


# heart and soul

the elusive groomers at the center of your ski & ride experience



After a long day of skiing or riding, most of us kick off our boots and settle in with a tasty beverage by the fire. We talk of amazing runs through the glades, spectacular wipe-outs under the lift, and sweet turns on corduroy. As the sky darkens, we may look out the window toward the mountain and see a string of lights dancing on the trails. Those lights are the headlights of the “kitties,” as referred to by some locals, the tracked vehicles or “snow cats” piloted by the resort’s grooming staff who nightly commence their work on Smugglers’ three mountains.

by kirsten moore



## Did you know?

The term "snow cat" developed from the 1946 trademark filed by the Tucker Sno-Cat Corporation, one of the early tracked vehicle manufacturers that is still in business today.

A winch cat is a snow cat that uses a winch cable to ascend and descend steep terrain. At Smuggs, winch cats will sometimes groom Upper Pipeline, Upper Bootlegger, and occasionally Snakebite and Upper Fis as conditions require.

Mike McAdoo, now Smugglers' terrain park manager, tied for first place in the 2006 Eastern PhatCat Challenge, a competition testing the skills of eastern ski resort grooming operators.

It's easy to forget that as we're ending our days of skiing and riding, the day is just beginning for the groomers. Grooming is a key part of the operations of most resorts, allowing more terrain to be opened up and enjoyed by a greater spread of ability levels. It's at the very soul of a positive experience for many skiers and riders, from beginners starting out at Sir Henry's on Morse Mountain to experts carving their way down Snakebite on Sterling or FIS on Madonna.

For the groomers, going to work in the dark and going home in the dark is a typical day at the office. To the general public, grooming may seem a daunting task and a bit overwhelming; after all, the crew is out there alone for hours, carefully navigating around the mountain at night in a big piece of machinery with an equally hefty price tag.

"There's roughly \$3 million running around on the hill each night," says grooming supervisor Nelson Cushing. "But it's the same old thing every night. The skiers push the snow down all day and we push it back up onto the trails all night. Just have to make sure there's enough coffee," he says with a smile. He's not joking about the coffee — the groomers and lift mechanics go through about 8,700 cups of coffee in a season.

Cushing is an old pro in a snow cat. He began grooming in the 1960s, when groomers drove bulldozers to smooth the trails. He recalls, "We had two bulldozers back then. A John Deere 450 and a John Deere 350. It took two days to do Chilcoot. We can do in two hours now what we used to do in two days."

**"It's always a powder day in a cat!"**

Grooming was also a much colder experience in those days. Both bulldozers had heat, but one had a steel cab and the other was made of plywood with plexiglass windows — not exactly well insulated. The Tucker Sno-Cats of the 1970s weren't much better; as the snow would frost the windows, the driver would scrape a small peep-hole to see. Today's snow cats are far warmer,

better insulated and have specialized heated windshields to minimize frost and snow build-up.

Back in the "old days," the groomers would cover one mountain a week, grooming Rumrunner and Treasure on Sterling one week, and Chilcoot and the Madonna trails the next. Steve Wry, Smugglers' Director of Skiing Services, grew up skiing at Smuggs. He fondly recalls Saturday mornings on the top of Madonna: "We'd get to the top and race down Chilcoot when they'd groom

it. There was nothing like it. Now you can have that ski experience every day."

For some snow cat operators, grooming can be an experience similar to skiing. Dave Williamson, Smugglers' mountain manager, drives a snow cat often during the day to smooth out a closed trail in order to open it sooner, or to pack down a beginner trail during a big snowstorm.

"In a storm, on the steep stuff," he says, "it's like making first tracks skiing. You sail through there, and it's not as easy as you'd like. It can be a challenge some days. You want it to be good."

Matt Watson, a terrain park groomer, describes driving a snow cat as "like riding on a cloud." He quips, "It's always a powder day in a cat!"

