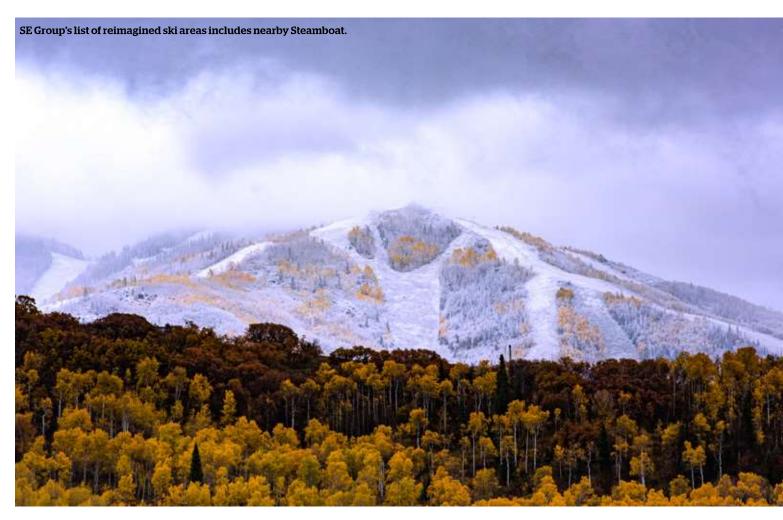
Now enter SE Group, which was the first company in the world to plan, design, and build ski areas, and has envisioned more than 2,500 of them. SE Group—it dates to 1958—was also a leader in engaging with communities, environmentalists, and land managers, aspiring to get mountain planning right for the long haul. That's not hyperbole: In the 1970s, SE Group envisioned Deer Valley. Today, Deer Valley, North America's top resort in delivering a customer-centric experience, is putting the finishing touches on that vision. The

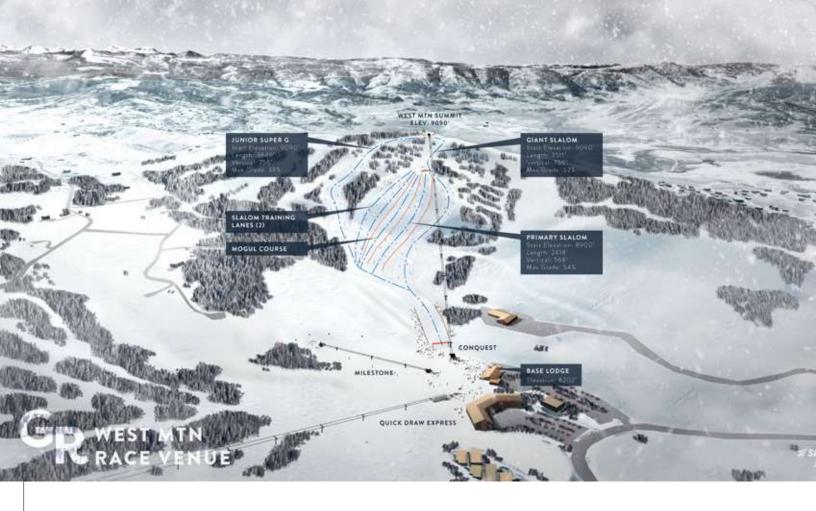
new vision for Steamboat? That's an SE Group project. So too with the revitalization of Cannon Mountain, New Hampshire, and the Alpine Training Center on its sister hill Mittersill Alpine Resort.

At Granby Ranch, SE Group is in the initial concept phase of a plan to anchor the base area while improving flow. Simultaneously, SE Group is mapping out a new competition venue (See Bode Story) and conceptualizing new facilities and resort amenities.

As the plans gel, SE Group and the Granby Ranch team will reach out to the community, carefully consider the environment, and build a longterm vision of the mountain and its facilities. And, oh yeah, all those improvements to the guest experience won't come at the expense of the small-mountain atmosphere that people love Granby Ranch for.

"Smaller ski resorts are way more important today than they were even 10 years ago," says SE Group Lead Ski Area Designer Chris Cushing who is overseeing the Granby Ranch project. "For a lot of people, the big resort experience is just too much. We need more intimate places like Granby Ranch where guests can get to know the staff and let the kids roam. People want to feel comfortable. That's what we're trying to build on at Granby Ranch."





Racers On Course

A new West Mountain competition venue designed in part by SE Group consultant Bode Miller will soon draw the world's elite athletes—and kids from around North America.

Compression turns, double fall lines, flats, steep off-camber corners... if you were designing a new ski run for 80 percent of the skiing public, those are exactly the features you'd want to avoid.

Ski racers are not the skiing public. If the goal is to produce a generation of skiers able to perform well on the national and international



level, you need to challenge them. "I visited Granby Ranch last winter for a ski company demo day and heard about their plans to add snowmaking on West Mountain," says Bode. "I immediately recognized what a competition venue at this altitude could do for racing. There's enough terrain variability for high-level technical skiing."

