

Missoulian

Dillon native skis all 16 resorts in state in 16 days

By NICK GEVOCK Montana Standard | Posted: Tuesday, January 17, 2012 1:45 pm

BUTTE - Skiing all 16 of Montana's ski areas has long been a dream for Cory Birkenbuel.

The thing is, he's always wanted to do them at once, as in 16 resorts in 16 days.

As of Monday, Birkenbuel reached his goal when he made turns at his home hill of Maverick Mountain west of Dillon.

"This has been quite the adventure," the 33-year-old student at the University of Montana-Western and Dillon native said Friday from the slopes of Great Divide Ski Area near Helena. "It's very emotional - and it's awesome."

Birkenbuel teamed up with Kevin Hilton, a Montana State University film student, to make the journey. Together the skiers are making a film about the adventure that they plan to take to festivals for skiing and mountain films.

The project is dubbed "Montana's Sweet 16" and is serving as an internship for Birkenbuel, who's majoring in business.

It started with his passion for skiing but it also took some planning. Last summer, Birkenbuel went to the Montana Ski Areas Association and pitched the plan and the owners of hills all agreed to give him free tickets.

Friends pitched in, too, including the use of a vehicle to make the drive and other contributions.

From there Birkenbuel planned his route, beginning on New Year's Day at Big Sky Resort. He mapped out a schedule to keep each evening's drive to a minimum. His next stop was Moonlight Basin before heading east and hitting the hills counterclockwise.

Birkenbuel said throughout the journey he's experienced everything that makes Montana skiing special. That includes great mountains, quality snow despite a tough year and, most of all, friendly people.

He said it's that hospitality and genuine love of skiing that makes Montana a skier's paradise.

"I was looking for that passion for skiing and everybody has it," he said.

Now that the journey is done, Hilton, 19, will start the editing. He's aware it will take months to complete but said he's looking forward to the challenge. And Hilton, also a Dillon native, said it will be excellent experience for a filmmaking student.

"It's been a great opportunity for me as a freshman to get in on something like this," Hilton said.

Birkenbuel said they want the finished product to help promote Montana skiing.

So would the owners of Montana's ski areas, said Ben Haugan, spokesman for Showdown Ski Area near Neihart and for the MSAA. He said the association has heard from many people who want free lift tickets for a film project only to never see a final product.

But in this case they're confident Birkenbuel and Hilton will carry through. And Haugan likes the focus the pair is taking.

"He's not going out and trying to find the best ski area in Montana; he's trying to show what each area offers," Haugan said.

The journey ended Monday at Maverick. Birkenbuel said it's fitting that he wound up at his home hill, which is special because it kindled his love of skiing. And his friends were there to make runs and throw a party, making it that much sweeter.

"That's where I took my first run," he said of Maverick. "To end there means the world to me."