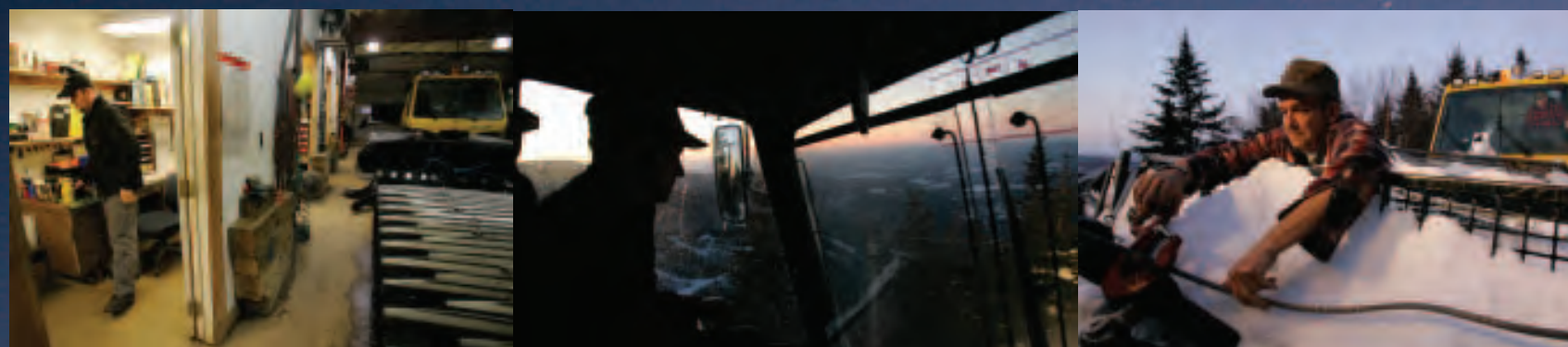
Powder days and heavy snowstorms can create rigorous challenges for grooming at night. In a job where the operator is already steering around lift towers, snowmaking guns, and the occasional hiking skier or snowboarder, blizzard conditions can be quite time consuming and demanding. The same challenges a skier or rider may face after a heavy storm — deep drifted snow and an uneven, unsteady base — are magnified in a snow cat. In this situation, Cushing explains, "We'll sometimes have to

make a few passes before the snow is packed down enough to work with." It can be quite the battle for the groomers, but as full-time groomer John Burton comments, "You just get in the zone. And go with it."

There are moments of beauty that make up for the long hours of painstaking work. Each groomer has a favorite memory that keeps them here, year after year. For Cushing, it's seeing the trees covered in rime glittering in



*The Tucker Sno-cat outside of the Top of the Notch building on Sterling, 1956*



the moonlight, and taking in the moonlit views. He says, "On top of Chilcoot there's a nice view, you can see all over, east to Morrisville, west to St. Albans. It's really nice in the moonlight." John Burton enjoys driving at night under a full moon. Driving during the day has its moments, too. "There's nothing like looking out over the valley on a powder day from Ruthie's," Dave Williamson declares, "Beautiful."

Nelson Cushing's son, Jason, has been grooming for several years, and also has some favorite places. "I like Upper Pipeline," he says, "because it's steep. One pass,

over the ledge and you're done. The flat trails aren't as much fun; they're boring, not much of a challenge like Pipeline or Bootleggers." The feeling of going over a ledge can be intimidating. As Steve Wry describes it, "You're looking straight down the trail, pitched with the nose of the cat beneath your feet."

Smugglers' groomers take great pride in their work, as well they should. They produce fine lines of pristine corduroy, smooth out uneven bumps and renovate icy patches into a perfect white carpet. They maneuver five-and-a-half ton machines with delicate control in tricky weather and

equally tricky mountain terrain, as howling winds and swirling snows envelope them. Grooming is an essential part of the mountain experience for skiers and riders. As you strap on your board or click into your bindings and start carving turns down Upper FIS, think back to those lights venturing up the mountain that you spotted the night before, and remember the snow cats and their drivers that helped create the soulful experience you'll enjoy today.

*Kirsten Moore lives in Jeffersonville and works year-round in Smugglers' Mountain Operations department. She grew up skiing at Smugglers', and joined the volunteer ski patrol in high school. She was a professional ski patroller for two years after graduating from the University of Vermont. Kiri joined the Mountain Ops team full-time in 2006. When she's not on the mountain skiing, it must be summertime and she's mountain or road biking, hiking, or playing volleyball in the local league.*

*Photos by Alden Pellett. Alden Pellett has been an award-winning photographer in Vermont for over 20 years. His images have appeared in magazines and publications like TIME, Newsweek, Yankee, Vermont Life, as well as on the front pages of the New York Times, Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and many more. He is currently editor/publisher of the online newspaper, Vermont Daily News (vermontdailynews.com)*