

The Alta Experience
Sam Howard Interview

Sam Howard: Well, I started in '86-'87 as a patrolman but I've worked at Alta since 1980.

Joey Prokop: What brought you – you're from Vermont – what brought you out here?

Sam Howard: I had a degree in geology and I'd made an agreement to go on a cross-country motorcycle trip with some other geology students. And about a week before I left, I wrecked my motorcycle. Spent all my money to fix it. Left town with less money than everyone else. And we went all through the West, all through Colorado and came here and went through the Grand Canyon and up the coast of California. And, uh, in Reno, I told 'em that I was gonna go to Salt Lake. I was gonna spend three days looking for a job, and if I couldn't find a job I'd meet them in Jackson Hole and they'd credit card me home and I'd get back to Vermont with no job and owing money. And on the third day, I got a job at the Rustler Lodge. So I didn't have to go home and I'm still here. It was a temporary Band-Aid that I never peeled off.

Joey Prokop: With that, that's a pretty common occurrence around here. I mean, like for me, I came out here on a one-month ski trip. I'm here 25 years later, still here.

Sam Howard: Right.

Joey Prokop: The thing is, what do you think about this area that kinda draws you in, that makes you wanna stay and do this?

Sam Howard: Well, I think that... Alta has a unique – uh – community feel compared to most ski areas. Where, uh, the ski area's one thing and the community is fractured by people that are only on vacation or are really not part of the community or might only be there for a year or two. Here, uh, the just incredible beauty of the mountains and abundant snow, uh, makes people stay that extra year and then the next thing they know they've fallen in love with it and they just can't leave. They're, uh, they uh... and a lot try to leave and

end up coming back a year or two later 'cause it's just somethin' that gets in your blood.

Joey Prokop: With that, let's talk a bit about, y'know, y'know you can see 'em on the mountain. You see people who ski, but then you know people that are skiers, and like, for you and your family, it's an important part, I mean, it's what you do. It's a real important part of your... talk about why, y'know, what drives you, what keeps you into the, kinda the ski lifestyle.

Sam Howard: Well, I think you've hit the nail on the head. There's the sport of skiing and, if you look at racing or, um, recreational skiing, a lot of people treat it as a sport and they're in the gym workin' out in the fall. And then there's mountain lifestyle and the ski lifestyle where, uh, even when the snow's gone, you're still up in the mountains hiking around or checking out different things, trying to go through a certain spot you've never been to, and . . . I think the constant change and, uh, the feeling of uh, ah, I don't know, the biting wind on your face and, uh, and, uh, the, the snow stingin' it and bein' on top lookin' down at everything is really what keeps people goin'. And, uh, a sport's a sport, people pick up one sport every other week sometimes and g-grow tired of it, but a lifestyle's different. And, and, I think that's what keeps people goin', is they just love the feeling of being out here and being on top and seein' Mother Nature go at it. It's wonderful.

Joey Prokop: Talk a bit about, y'know, Alta has a lot of, I mean, one of the things that I really enjoy about comin' up here is when it's whippin' the wind's whippin' at you 50 miles an hour and the west face is blowin' flat and you're just, y'know, can make a turn anywhere you want to go, and then another day it's dumping, and just talk a little bit about the weather life cycle and how, I guess Alta kinda has its own little microclimate.

Sam Howard: Well, Alta does benefit quite a bit from the topography. Uh, the canyon channels a lot of storms that come out of the northwest, and, and they pick up moisture from the Great Salt Lake and it snows and snows and snows. And sometimes it'll still be clear downtown and you'll have a day or two more snow up here. They call it the "Alta Cloud" a lot of times. But for me to, uh, to be out in those

storms where it's bordering on, um, panic almost, uh, the, the road is in chaos, and and if you were downtown, driving on I-15, tryin' to get to work downtown, you'd be worried you were gonna make it and, and you'd never think in the back of your mind that someone was on a ridge up at 11,000 feet, uh, crawling around trying to control avalanche and just dealing with the storm with no protection other than some clothing. The adventure of that and, uh, the uh, I guess uncertainty in it, and, and, the just awesome power of the weather. It, it really, um, fills a big gap that a lot of ski areas and a lot of ski patrollers don't ever get to experience. They may be, uh, taking care of the injured or setting up the mountain, but they never do experience that, uh, avalanche control, the, uh, the weather, the uncertainty, uh, the watchin' out for your bros, the running a rescue, none of that, uh, comes into play for them.

