

JERRY BLANN

Leads JHMR to Ranking as Top Ski Resort in North America

WORDS KRISTEN POPE | IMAGES COURTESY OF JERRY BLANN AND JACKSON HOLE MOUNTAIN RESORT



A young Jerry Blann celebrates Christmas at Snow King with his parents and twin sister, Sherry.



Sitting at the kitchen table one day, a 10-year-old Jerry Blann was summoned to his first ski industry assignment. His father Cliff, who managed Mount Bachelor outside of Bend, Oregon, needed some help painting the ski lift towers. He looked at young Jerry and said, “You’re it.” The younger Blann helped with a number of assignments over the years, from painting to cutting trees on the mountain—he would go on to spend his career in the ski industry. Today, Blann serves as President of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, ranked by *SKI Magazine* as the #1 overall resort in North America, also topping the rankings in overall satisfaction, character, variety and challenge. Blann credits the resort’s 1,450 winter employees for the top billing, saying, “It’s all about people. We’ve got a great team here.”

The community of Jackson was always a special place for Blann. He took his first trip out to the valley at the age of five for a family ski trip at Christmas time. Over the years, his family spent several Christmases in Jackson, skiing at Snow King Resort or, when there wasn’t enough snow in town, heading up to Teton Pass and skiing from the Jeep-rigged rope tow. Those were the two main skiing options near Jackson before JHMR opened. Jerry and his twin sister Sherry even learned how to ski under the tutelage of Bill Ashley, a beloved local resident who owned and operated the Snow King Ski Resort and Ski School for decades. Forty years later, Blann ran into Ashley at a



“If you’re going to be a citizen,
you need to be a good corporate citizen.”

– Jerry Blann

Rotary Club meeting and introduced himself. Ashley immediately inquired, “How’s your sister?” remembering the twins he taught four decades ago.

Ashley’s teaching paid off for both of the Blann twins. Sherry went on to become a member of the U.S. Ski team and Jerry was an All-American on Denver University’s ski team—a team that won three national championships during his four years at the school. Their father Cliff was an alternate alpine skier in the Olympics, though the Games were canceled due to World War II. Cliff served as Mount Bachelor’s General Manager while their mother Louise ran the ticket office. “It was truly a family operation,” Blann recalled. All four of the Blann siblings have worked in the ski industry, with Sherry working as a groomer at Mount Bachelor, Casey now running Kirkwood Resort in California, and Dave working at three ski resorts and two ski lift manufacturers over the years before settling on a career in law enforcement.

After Jerry Blann finished college, he began working at Aspen as a management trainee, rising to become the resort’s President from 1984 to 1988, also serving on the Aspen Ski Club Board of Directors. After his 18 years at Aspen, he spent five years at California’s Bear Mountain, nearly tripling skier visits during his tenure. He went to Colorado to work on opening a new resort there. During his career, he also inventoried 300 mountains in the western U.S. as potential sites for ski resorts. In 1995, Jay Kemmerer hired him as President of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort.

When he arrived at JHMR, Blann quickly set to work revising the master plan, a multi-year process that involved working with the community and holding over 40 public meetings. “This is a long-term business,” Blann explained. “It’s all about the relationships.” He cited the importance of local officials and community members working together to improve the resort and their celebration of the resort’s achievements. “[Mayor] Mark Barron is as excited about being the number one resort as I am,” Blann said. >>



**“You get to know people over time—
it all comes back to relationships.”**

— Jerry Blann

<< In 2015, JHMR celebrates its 50th anniversary. In recent years, the resort has expanded and focused on opening up more intermediate terrain and groomable acreage, including the Casper Bowl High Speed Quad, which opened last season. “People want that terrain,” Blann said. “Ultimately, the mountain can never be tamed, but we can make it more accessible to more people.” In addition to winter skiing, the resort is also focusing on expanding its summer offerings, including a ropes course and zip line. “Summer is emerging,” Blann said with excitement.

The resort also has a keen focus on protecting and preserving the area’s natural resources. Blann sees environmental sustainability as a crucial aspect of the business. “If you’re going to be a citizen, you need to be a good corporate citizen,” Blann explained. “Part of that is environmental. We have a lot of very precious resources here in the community. We’re on the edge of one of North America’s largest intact ecosystems.” JHMR is one of only two ski resorts in the nation that have earned the ISO 14001 certification by undergoing an annual environmental audit that requires extensive documentation and verification of environmental policies and practices.

In addition to sustainability, Blann sees cooperation as key in the ski industry. “We come together as an industry, which is unique,” Blann said. Last winter, JHMR joined the Mountain Collective, a group of ski resorts, including Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows, Alta and Aspen/Snowmass, that worked together to offer a pass that included two free days at each of the four resorts as well as half-price tickets. “It’s a no brainer for people who are traveling,” Blann said. This season, the Mountain Collective added Mammoth Mountain, Snowbird and Whistler Blackcomb.

Bringing visitors into Jackson is also a crucial part of the equation, and the airport now offers 12 nonstop flights. Blann praises the community and groups, including the the Airport Board JH-AIR, Central Reservations and the Travel and Tourism Board, that work together to bring visitors into town and the resort. “It’s a community and this community has come together,” Blann explained. “Without that, the mountain is one component and a very small component.” For the past 13 years, Blann has served on the Airport Board JH-AIR. He also cites the popularity of telecommuting and believes the changing workplace will be a boon for Jackson. “When the ‘modern cowboys’ can conduct business anywhere and people can get in and out with good air, that’s a good thing for our community,” Blann explained. Community and relationships are key to Blann’s work and the role JHMR plays in the community. “You get to know people over time—it all comes back to relationships,” Blann explained. ■