



A yurt at the base of the Casablanca Glade midway up the mountain will give riders and skiers a place to warm up and chill out between runs without having to head back to the base lodge. (Russ Dillingham photo)

## Cutting Casablanca

By Scott Thistle  
Special to the Irregular

DALLAS PLANTATION — Armed only with chainsaws and gusto, a small band of young sawyers — bonded by their passion for skiing and snowboarding, love of place and sense of adventure— have, over the past few weeks, created on Saddleback Mountain what aims to be the largest ski-able forest glade in New England.

“There are other glades out there,” says Conrad Klefos, the resort’s director of marketing. “But this is big.”

The 44-plus acres of once jungle-dense mountainside forest, now dubbed the Casablanca Glade, will offer those who play in and on the snow an experience like none they can find anywhere else in the state. Like other trails on the mountain, the glade is named after a fishing fly, not the movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

The thinning out of that section of forest to make it more navigable has long been a dream of local skiers and riders, said Jim Quimby, Saddleback’s mountain operations director.

“We’ve been talking about this glade for the last 10 years,” Quimby said. This fall, Saddleback decided to go for it. The resort hired 18 people, trained them on chain-saw operation and set them to the uphill task of carving a new market niche for the ski hill.

At times, all 18 have been working in a line stretched across the mountainside, pushing slowly uphill, essentially weeding the forest and making enough space for skiers and riders to negotiate the slope.

Sam Loud, one of eight sawyers working during the last push to polish and clean up portions of the glade on Monday, Nov. 9, was beaming with pride for the accomplishment. Loud, a Rangeley resident, said he was most impressed with how tight-knit the group of tree-cutters, who range in age from 19 to 30, have become.

“These are all local people and we are doing the best job we possibly can for our paying customers,” Loud said during a break with co-workers George Herbert, Tucker Blythe, Owen Cassidy and Melvin Shaw.

The physical work has been among of the hardest Loud and the others have done, and most said they were in the best shape of their lives.

The 10-hour days, much of it hiking uphill or working on a slope with a running saw, have gradually become easier. The progression of the crews’ overall fitness and safety was something planners of the venture considered.

“We knew as they started out things would be level and flat, gradually getting steeper, giving them a chance to build up stamina over time,” Quimby said.

The crews’ day begins with a safety discussion and a hike uphill, often in a single column, with each worker carrying about 60 pounds of saw, fuel and other equipment. They have worked in rain and in six inches of snow.

Some days have been better than others, Cassidy said. From getting snow down their backs and necks with every tree they touched to working in the pouring rain, the crews have stayed safe by watching out for each other and being cautious.

Herbert said he had lost 15 pounds on the job. “And we don’t know where it goes, because he eats like a horse,” Loud said, drawing a laugh from the group.

The sawyers work from a daily base camp, where they often have a small fire crackling to warm up and dry out.

They have befriended a trio of Canada jays, which visit them during breaks and take snacks from their hands. Loud said that according to the Maine folk stories and the film “Dead River Rough Cut,” the birds are supposedly the spirits of loggers past, so the crews treat them with kindness.

They have learned to cut safely and to repair and sharpen their saws as needed, said Jared Emerson, the group’s on-hill supervisor.

Emerson’s job includes scouting ahead, flagging trees to cut and visualizing how the route will work with snow. He cuts, too, and sharpens and repairs saws as needed. He

also will hike in and out to re-supply or fetch parts, he said.

Usually, two crews work seven-day weeks, the larger working Monday through Thursday and the smaller on weekends. Starting in mid-September, they were hoping to finish by mid-November.

The work done this past summer will continue next year and the resort is hoping to install another new lift in 2010 if possible.

The crews have cut through many dense areas, but some islands of thick forest have been left to help guide and direct skiers. Some patches that were going to take too long to cut efficiently were also left.

The crews also have built occasional terrain features, such as launch pads, incorporated into natural ledge and wooden rail slides, intended for thrill-seeking snowboarders and freestyle skiers.

Klefos said building a glade is a cost-effective way for ski resorts to add a new element that many guests will enjoy, but it serves another purpose for ski area operations. A glade, because it typically takes longer to navigate than a traditionally cleared ski run, can ease the pressure on a chairlift line by keeping more riders and skiers on the mountain longer.

As part of the fall work, the resort has added a new warming yurt at the base of the Kennebago Quad chairlift, which services the new glade. The yurt means skiers will not have to return to the base lodge for warming, food or beverages, and it will give them more time in the glade when it’s open, Klefos said.

Part of the job satisfaction for the sawyers is building something that they know will be used by generations of snow enthusiasts, Loud said. Others said they liked that idea but also liked the idea of skiing and riding in the glade themselves.

“We are getting to create something we will use,” Herbert said, smiling.

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