

GOING DOWNHILL FAST

Senior skiers prop up the industry, and at Copper Mountain, they roll deep.

By Scott Yorko

"IF YOU HAD A METAL DETECTOR, IT'D GO CRAZY IN THIS ROOM," says Adele with a nod toward a group of nearby skiers last March. Her gang members were unmistak-

able. They gathered tightly in the cafeteria, huddled and shouting over one another, squinting at cell phones and listing off injuries they'd sustained over the years: Seven of eight had hip replacements, one with a spinal stenosis, and one had back surgery and an aortic valve pacemaker installed last year. Almost everyone had knee replacements.

Made up of Summit County, Colo., locals and some snowbirds, the Over the Hill Gang is Copper Mountain's official 50-plus ski group and longest-running on-mountain program since its inauguration in 1976. (Pope John XXIII and President Gerald Ford were made honorary members in the 1980s.) This morning, the group is joined by some Front Range weekenders and other first-time guests traveling the country, looking to ski with an enthusiastic community of folks in their age and skill bracket. Everyone dons their team colors (bright for visibility) to hit the slopes, refusing coffee refills so as not to have to pee again.

Now boasting around 300 members, the OHG provides four weekly days of guided resort skiing for six skill levels,

access to the ski school line, and quick, helpful tips throughout the day.

"One of the issues for older skiers is finding others with whom they can ski," says Jon Weisberg, the publisher and editor of SeniorsSkiing.com. He's happily stepped out from his morning gym workout in Salt Lake City to talk skiing. "People age out of the sport; some decide to trade boards for beach chairs, others hit their expiration dates ... But in the U.S., skiers and boarders over 52 years old still comprise 20 percent of the market and ski five times the national average." Skiing together in a group isn't just more fun, he says, it's less dangerous, especially with age.

There are more than 20 OHG members in their 80s, although once they're bundled up, it's hard to tell who the octogenarians are by the way they ski. In Club Decline—an upper-tier ability group—everyone makes smooth turns with precision and no unnecessary effort. A few ladies who can barely carry their lunch trays are hard to keep up with as they slice through choppy crud.

"So many people muscle their skiing to overcome lack of skill," says Steve Hultquist, a 61-year-old guide who skis





about 20 days a year with the OHG, sometimes racking up to 25,000 vertical feet in a day. He co-authored a book about the group in 2018 entitled "Peak Performers" with club co-founder Moe Mosley. "We try to teach members how to ski more efficiently so that they can ski longer in the day and in life." He stops Club Decline mid-slope to yell a few notes through a wind squall: "Be in the middle of your foot. Let the deep snow know who's boss and give it some push. Don't forget to check uphill and be thankful for our working body parts. I'm inspired by you guys every day."

On the lift, Gale, 82, tells me she's been on skis since she was 10 years old. "But I really learned to ski in the OHG," she says. Gale likes skiing groomers with her best friend Barbara, although she skied bump runs bell-to-bell on her 80th birthday as a bucket list item. "The best skier on the mountain is the one having the most fun!" she reminds me before pushing off the chair and taking a bump line down Timber Ridge.

Most OHG members don't want full-on instruction—just occasional pointers and beta on the terrain and conditions—although the club's annual dues (\$449 for the standard membership, \$225 for the 80+ membership) cost less than one group lesson at the resort and still gets them discounts on lunch. Plenty of out-of-town visitors who meet the age requirement sign on for a day or a weekend to access these perks in addi-



tion to the camaraderie.

Copper's wealth groomed, fast terrain is the perfect spot for Dick, 81, to fulfill his dreams of starring in his own ski flicks. He's barking "GoPro, on. GoPro, ON!" at the camera mounted to his helmet while moving fast down a cat track. I ask him in the lift line what he normally does with the footage and he explains that it's all going on an external hard drive for now. "For watching later in life when I can't do this anymore," he says. "I'll be in the nursing home yelling 'Pass me the bedpan and turn on my ski videos!!'"

Before lunchtime, the entire club convenes at the top of Rendezvous for a memorial of Paul Kresge—the OHG foreman for over 20 years who died in a sailing accident on Lake Dillon in 2020. Covid kept them from gathering earlier, but the 75-plus person turnout is boisterous and the memories fresh as people laugh and cry while sharing stories of Paul. "We just have to keep doing this," says Paul's 72-year old sister Aleta, smiling through tears while giving her toast with sparkling cider. "We all made it through Covid because we're outside doing the thing we love together." She lost her brother in the same year she lost her partner and mother. She, like everyone else there, carries a sense of knowing how precious our time is. Finding joy wherever you can is all that matters at the end of the day.

This may explain why Judy, 78, peels



The dedicated members of Copper's Over the Hill Gang get after it most winter days. Portraits from top left: Wayne Umland, Erwin Gelland, Gail Schatz, and John Gramsas. Photos: Aaron Dodds



off from the group on their final lap to burn more runs on her own. "I'm passionate and this gives me my ski fix," she says. "I can't count on all of my other friends to ski with me all the time that I want to. My husband got old on me and doesn't ski anymore, so [the group] gives me friendships and fun."

Lorie, who joined six years ago and skis 100 days a year, echoes what plenty of other members like about it too: "This group saves marriages because you're not ditching or teaching your spouse or, even worse, bringing them down a run they don't want to do."

The Over the Hill Gang does more for relationships than just save them. Art, 76, and Heidi, 71, were both widowed when they met in Club Decline. They connected on shared interests like hiking in the fall colors as well as their grieving processes. They fell in love and have been partners since 2019, sharing a condo in nearby Frisco and recently merged their households into one in Boulder. "Out here, you can get cancer, lose your spouse, break your leg, and just keep going," says Heidi over après beers at JJ's pub, in the village, her smile beaming as if she just discovered the thrill of sliding downhill on snow that day. Moe Dickson, a former OHG guide who played music at one member's wedding, is on stage performing Paul Simon songs and other hits from his generation. "Sharing your favorite thing with your favorite person at this age is rare," Heidi says. She and Art saunter into the crowd of people still in their ski gear and slow dance to "My Girl." □