



# Learning To.... At Hunter Mt. "Learning" is a gas!

By Chris Dehnel

*The Editor's Note: We all know the three trail classifications, and all three get their share of the publicity. After all, that big, old green run that meanders across the mountain is often touted on the trail map as the "longest run." The blues are considered the groomers' best friends. Guy sees a woman in the lodge with a "black diamonds are a girl's best friend" T-shirt and he is automatically in love. But what do the main trails do to the learning curve? We can sing all we want about a magic carpet ride, but it isn't necessarily a sweet tune. Learning is usually considered work, not glamour! Well, now SNOWEAST introduces a new series entitled "Learn-To," to take a look at what our resorts are doing for the beginner. Look for it in each issue.*

## Gas!

Add that exclamation point, as many are doing these days, and it becomes a four-letter word. A gallon of regular unleaded has cost more than four dollars in the New York Metropolitan area since late spring. In the preseason, Westchester and Fairfield Counties had been closer to five than four, and those in Connecticut dodged a serious bullet when its legislature in mid-June decided not to take a few cents on what is already one of the largest fuel tax burdens in the nation.

Speaking of mid-June, even traditionally cheap New Jersey cracked the four-dollar barrier.

Hunter Mountain, located in the Catskills and one of the closer resorts to the Metro area, watched it all unfold. When he held a management post at Hunter, industry veteran Rob Megnin said he looked on in horror as the price kept going up, the result of a wild commodities market.

But did he panic? Nah. Last spring, he used good old New York resourcefulness.

"I think it's put our Eastern Resorts in a better position," Rob says. "The cost to fly from JFK to LAX one way

in terms of fuel is \$35,000. What is it to Denver? To Reno? To Salt Lake? The Western resorts have some elasticity in terms of high-end offerings, but we can certainly make people comfortable here. I think the gas prices are absolutely going to cause a windfall of activity in the East, especially in terms of families. After all, how many people drive by places like the Catskills while going north? We want that to stop."

So Hunter has put a little incentive on its Web site - a Gas Gauge. The intent is to show what it costs different vehicles to travel to various resorts as opposed to driving to Hunter.

Hunter is banking on a philosophy that the "Learn-To" people will want to stay closer to home, that is "Learn-To" as in Learn to Ski or Ride. In other-words, the new participants, the "Neverevers."

And Hunter wants to beat the National Ski Areas Association estimate that only 15 of every 100 introduced to skiing or snowboarding stay with the activity.

"We need to constantly ask ourselves 'why not more?'" Rob says. "One way to bring people into the sport is through value packs and season passes."



A ski career gets started right

To address this, Hunter offers "Single-Pak" and a "Try-Pak" programs at \$79 and \$129 (\$110.50 on e-Ski) respectively for the lower mountain lifts. These programs include equipment and lessons and are bargains compared to the single-day holiday adult lift ticket, which costs more than \$60 and does not include the equipment. "We think it's a good value," Hunter

public relations director Jessica Pezak says. "And we think the gas gauge is a great way to show skiers and riders the value in driving to Hunter."

"The industry needs to concentrate on programs that appeal to first-timers so that they want to continue skiing or riding," she says. "A lot of people begin the process, and then don't return for a long period of time. We want the new skier and rider to say, 'I can't wait to come back and improve.'"

At Hunter, Jessica says that creating an environment to make the new skier or snowboarder comfortable is the key. Hunter's dedicated Learning Center opened in 2002 with just that in mind.

"We made our learning center a one-stop location for skiers and riders looking to learn and improve," she says. "The snowsports learning process is historically a difficult one, with equipment rentals, ticket purchases, and lesson choices all part of a larger, sometimes overwhelming experience. Now beginners find a program and area specifically designed to help smooth transition from street to slope."

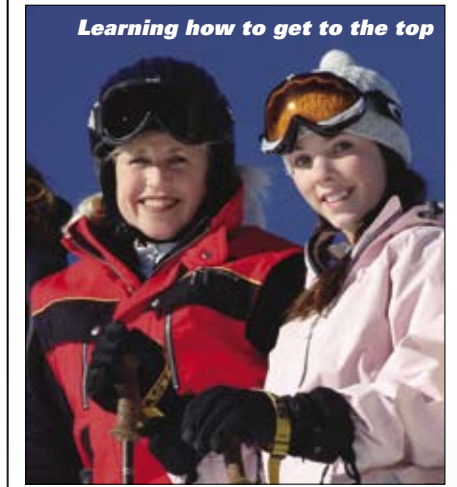
Adds Jessica, "It's a good program to bring a friend to. We all have a responsibility to help the sport grow, and programs like this support that."

But Hunter's success with first-timers comes with a catch. The upper mountain trails aren't the easiest in the East.

"New York and California generate more skier days than any other



Beginners become experts!



Learning how to get to the top

states by far," Rob says. "As with many others, Hunter exports many of their customers to New England, Colorado, Lake Tahoe and Salt Lake. But with the gas prices the way they are, people should be more inclined to stay with Hunter."

Jessica admits the upper mountain could make the intermediates nervous. But, she adds, skiers and riders should not be afraid to go back to where it all started, the Learning Center.

"Some of our guests can find a diamond trail is a giant step from the more forgiving greens and blues and we are prepared to help with the transition. Our private lessons cater to each skier's and rider's skills," Jessica says. "Hunter also offers camps and workshops to build specific skills."

Bottom line? Making skiing and riding a constant, and fun, learning process is paramount.

"We hope that when a skier or rider comes to Hunter, they set their sights to our higher-level terrain," she says. "For someone to start on Hunter One and progress up to the Huega Express diamond trail is a tremendous triumph."

And, according to the gas gauge, a more economical one too. ❄️



Hunter Mountain's dedicated Learning Center and area