



“Grooming Schweitzer”

Dave White – Red Eye Ski Club, Eau Claire, WI

As I was sliding uncontrollably, headfirst, down the face of *Kaniksu*, a groomed vertical black diamond ski run at Schweitzer Mountain Resort in northern Idaho, several thoughts quickly crossed my mind. The first: What made me think I could actually ski this steep beast? The second: Would I still be in one piece when this ride comes to an agonizing stop? And finally: How in the world did they groom a ski run with a pitch this steep? There is no logical answer to the first question. The two witnesses to my crash, laughing at the bottom of the run, answered the second one.

To obtain an answer the third question took me to the offices of Dave Kulis, the Sales & Marketing Director, and to Michelle Hixson, the Senior Sales Manager at Schweitzer Mountain Resort. As the Trip Coordinator for the Red Eye Ski Club, I’ve crossed paths with both of them a few times at various travel shows, but now it was time to call in a special favor. I hoped that they could help me fulfill a “Bucket List” dream of mine - riding with one of the mountain snow groomers. Often times - *it’s more important who you know - than what you know*. Michelle’s phone call confirming the arrangements for my “special” groomer ride was further proof of that.

I could hardly wait for Thursday night. Arriving at the equipment barn, actually a huge metal pole building, I was introduced to Mitch. Mitch was the grooming supervisor that night, and he had arranged for me to ride with a driver named J.B. Surveying the expansive maintenance facility, and the fleet of seven, wide-tracked Prinoth BR350 Grooming Cats, I figured this was going to be sweet. When I was introduced to J.B. it became evident that they had decided to put me on the winch groomer cat. The winch groomer is the snow cat that is specially equipped with a 2,500 foot spool of half inch steel cable and a control motor that is used to keep the entire cat from sliding uncontrollably down the snowy face of the mountain while grooming the really steep ski runs like *Kaniksu*. My excited anticipation took a nervous turn, but this is what I had come to see.

As we traversed up the mountain in Cat Groomer #16, I was bombarding J.B. with a million questions. “How many years have you been driving this winch cat? – Your family? – Any secret death wishes...?” It turns out that he’s about my age, and like me, his kids are all grown and have left the nest. He’s obviously enjoying the freedom that comes with that stage of life. He’s spent the last twelve winters grooming snow five nights a week at Schweitzer, most of that time driving the winch cat. He’s worked a variety of other jobs and spent last summer at a salmon canning factory in Alaska. I hadn’t thought about it much before, but grooming snow is obviously a seasonal occupation.

Winding our way up the mountain I couldn’t help but marvel at the constant manipulation of the blade at the front of the cat, gathering and moving the snow. Along with raising and lowering the blade, he

also tilted it left and right, and independently adjusted the blade's outer edges to gather snow and maintain a smooth grade with the adjacent corduroy's surface. All of this was accomplished with his right hand, utilizing the most complex joystick controller I've ever seen. That right hand was never still. While the sixteen-foot wide power tiller at the back of the cat was constantly churning up and laying down a four inch deep bed of smooth corduroy, his focus was on steering the cat with the pair of levers on the left armrest, and then meticulously manipulating the front blade with his right hand. Any mistakes with the front blade could result in bumps, holes, ruts, or worst of all – dangerous ridges in the corduroy. Perfect grooming was obviously a learned art.

As we approached a big steel post at the very top of *Kaniksu* I felt a knot starting to form in my stomach. I was pretty sure what was coming next. J.B. set the brake and then climbed out of the cat to attach the winch cable's grab hook to the steel anchor post. Back inside the cab, I'm sure he sensed my trepidation. "It won't be that bad" he said. Nonetheless, I tightened my seat belt, and prepared to control my fear of heights. The thrill of riding that 18,000 lb. machine straight over the edge of the mountain, restrained only by the steel winch cable being spooled out from the back of the cat, is indescribable. With the front of the cat being almost entirely glass, I was stunned by both the awesome straight down view and the gravitational forces pulling at my waist. Meanwhile, J.B. continued to calmly manipulate the front blade of the groomer and simultaneously control the speed of our descent.

When we got to the bottom of the steep drop, and turn around for the return climb back up the mountain, I'm compelled to ask the obvious question: "Has that winch cable ever snapped?" His facial expression told me I wasn't going to like the answer. Then he says, "Twice. Yep, the second time was just last week." The mental picture of this nine-ton machine spinning uncontrollably down the face of the mountain was not something I wanted to think about. Instead I used my cell phone to record a video clip and post it to my Facebook page, knowing that none of my friends would believe this story without visual proof.

We continued to work our way up and down *Kaniksu*, before moving on to repeat the same process grooming *Sundance*, *Pend Orielle*, and *Stiles*, all incredibly steep black diamond ski runs that required the use of the winch cable for grooming. Figuring that I'd probably had enough excitement for one night, J.B. radioed to another groomer operator named Allen, and made arrangements to transfer me back down the hill. As I climbed up into the next cat, the driver said, "I would never do that."

"Do what?" I asked.

"Drive that winch cat!" Then with a short pause and a smile, he continued, "Yep, I watched the headlights going round and round while that cat slid down the face of *Stiles* last week after the cable broke." I needed no further explanation.

A relative newcomer, Allen had been driving the snow cat groomers since November. His operating technique and driving style were a little different than J.B.'s, but equally effective at grooming snow on the more familiar intermediate and beginner ski trails located closer to the bottom of the mountain. When we reached the base, I thanked him for the awesome opportunity to experience snow grooming

first hand, and then I headed back to my room at Selkirk Lodge with a far greater appreciation for what it takes to groom perfect white corduroy on those steep black diamond trails.

“Bucket List”: Riding Snow Groomer, check...

