



# Peak performance



By Alexandra Skinner-Reynolds

A busy Kamloops ski resort embarks on an injury-prevention and return-to-work path — with profitable results.

**S**ean Caira has worked at Sun Peaks Resort for the past three years. At 21, he's an expert skier and avid outdoorsman. From October to April, he works as a ski patroller, and in the summer months, he patrols the mountains on bike.

Caira doesn't remember a few years back when Sun Peaks was facing serious challenges due to rising employee injury rates and increasing claim costs. He only knows the Sun Peaks of today — a resort diligent about continually improving and monitoring employee safety practices. And a resort that has saved \$50,000 to \$75,000 in claim costs as a direct result of these measures.

But it wasn't always that way.

## Mountain resort battles high injury rate

In 2007, Sun Peaks received a warning letter and was facing a stiff penalty from WorkSafeBC. "We were watching our injury rates go higher and higher, and everyone from senior management on down took ownership of the problem," says Ken Hammell, resort risk management and safety programs director.

Hammell could see what they were up against. More than 500 young, seasonal employees come to the mountain every winter. The combination of youthful inexperience and high employee turnover results in "lots of growing pains" for the resort, says WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Patrick Davie.

◀ **Ken Hammell, risk management and safety programs director, and Sean Caira, ski/bike patroller, atop Sun Peaks prior to ski season**

It's no surprise that Sun Peaks saw more serious injuries taking place over the winter: knee, wrist, and shoulder injuries occurring while employees were skiing or snowboarding on shift.

Davie says Sun Peaks' high injury rate was also directly related to accident investigations and reporting procedures that didn't accurately determine causes and remedies. "The resort kept seeing the same types of accidents. They needed a concrete plan, but first they needed to figure out where and when the problems were occurring. Management sat down, went through the accident investigation reports, and started making connections."

### Ski hill employees urged to take fewer risks

Accident rates were highest among ski school, ski patrol, and lift operations employees, so managers went to the ski hill to watch employees on the job. Department supervisors in all sectors – from rental retail to snow maintenance – were encouraged to pay attention to daily operations and report back on possible high-risk activities.

One example of such activities, Davie says, was the fact that some ski school instructors were guiding young skiers down the slopes between their legs – a common ski school technique, but a potentially risky one. "If the child falls, the instructor often goes down too, resulting in possible injury." After observing this practice, ski school employees were reminded to use the safer alternative of holding a pole to guide young skiers.

Injuries had also occurred when lift operators were skiing or boarding down advanced runs while on shift. New policies mean mountain employees have to stick to designated low-level runs when coming off shift or moving between job sites.

According to Caira, employees keep each other accountable when it comes to safety protocol. If an employee were to witness

a staff member coming down an advanced run while on shift – and Caira admits this could happen – he says, "I would feel comfortable going to that employee saying, 'Hey, you shouldn't be doing that.'"

### Managers promote cooperative approach to safety

Hammell says the resort's efforts to create more open lines of communication, and "to give employees the support they need to do their jobs safely" is a big part of Sun Peaks' new safety culture. "We make sure incidents are fully investigated and the causes communicated, so they don't reoccur."

Weekly safety meetings in all divisions of the resort – from its lift operations to its food and beverage section – ensure employees are aware of potential

risks specific to their jobs. And these meetings allow employees to report and learn from any "close calls" that take place throughout the week.

To address the work time lost due to injuries, Sun Peaks has also created a solid return-to-work program – a move that not only keeps employees connected to the workforce through modified duties, but also reduces claim costs, says Michael Paine, Kamloops-based account manager for WorkSafeBC. Hammell cites a supportive working rapport with WorkSafeBC – including

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– WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer  
Patrick Davie

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Sun Peaks in winter (Ian Stathers photo)




◀ Sean Caira, a ski/bike patroller for Sun Peaks Resort, near Kamloops  
— photos by Adam Stein

informative board workshops – as important for supporting such on-mountain safety initiatives.



From Caira’s point of view, Sun Peaks’ ski patrol injury rates are extremely low, given the nature of the work. And he’s right. According to Davie, in 2007, Sun Peaks had 10–15 lost-time



claims from work-related injuries. Between January and June 2009, the resort had two.

Hammell and Davie credit the joint efforts of managers, supervisors, and lead hands for Sun Peaks’ improved safety record. “Everyone got on board on all levels, from senior management to ski patrol. We saw that together we could be a catalyst for change,” Davie says. “It’s exciting to see good things happening.”

Most importantly, employees are on board. Caira says he plans to stay at Sun Peaks for at least a few more years. “I like working with like-minded people who enjoy the outdoors and don’t want to be tied to a desk all day,” he says. “Staying safe is just a bonus.” 

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