

BELOW *A modest base area; yours for only a couple million dollars.

RIGHT *Shames local Talon Gillis splits the home-field uprights.



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The Shames Mountain Dilemma

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The scenic road up the long mountainous valley is suspiciously bare and the coastal evergreens are looking a little, well, green. Getting out of the car at the end of the road, I glance to the sky. It's raining, but I'm told it's snowing up top. Above the T-bar, the landscape transitions to white and Shames Mountain comes beautifully into focus. Pillowy drifts coat a collection of chutes just out of bounds that funnel back down to the lifts. No one is riding them. It is the kind of small, remote mountain spoken of in hushed tones, while concocting plans at four in the morning.

"Have you ever heard of Shames? We should go there."

"Yeah, it's supposed to be dope. But where is it?"

"I dunno, I think it's waaay up north."

And that's where the plans usually end. They shouldn't. The mountain gets an inordinate amount of snow—an average of more than 40 feet annually—and its two lifts, a rickety old two-seater and a T-bar, provide access to extensive backcountry. The vibe is friendly and locals are likely to share their favorite stash, rather than hoarding it for themselves. But this year the snow failed to materialize. Shames has been struggling financially for a number of years and the lack of snow meant a lack of riders.

If it's such a great place, why is it struggling? Well, for starters, it is a bit out of the way. The mountain is about 20 miles from the town of Terrace, BC, which is about 850 miles from Vancouver. The mountain has been for sale for three years at a cost of \$1.5 million and, so far, no serious buyer has stepped forward. Everyone has an idea of what might keep Shames alive—the addition of accommodations, new investors, multi-use mandates—but there is a pervading sense of uncertainty. Currently, two groups have concocted co-op strategies, but neither has gained serious traction.

The first, Shames Mountain Co-op, was founded by an American ex-pat living in Patagonia. Jamie Schectman's passion for all things mountainous led him to the idea of a co-op. Schectman is visiting his home hill in Lake Tahoe when I catch up with him, and he laments the scene there: "Lift tickets for \$88, \$14 hamburgers and a declining overall ski experience," he says wryly. It's places like Tahoe that led him to Shames, with its small-town vibe and community ideals.

"We started Shames Mountain Co-op to come together as a global ski community," he explains, "and prove that a ski area can be profitable while run in the best interests of the community, environment and guests." He hopes to sell shares in the co-op to enthusiasts from around the world, offering an opportunity for a rider from, say, Australia, to buy a piece of a hill in Canada. The rider then has incentive to get all of his buddies together and head across the pond to check out what is now his home turf. Ultimately, if the hill turns a profit, members of the co-op make money on their investment.

But while Schectman maintains his vision for positive change in the ski industry, not everyone shares his optimism that the for-profit

co-op is the answer to Shames' problems. A second group, Friends of Shames (FoS), grew out of concerns that Schectman's plan may not be the best answer. Consisting of residents from the hill's three neighboring communities, they are exploring the idea of a community-service cooperative—a nonprofit co-op. The difference is any surplus of money would go back into the hill, as opposed to the shareholders.

Darryl Tucker came to the region 13 years ago after hearing stories about Shames. Now he supports the basic goal of FoS: make sure the lifts keep turning. "The key to [Shames'] survival," he says, "is to rejuvenate the area and the interest. It needs to get its spark back." The current owners—a group of four locals—have invested 20 years of time, energy and money into keeping the mountain open. Now it's time for a new generation to step up.

According to a recent press release, "FoS is planning to incorporate as a nonprofit society, allowing us to be a legal entity that can seek charitable status throughout the business planning stage. As a nonprofit society, the FoS would also support the Community Services Co-operative plan that will own and operate Shames Mountain ski area." Essentially, the FoS model means the mountain would be locally owned, retaining one of Shames' most endearing traits: a community-first mentality.

Schectman has put Shames Mountain Co-op on hold—waiting for Friends of Shames to explore their vision for the hill—and is on the lookout for other areas in which he can try the co-op experiment. FoS is pushing forward with their planning and hopes to have a model on the table soon. Still, no one really knows what's going to happen to Shames Mountain. One thing is for sure: it's worth saving.

Can a co-op do the trick? Mad River Glen in Vermont has been running as a ski-only co-op hill for 15 years. Magic Mountain is attempting to do the same (see *frequency* TSJ #7.4), and community-run resorts like Vancouver Island, BC's Mount Cain have prospered. The co-op model definitely has potential, but it ultimately comes down to whether or not they can sell shares.

At the end of the day—the last of the season—I drift down toward the base heading for Galloway's, the base-area bar that waits patiently for a flood of happy riders. Floating past the snow-shrouded trees through another untouched line, I grin impulsively and hope that whatever the future holds for Shames, it includes much more of this. These co-ops present an enticing opportunity for Shames to become something unique—a whole new way of thinking about the business of riding. And when shares finally go on sale, I know I'll be first in line to buy my own small piece of a little northern mountain that I can call home. ▲

For more information on Shames and its various ownership plans, check out www.shamesmountain.com, www.shamesmntncoop.com, and www.friendsofshames.ca.