Joey Prokop: Talk a little bit about, y'know, when we interviewed Jim Head he talked a bit about, y'know, you're on the ski patrol in this situation, in this area, some of the people, it's like, almost like you're in battle with them, y'know what I mean? They're people that they got your back and you got their back. Talk a little bit about the camaraderie of some of your, y'know, how your co-workers . . . how that all goes.

Sam Howard: Well, we're lucky in that we all get along and . . . I think the, um, what drives that mostly is there's a, uh, a large number of potential patrollers. We have applications from all over the world every year and, uh, we're able to select people, and generally they're people that have worked at Alta for a little bit, and we have some track record of 'em. We know who they are. They may have worked at one of the lodges or they may have been a cook somewhere, but, uh, we know what we're getting when we hire 'em and we make sure that they fit into our program, that they're uh. . . Not everyone wants to go out and be outdoors as much as we have to be outdoors, but, uh . . . With the large number of applicants we can filter out the ones that don't, and . . . I think, uh, the camaraderie comes down to communication in the end. Um, you're watchin' out for your back but everybody else is watchin' out for your back too and it's all done over the radio, really. Um, if somethin' happens somewhere, you're, uh, in the back of your mind figuring out what can you do to help them, even if it isn't show up on the scene, can you go down and land Life Flight

or can you go to make some phone calls or what can you do to keep them safe. And, uh, I think, uh, the more information we pass back and forth in the morning meetings and, uh, the more we talk about what's goin' on in the snowpack or what the weather's gonna do, it just. . . builds that camaraderie.

Joey Prokop: Take it from the serious side to the fun side and look at what you . . . You get to y'know, obviously there's the nuts and bolts of avalanche control and rescuin' people and controlling the mountain kinda thing, but you get to come up here and y'know, enjoy, enjoy what you do.

Sam Howard: Oh yeah.

Joey Prokop: I've seen you come down with a frickin' smile as, y'know, it's always, it's like omnipresent, y'know

Sam Howard: Yeah.

Joey Prokop: You enjoy it. Seems like you really . . . Talk about how you enjoy, like, the skiing aspect and being on the mountain aspect.

Sam Howard: Well . . . even as a little kid, I always wanted to ski, so enjoying skiing wasn't too bad. It wasn't too hard for me. When I was, uh, somewhere in high school I told my father, "Wouldn't it be great if you could ski every day?" And he said, "Well, you'd get sick of that. But, uh . . . and I took him for his word. He was a smart man, but after, after I started working here I realized, well, I'm not gonna get sick of that. I love to ski, and the better the skiing, the more you love it. And every day's different. You get up one morning and it's a beautiful day like today, uh, and it's warm out and it feels good to have your feet warm. And you get up another day and it's a blistering storm and you're out adventuring around in that thing trying to make, get the area open. And in the meantime, once you're done, you get to ski, and again, that's what, that's why I'm here. I love to ski, and I don't know if I could really quantify why. I think everyone does it for their own personal reasons, and for me, I just love goin' fast (laughs) and so . . .

Joey Prokop: Let's talk a little bit about, um, the boys. It's... I mean it's almost . . . y'know, I kinda casually know them from seein' em, like there's Grant or there's Neil, y'know, people can point 'em out. Y'know, they say the nut doesn't fall very far from the tree. Talk a bit about how those kids have, kinda, y'know, you've seen 'em from infants to now, y'know, they're really hard core, great skiers . . .

Sam Howard: Yeah, they love it too. Um, well, Susie and I have two boys, Grant, who's 11 and Neil, who's 16, and pretty much from the time they could walk, I got 'em on skis. I remember skiing around with diapers in my pocket and a kid on his skis, thinking, "Well, I got my priorities mixed up here. But I think what the kids see in skiing is, ah, is the independence. At a very young age, they're able to make decisions on their own. If you, if you go camping, uh, and you take your kids, very rarely do you go, "Anywhere within five miles of here will be fine." But that's what you do skiing. You let them wander off two or three miles from you, and they're making decisions on their own about where they wanna go and what they wanna do. And it builds a lot of confidence and, and, I think, a lot of self-reliance in the kids. Their, uh, their ability to just, do what they want, suddenly, and unencumbered by anyone tellin' em, well, don't do this or don't do that, I think, uh, that's what makes them love it so. It's almost like givin' 'em their driver's license when they're six years old. And uh, and the kids have really, my kids, uh, love it up here. Uh... if they, if they could somehow skip all the school, they'd probably be ski patrollers in the end, but we'll see how that goes later.

