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Olympic Change in a Patch of Paradise

RIDING WITHOUT SLEDS AT CALLAGHAN LODGE

WORDS BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI | PHOTOS BY CHRIS ANKENY

It was bluebird in Whistler, but Jonaven Moore was lagging and Scott Newsome was late. Our sleds were revving, with splits racked, duffels packed, and Crown safely stashed for the ride. Three cold February feet had settled in a gated touring reserve 22 clicks up the trail, but this morning's start was rough. We were reworking logistics at the staging area with Brad Sills, the heart and soul of Callaghan Lodge. Brad was gripped at our professional disorder.

Delicate cash and trade negotiations convinced Callaghan to let a crew more comfortable with floor space than featherbeds occupy its Norwegian lodge for four days. The trip had nearly fallen apart at every stage, and a delayed start meant we were burning blue as Moore was finding a dogsitter and Newsome was stuck in morning rush hour after an all-night drive from the Interior. We tacked a note on the gate and hit the road in a caravan, hoping this trip would turn smooth by noon.

Even at this early weekday hour, we shared the start zone with at least a dozen other sled-decked trucks with eyes on Callaghan. This spot is no Whistler secret, and it gets hammered fast. Conservative government estimates place use at 6,000 snow-machine user days per year in Callaghan, while the local snowmobile club counters with peak weekend numbers at 500 per day, three-quarters packing ski or shred gear. However, use is about to shift, as Olympic-scale transition is shutting this zone down.

"The Callaghan is one of the best areas in the valley, and shutting it down will create animosity and make a lot of people mad," says Dave Basterrechea, a local since 1998, owner of Cheetah Factory Racing and the third pro rider in our crew. "I think it will be violent, even. There will be lots of confrontations and issues because it has been open for so long and

everyone expects it to be open. Because of the Olympics, they kind of shut it down without really telling anyone."

Immminent arrival of 2010 is the root of all change in Whistler, and Callaghan is a microcosm of the backcountry future. Regional visitation—both during and after the Olympic moment—is being pushed hard by provincial ministries with big tourism dollars at stake. Municipal government, local green groups and commercial backcountry operations are all angling for a piece. Public comment is one whisper in the wind, but influence from interests with time, money and lawyers has magnified the complexity of decisions that will impact Callaghan.

Eight clicks up the access at Alexander Falls, we spot a towering construction crane awaiting the spring melt. In two short seasons, this patch will sprout the \$130-million Whistler Nordic Venue, with a full biathlon facility, 90- and 120-metre kickers, three temporary 12,000-seat stadiums, a 10,000-square-foot daylodge and all related infrastructure. While Shaun White is lofting large on the North Shore, Flying Finns, Estonian biathletes and Canadians skilled at V2 will be going for gold in this venue.

The long-term vision for the valley has a Scando feel. Alexander Falls will be turned into a prime skinny-ski destination, with 50 kilometres of legacy two-tracks and visits projected at 60,000 spandex skier days per season. This drastic shift in the lower valley to a world-class Nordic destination will benefit Callaghan Country Wilderness Adventures, the multi-partner entity that owns the touring lodge, holds adjacent tenure and operates an Alexander Falls warming hut. But the Olympic footprint is large, and the whole valley will feel its collateral impact. →

By early 2008, this premeditated epicentre will be a different scene. For now, it is periodically quiet, with two-lane traffic racing for premium shots with the caption “Whistler backcountry.” Instead of joining the pro-am circus, this interchange is our cue to leave the local traffic behind. We bank left around a barrier and onto a privately maintained cat road that will lead us, 12 additional clicks, to Callaghan Lodge. But only after the gate is unlocked.

This public territory is open to all, but the access road is a private enterprise, so this groomed strip is kept guarded. To keep us from leaving a visible scar, we are escorted in and our guide jumps up to unlock the gate from the 1,000cc Yamaha trailering our gear. As we throttle on through, it’s as if we’re being velvet-roped into a VIP zone.

Unlike heavily hammered areas, this approach is smooth. The cat road slowly rises 1,800 additional feet under the watch of 450-year-old timber. We shut off at aptly named Conflict Lake, where stadium-sized vistas pan in every direction from the glacially carved, flat-bottomed valley. A consistent pitch rises to 7,800-foot points stacked with expansive bowls up top and ringed by hairy pillow lines below.