Now enter the ski area envisioning firm, SE Group (see story at left), which, with Bode's inputhe's a consultant—has designed the plans for a national level training and competition venue on West Mountain. A lot goes into

it. For every level of competition there's a corresponding International Ski Federation (FIS) "homologation" (certification) that must be met. Take

the eventual lighting for example. To light an FIS course you can't have competitors moving through bright light to dim, so the light poles get stacked up. Instead of high-speed chairs, racers get quick surface lifts. As for the four slalom runs and one convertible mogul run—"lanes" in race-speak—the goal is to earn the highest FIS certification the pitch allows. Middle Park's very own Chris "Seadog" Seaman, a legend in the world of FIS and Olympic level moguls course development, is overseeing the bump venue. The facilities will be capable of hosting events like the World Pro Ski Tour. "As important as it is to host elite racing events," says Granby Ranch General Manager Jace Wirth, "we also have a greater objective, to develop Grand County kids into 2034 Winter Olympians."

Even snowmaking is different with racing. For the public, the lighter and drier you can make snow the better. That's easy in the cold temps of Granby Ranch. But racers need harder and wetter snow. "It's fun working on competition venues," says SE Group Director of Mountain Planning Peter Williams, who has designed race hills all over the world including at the Utah Olympic Park. "By intentionally making the skiing harder, you do the opposite of what you would do for a beginner or intermediate run at a big resort. We'll have a ton of high quality competition skiing."

And it's coming soon. With the snowmaking install happening now, the West Mountain venue will be welcoming athletes by this winter. "I grew up racing a small venue and did pretty well," says Bode. "With slalom especially, you don't need massive mountains, it's about the frequency of runs through gates. Some of the best racers in the world come from mountains like Granby Ranch."



A Higher Calling

If you see the Military to the Mountain crew on the hill this winter, give them a high five.

"At one time, the veterans we ski and snowboard with in the Military to the Mountain (M2M) program were perceived as 'broken,'" says M2M co-founder Roy Tuscany. "And because they might be missing limbs or suffering from severe PTSD, they might have believed it too. But when they finish nine weeks of physical and mental conditioning, and cap it with a week of skiing and snowboarding, they return to their daily lives whole. They aren't broken.

And in my mind they never were."

If you were lucky enough to ski with the 10 veterans last winter on

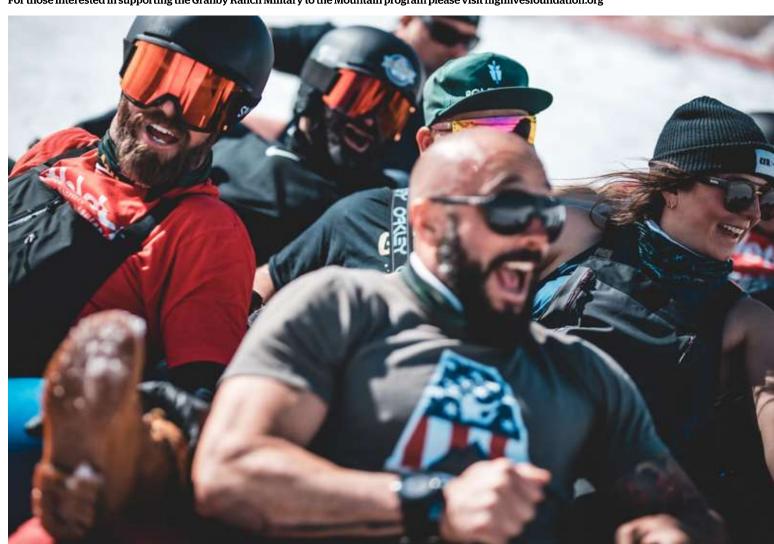
Granby Ranch, you'd surely concur. Here's the quick background: When Ridgeline Executive Group (the management company operating Granby Ranch) Founding Partner Andy Wirth was with Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows, Wirth, Tuscany (the founder of the adaptive sports center High Fives), and former NFLer David Vobora were brainstorming how to give back to those that sacrificed for us. They came up with a special pass program, the proceeds of which paid for 22 veterans a year to attend a nine week winter sports conditioning camp at Vobora's Adaptive Training Foundation

center in Texas. Strong as hell and mentally prepared to take on an entirely new challenge, the veterans topped off the training with a week of shredding on sitskis, outriggers, and prosthetics—whatever it takes—and as Tuscany would put it, reveling in the stoke of it all. Military to the Mountain was born. The Squaw event is heading into its sixth season.

Last winter, M2M debuted at Granby Ranch. In fact, paired up with High Fives, Granby Ranch ski instructors, a team of coaches from Winter Park's famed National Sports Center for the Disabled, plus 10 veterans, the crew took over the mountain—hooting and hollering the entire time. Each veteran completed the entire program. Undoubtedly, a few will come back to serve as 10 week mentors to the next class. Some will develop a passion for skiing and snowboarding. If so, M2M will buy the gear. One graduate is headed to the Paralympics.

In the end, though, it's not really about skiing: "The byproduct of sport is community," says Tuscany. "And it's the community and connections we make that transform the lives of everyone involved."