Joey Prokop: Talk a little bit about the nuts and bolts of gettin' this place goin' in the morning. I think a lot of people don't realize, like the amount of work that goes into a day.

Sam Howard: Well . . . on just a regular day, with no new snow, checking the mountain to make sure that the grooming's fine and that all the signs are up and that all the tower pads are on . . . finding out . . . We have to interact with Snowbird quite a bit on what terrain is open between the two of us, and sometimes we'll control some of their terrain and at other times, they'll control some of ours. And from the 8 o'clock that we come in and get a morning meeting and a weather meeting, uh, on a regular day, that hour and fifteen minutes is barely enough time to get everything set up. All the rope lines that

come out for grooming, all the banners that need to go out, all of the medical gear that might have been down from a case the day before, getting everything sorted out and, and positioned to run for the day. On a day when we do avalanche control, Mother Nature's really in charge as to how long any of that stuff's gonna take. If it's, if it has snowed and it's quit and it's a fairly stable pack, well then we can get a lot of stuff open in the couple of hours we have. If it's unstable, it's snowin' hard, uh, the road's a mess, then sometimes we don't even open all day long. And that's really, it comes right down to Mother Nature. She's kinda callin' the shots and we're out there mitigating and interpreting and coming up with a reasonable opener for a given day.

Joe Prokop: What do you think is, I don't know, there's this community, y'know, I come up here and Alta means one thing to me, y'know, it means generally skiing, first and foremost. I'll come up here to see and be seen, although . . . y'know, anytime I come up here I run into a bunch of friends. What, I guess, what is it about Alta that makes Alta, Alta?

Sam Howard: I'd say it's a community, uh, and going back to one of your earlier questions, y'know, it's a . . . Sure, it's a major player in the ski industry, uh, right up there with Jackson Hole or Aspen or any of 'em. But because of its unique smallness, uh, the people that have been around have been around a long time and they're lookin' out for each other just like the patrollers look out for each other during routes. And, if uh, if a community member has cancer and, uh, and no insurance, then there's pot lucks and roasts and people support each other. I think that's really what makes the big difference. Um... sure, the community is seeing your friends at the bar after skiing, but it's also taking care of each other. And, and uh, quality people, they all rise to the top. And there's a lot of quality people at Alta.

Joe Prokop: Who are some of those people over the years, I mean, even, did you know Alf at all?

Sam Howard: When I got here, Alf was still here... and Alf was quite a character. He'd make us laugh, uh, with his stories of Norway and the early days of jumping. He was quite a, quite a piece of work and . . . A lot, when I started here, a lot of the original guys that, um, that

you look at these old photographs of building the original Germ chair, uh, or Collins chair, they were, they're in the photos, and they were sitting in the front office or out teaching people to ski, and, uh . . . It was . . . I think that we've, uh, we've kind of gone to the next generation of important people in a way, or of significant people. Um, you know, Alf's gone, Chick Morton's gone, but people have stepped in and, and even though their shoes were big to fill, they've, they've stepped in and, and taken over. And we have a lot of quality people around uh, that just, I, I'd hate to name anybody because I'll just forget somebody that I should have said. It's, uh, it doesn't matter what you're looking for, if it's, uh, someone to fix your Snow Cat or, uh, someone to lead a route or someone to teach your kids to ski or become a ski racer, there, uh, there's someone there to do it and they're, they're top of their field, for sure.

Joe Prokop: What do you think it, y'know, talkin' to you on the lift, you always got a incredible sense of humor and, y'know, just generally fun to be around. What do you think, I dunno, do you have like a funny story or, y'know, a kinda funny insight about, y'know, either dealing with the public or how you (?) that job?

Sam Howard: Uh... a funny story. Um... oh, I suppose, uh, now I just drew a blank there, so you'll have to cut this. Uh . . . what was I thinkin' about?

Joey Prokop: You could even stop down for a second.

Sam Howard: Um . . . the funny stories . . . oh, yeah . . . oh, y'know, Four white . . . oh, y'know, you gotta weigh every day differently, a little, but, uh . . .