We are only one ridge distant from congested Callaghan Lake, but in this zone, not a single other party is within earshot. Tighter access, a tougher public approach and a hefty overnight rate keep visitation down, yet, through community effort, Sills has worked to keep motorized and non-motorized access segregated into neighbouring drainages. Mutual respect keeps this unspoken accord in place, which is no small feat with surrounding zones feeling mounting pressure.

“The Sea to Sky corridor has just exploded in terms of recreation. It’s just getting hammered. You’re getting weekends with 500 snowmobiles and no regulation at all—none, zero, zip. It’s bizarre,” Sills says. “What we are seeing is basically the management regimes that have been in place in much of the United States for probably 20 years. I think we are just starting to see those types of management plans and land zoning for various types of recreation.”

Sills has seen unchecked change with a local claim that traces back to a squatters camp on Fitzsimmons Creek. He found Callaghan while rotoring over the valley as a forest ranger in 1974, back when Whistler was still Alta Lake. The summer road to Callaghan Lake was built in 1967 for the proposed Olympic Valley ski area—the first of six ill-fated schemes to add lift access. The road made an approach from the highway possible. At first sight, Sills saw a paradise for self-powered recreation. In 1981, he started working with his partner, Nic Slater, for permission to build a ski-touring cabin.

Their first effort was rough, with a 14-by-16-foot cabin raised in 1982. In 1985, the partnership secured its first renewable two-year tenure, which was extended in 1995 to a 15-year commercial backcountry licence. This enabled Sills, a local contractor, to pull the trigger on new construction as neighbouring Callaghan Lake was gaining special status.

The area around the lake was designated a provincial park in 1997 due to its rare alpine standing in the coast range. Sills participated in the Protected Area Strategy Committee for three years to advocate for the designation. The lake was ripe for preservation, with Stage 9 old growth, horsetail waterfalls and species such as cougar, bear and goat populating the area. That griz sniffed around made it an even higher priority target for conservation.

Yet this zone became a haven for another crowd, due to other unique characteristics. The summer road facilitates an easy roost to photogenic Cirque Lake terrain, where shutters snap off shots on 3,000-foot Morning Glory runs and Hollywood Cliff hucks. The park boundary also bisects a route to the Round the World Tour on the Pemberton Icecap, a defined gas-powered corridor that mitigation initially kept open. But enforcement was lax, and with the media-fueled rise of the sled-accessed shred, impact rose dramatically.



Moore and Newsome, getting dumped on and loving it.



Dave B.—totally classic.

We are now climbing less dramatically after dropping duffels to be attended by Evan and Kristi, the lodge’s resident Aussie caretakers. To respect this quiet zone, we park sleds at the far end of the groomed loop. Unlike claustrophobic V-shaped valleys, a steady rise makes access in this southeast-trending valley ideal for a tour. We split and skin, while Basterrechea joins our knee-deep wallow on snowshoes.

The disadvantage of solitude is a fresh metre with not one track, which makes uphill progress glacial. The snow is “Utah cold” and “Baker deep,” which we learn that night is not unusual for this super-cooled catch basin. Receiving 50 per cent more pow than Whistler

is no snowbelt myth, and the reason is a track that forces storms to crest the cold, 7,000-foot ceiling of Powder Mountain’s icecap before being sucked down-slope into Callaghan.

Even in the chronically moist Coast Range, a rain crust in a Callaghan snow pit is rare. During our late-February trip, Callaghan Lodge’s snow stake reads 567 centimetres at 5,000 feet, while Whistler’s base depth sits at 380 centimetres, 1,800 feet higher. Coverage lasts late into May, and this prized and abundant natural resource puts Callaghan on both paid and poaching hit lists, which we realize when a heli breaks our silence before we level off on the first bench.