The 2022 Granby Ranch Military to the Mountain program is scheduled for March 26 through April 3. High Fives Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. For those interested in supporting the Granby Ranch Military to the Mountain program please visit highfives foundation.org





If you're a Granby Ranch fan, by now you know that the customer is the focus of the experience. So why not celebrate that with a free concert series that locals, weekenders, and new visitors to Granby Ranch can all partake in?

That was the idea behind the Rocky Mountain Music Series, which brings Americana music to a relaxed venue where kids can learn to rope like cowboys, paint their faces like rodeo clowns, or just run free like kids are supposed to. For the inaugural concert, more than 1,500 folks got out dancing. For

the second show—Rising Appalachia on July 24th—2,000 were expected. The Paul Cauthen act will round out August. Next summer expect five concerts. The venue, which could comfortably accommodate 5,000, can handle it. "With the combo of coming out of Covid and this desire to convey to folks that Granby Ranch is for everyone, we thought a family-friendly music series was the right call," says Ridgeline Executive Group founder Andy Wirth.

No newbie to ski area events, Wirth has worked with legendary Bill Graham Presents

and was a key player in developing the first WinterWonderGrass and the Wanderlust Festivals. With Granby Ranch he wanted something that could resonate with nearly everyone. "Given the wide variety of tastes, selecting music can be challenging, but we think the lineup appeals to almost everyone." Look for Wirth teaching kids to rope cattle at the show. "At the first concert, the kids were lined up 10 deep for three hours. I'm not saying we did everything perfectly, but we got the fun factor right."

For more information visit granbyranch.com.





Double Diamond Cooking

As a snowboarder, Liana Aghajanian launches 40 foot kickers. As Granby Ranch's Executive Chef she's elevating food services to expert class too.

Want to get a photo of Granby Ranch Executive Chef Liana Aghajanian? She'll lead you to the pit smoker on the patio. That's because it's not just another pit smoker. It's a metaphor.

When Aghajanian took over the food and beverage offerings last fall, she knew she needed to improve the cuisine. But she wanted the menu to stand apart from the standardized fare at most ski areas. Aghajanian's decade in Grand County—she spent seven years cooking under James Beard chef Evan Treadwell at Devil's Thumb Ranch—guided her. "I had an instant vision of the pit smoker right on the patio," says Aghajanian. "We're not Vail or one of the I-70 resorts. We're rural. And that remoteness is part of our identity here. Grand County's history in agriculture predates skiing. We still have cattle country and small farms. I wanted to showcase quality smoked meats and locally sourced produce."

Now with a curated crew behind her, Aghajanian is delivering on that vision. But outside of urban areas, building a staff of culinary professionals can be challenging. Granby Ranch's sous-chef uprooted his family from the south to take the role. Now three out of his four kids are also working under Aghajanian. "I try to grow with the people around me," she says. "I turn dishwashers into prep cooks, and line cooks into chefs. That's the best way to ensure quality—when everyone knows every aspect of what we do."

This past June, Aghajanian was awarded the Double Diamond award as the food and beverage professional of the year by Colorado Ski Country USA. The trophy was an honor, but Aghajanian is more keen on turning the food service at Granby Ranch into a destination unto itself. It's happening: A customer recently told management that he drove up from Fort Collins—for the burger. That's a little weird, but it's a fine burger. "I think Granby Ranch is humble with our skiing and mountain biking offerings," says Aghajanian, "but I want people to overlook the lack of vertical and say, 'the food was amazing, and I want to go back because of that.' I also love the family focus of Granby Ranch. The kids' menu is put together with just as much passion as the adult menu. The business is built around kids."





Grand County kids belong on the hill.

Yet one more reason why small ski areas matter? The "other mother" role they play in raising children. Where else can kids be outdoors roaming free in nature without constant supervision these days?

To facilitate that on the local level, Granby Ranch offers three programs for the East and West Grand School District: Freeski Fridays (now including learn to ski/snowboard lessons); a restricted season pass for K-12 students for \$89; and a \$199 unrestricted pass. Also on offer? A joint school district/Granby Ranch physical education class complete with complimentary skiing, snowboarding, rentals, and lessons.

"I grew up skiing on Howelsen Hill in Steamboat," says Granby Ranch GM Jace Wirth. "You can't overstate how important it is for kids that are surrounded by a recreation economy to feel as though they belong too. It's not just about growing skiers, it's about growing the community. We're committed to getting every kid in Grand County that wants to lean to ski up on the hill."

That sentiment resonates with Brooke Dryden whose two kids Berkeley and Huntington took advantage of the Freeski Friday program almost without fail last winter. "I grew up skiing Mammoth," says Dryden, "and the [Mammoth] owner Dave McCoy always made sure that local kids could ski. When the new ownership took over Granby Ranch, we weren't sure what was going to happen. It's hard to make it in the mountains these days. We live in a multi-income, multicultural neighborhood here. It can look a little rough, but everyone really cares for each other. All the neighborhood kids took advantage of skiing on Fridays. With a lot of those families, the parents never skied—but now the kids are getting out on rental gear and taking lessons. It brings me to tears to talk about."