Joey Prokop: What do you think, I mean, I guess, in summary, what do you think is the most rewarding aspect of your, of your job?

Sam Howard: Well, it doesn't happen very often, but every now and then you save someone's life. And, uh, it's, uh, it's a different feeling, and it, and to know you made a difference, and, y'know, you may have not even saved their life, you may have just, uh, taken 'em off the hill and, and got them out of a sticky situation, but . . . uh, you, uh, it, it, it's just a great feeling to go home at the end of the day and think

that, well, uh, if, if I hadn't been there, this guy would, would have been, uh, probably would have died in this tree well or, y'know, lost on the back of Supreme or something of that nature. And, uh, that's probably the most rewarding part, although it's awful rewarding to just do lap after lap on a powder day as well. But, uh, I have to say if you quantified it right down to something, it's a feeling of, of, y'know, making a big difference in someone else's life.

Joey Prokop: Nice. I know, this is, this is a question I ask everyone and I'm quickly learning that it's a stupid question . . .

Sam Howard: OK

Joey Prokop: . . . but if you could go, like if it's perfect powder conditions, right?

Sam Howard: Uh-huh

Joey Prokop: Actually, you probably do get to experience more than more people, or than most people, rather, now where, where are you gonna go? And kinda, just talk me through that run.

Sam Howard: Oh, if it's perfect powder and, uh, and we just, we're just opening in the morning, I'm probably gonna walk up to High Greeley. Um, it's open almost every day, aah, and so it's easy access, uh, the trail breakin' isn't too bad. And, uh, I'm gonna get to the ridge and I'm gonna look around and I'm gonna hear people unloadin' the lift because they're gonna be howlin' like coyotes. And, uh, and I'll look around and there won't be anyone there but me. And, uh, and from there, just point it down the fall line and lookin' for which spot looks the fattest and the nicest and, y'know, hopefully the sun's shinin' and you can get to the bottom and look back up and for about three minutes you'll be able to see your turns, but pretty fast, they'll be erased by the hordes. And that's, uh, pretty much where I would be goin' . . . with all those big dead trees up there.

Joey Prokop: I gotta, I don't think I have any more questions for ya.

Sam Howard: Well . . .

Joey Prokop: Do you have anything you wanna add?

Sam Howard: When I met my wife, she was working at Snowbird and I quickly . . .

(Unknown voice) We're gonna move the microphone 'cause the wind picked up

Sam Howard: OK

(Unknown voice) . . . and if we don't shelter it we won't hear nothin' but noise.

Joey Prokop: I guess that's in, yeah . . . Y'know, what's funny is that's still . . . let your kids get on the bus . . . go up the canyon.

Sam Howard: Yeah. That's why we bought our house where it is, y'know. The bus stops right at the end of the road.

Joey Prokop: And so, y'know, yeah. Go where, where you were goin' talkin' about . . .

Sam Howard: Well . . . I was introduced to my wife, Susie, and she, and she worked at Snowb, at Snowbird in the early '80's. And, uh, so I quickly got her out of that situation and got her a job up here. One of our first dates, I'd met her a couple of times, and I was at the Tram bar, and here's this girl Susie and I started talkin' to her. And, and the next day was my day off and I said, "Well, what are you doin' tomorrow." And she said, "Well, I'm gonna ski. I have the day off. I have to work a breakfast shift at the Cliff." And I said, "Well, I was thinking of skiing Snowbird too." And she said, "Well, come on down and I'll give you breakfast and then we can ski."

Well, what I didn't tell her is that I already had a date to ski with another girl from the Alta Lodge on that same day. So the next morning came and I went down to the Cliff and we had breakfast and Susie said, "Well, I'm gonna clean up and change." And I said, "Well, I'm gonna go back up to Alta and get my ski gear." So I went back up to Alta and got my ski gear. And I got this other girl, Lisa, and I showed up on the tram deck. And I said, "Susie, Lisa. Lisa, Susie."

And we boarded the tram. And, uh, I figured, well, I'll never see either of these two girls again. But I ended up marrying one of 'em. (laughs). So that's my funny story.

Joey Prokop: It's awesome.

Sam Howard: Yeah. It worked out pretty good.

Joey Prokop: Yeah, I think it worked out good.

(Unknown voice) Aaah, that could have ended bad.

Sam Howard: Yeah, that could have ended bad.