A Bell 212 is not a welcome sight when breaking trail. Watching 10 paid guests with a grand to burn snake your line is painful. It gets no easier the second or third time. We learn later that Whistler Heli-Skiing holds a section of overlapping tenure, but boundaries are a grey area in the backcountry. A gentleman’s agreement normally keeps paying guests in separate corners, but today looked too good to miss. Our consolation prize is thousands of untracked acres, but an hour in and only half-way up, mechanized envy is starting to show.

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Commercial operations with high-paying guests are also betting big on Olympic afterglow. In 2006, Whistler Blackcomb purchased Whistler Heli and its 494,000 acres of tenure. Locals speculate the real aim of pending closures is to privatize heli-lap areas feeling pressure from riders pushing deeper for fresh tracks. With powder being the newly sought-after natural resource, pushing sleds out to the margins is one solution that fits with the overriding master plan.

The pending three-year closure in Callaghan is officially due to Olympic construction, but this is where the story gets complicated. Sills recommended Callaghan as a Nordic venue to the bid committee in 1998 and championed the location throughout the process. The Callaghan Valley master plan, dictated by George McKay, laboriously evaluated the vested-interest issues from 1999 to 2003. When the bid went official in 2003, the Vancouver Organizing Committee and British Columbia's Ministry of Tourism, Sport and the Arts started throwing their government-backed weight into the valley.

But the Callaghan master plan was also a by-product of the ongoing Sea-to-Sky Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), which aims to section off the Whistler backcountry for specific winter use. A Sea-to-Sky Backcountry Winter Sharing Forum hammered out access between local user groups, but regulation did not follow recommendations. As part of a new government mandate, shutdowns are pending in areas such as Rainbow Mountain, Phelix Creek, Face Mountain and Upper Lillooet River. Callaghan now sits at the centre of this contentious LRMP map.

"One thing is the perception of it as a dirty sport," Basterrechea says later. "That's one small reason, but the major reason is the heli-ski operators and all the private-interest groups, who are all really organized together and, behind closed doors, are really able to manipulate what's going on through what they have with tenures that pay per person to go into the backcountry."

With not one group on our side, we are now feeling an upside to special designation, as Moore and Newsome catch our skintrack on lap 2. Newsome, the first certified snowboard member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, breaks alpine trail with a pace earned from big days of gain. As Basterrechea and Moore branch off to strap in, photographer Chris Ankeny and I strain lungs to follow Newsome's track to a point registering above 7,000 on the Nixon altimeter watch.

In low-angle light we are treated to a line of sight toward Powder Mountain and across the valley to tracked Whistler runs. Every heading here frames an immensity of scale that puts ski-area acreage to shame. From this perspective, conflict and contention have found a soothing moment of calm. Unlike the mad powder panic in other zones, we drop a three-grand line, untracked, at four in the afternoon, direct to our exclusive reservations on the valley floor.



Fortunately there's no dress code in this dining room.



This is how ice cubes look in the backcountry.

Five of us roll inside the yellow-cedar-and-Doug-fir structure to unlace boots and cluster gear in the drying room. Hot showers, hot apps and cold cans of Kokanee are waiting as we slide into a backcountry après relax in the fireside lounge after unpacking in private guest rooms. Woodworked detail, a commercial kitchen and semiformal dining room give the 5,000-square-foot lodge a regal character. Electricity is generated during peak hours, but propane lighting adds an after-hours glow.

Priced at a \$300 per person, per diem, Callaghan Lodge is a commercial enterprise. Construction started in 1996 and was no small effort, with airlift and snowcat transporting materials to the roadless location. Skilled local craftsman earned sweat equity by labouring, and Sills saw the project through to completion in 1998. A 2002 expansion added private-bath guest rooms, third-floor bathrooms and a lofted suite, which finalized the five-star rating.

For whatever reason, the place is far from packed, and the only party with reservations during this epic week is our lowbrow crew. Yet Kokanee cans on a white tablecloth and a steak dinner preserve a feeling of backcountry formality. We finish 'er off with chocolate mousse, kick the first case and trail off under down, with deep pillows on the mind.

Breakfast is on at seven, so four of us fuel up with coffee, while Moore sips green tea. The sky is falling at an inch per hour, so we settle on stratified lines out the back door.

One scenic skin across the creek, and we are deep in short stacks perfect for storm-day shooting. Snow is collecting 68-deep in the trees, and we stay entertained by blowing up overhead pillows.

A brown-bag lunch in the drying room refuels us for an afternoon push. Newsome sets a guide's track and Basterrechea keeps up on snowshoes, even after hiking the first pitch twice, due to a board left at the transition. Weather descends, so we drop in fast, using yesterday's heli turns for reference. Basterrechea and Moore bog down flat and posthole it home, delayed but on time for happy hour.

After chicken dinner, the first bottle of Crown is cracked in the lounge. Drinks are stiff and opinions strong between games of propane pong. In a head-to-head race, a sled always wins, but touring has a place. Even Newsome, who knows this valuable separation from guiding the Interior, will, by the final day, be angling to bring clients to Callaghan for a split. And with a buzz on, a fire raging and four days of fresh lines for everyone, no one here is complaining.

"Sleds can travel such huge areas that there just need to be some areas closer in to the highway, on fairly level ground, that people can enjoy without mechanization," Sills says. "There is a whole movement of sled skiers, and you and I have a huge amount of contact with that. It is significant, and it's sort of the new face of skiing. But the issue is that this has come about at the expense of the more traditional types of ski touring. People have to recognize that their behaviour affects other people." →



Scott Newsome might be a full-time guide, but he's no part-time shredder.

Even pre-split and pre-skinned, bluebird panic is our curious conduct on Day 3. We get out the door at sunrise, but it takes an hour to pick our line after circling the track to scope all possibilities. We skin across the lake and cycle a new pillow section before the group dynamic splits. Newsome charges a high line hard, while Basterrechea and Moore shoot laps in rock-show gardens with chatter indicating pro crews are elbowing for the lines over the crest.

Chris chases down an angle on Newsome before he drops an exposed line, and the fractured group reforms for lunch on the left ridge of the day's featured glacial drainage. In pairs, we skin for separate lines, Moore sticks a sketchy 40-footer cross-court on heelside, while Basterrechea and Newsome close it out in a sliver of light as shade shuts it down. Back again at happy hour, I pace myself with an exit interview on tap.

They saved the salmon for the boss, and the last meal is the best of the trip. Sills—who walked in with a case to break the ice—keeps us entertained with old-school stories of Twofer Night at The Boot (RIP), guiding angry women at the old critter-infested cabin, and being stalked by a cougar while grooming in the cat. He has guided change through process, even with swirling forces of Olympic development, tenure politics and government mandates. But he fought tirelessly for a vision that will keep this one perfect patch, for now, as it once was.

"To see the games here now is kind of like a culmination of what we longed for—that in this particular valley it would be seen that the best use for it would be skiing. And certainly the upper areas of Powder Mountain, Cayley and Brandywine, and all those places are still open for sled-skiing," Sills says. "I think it is good accommodation myself."

Not everyone is happy, and high-level decisions will create winners and losers in the Whistler backcountry, yet regulation has one entirely positive outcome for Callaghan. Neighbouring Brandywine will feel enormous pressure, and sled access is getting the shaft, but a new touring reserve will now be within skinning distance. With a character more approachable than the Garibaldi Neve or Spearhead Traverse, ancillary effect from an Olympic movement will reclaim a special place for those who shred with a different approach.



Dave B. loves pillow lines. Obviously.

As we crack the second bottle and savour our last night in paradise, it's clear the story is not simply black, white and green. Like the divided community's stance, our crew shares the same clashing attitudes about the personal effect of the 2010 train. Olympic ambition is trailing a huge wake, yet after seeing the 30-year view, a tradeoff between development and conservation seems the rational calculation in a Sea to Sky of relentless transformation.

We finish her off with an unauthorized mission and get a few short-stack seconds in the morning. A pillow-field sluff takes Moore for a ride and calls time on the trip. By afternoon, we are doubling out the gate and reclaiming shuttled gear from the staging area. In the lot, we are back among the local trucks that will get the boot next season. Balancing access, protection and progress while the world tunes in is no easy task. But our own loyalties are now conflicted since, in Callaghan, we have been shown a privileged glimpse of the future. 🍷



Jonaven Moore, doing what Jonaven Moore does best—you can figure it out.