

## Conversation with an Adventurer

*[Interviewed for “Spiritual Adventures in the Snow: Skiing and Snowboarding as Renewal for your Soul” © 2009 [www.spiritualadventurersinthesnow.com](http://www.spiritualadventurersinthesnow.com). No portion of this may be reprinted for any reason.]*

**Sarah Person** is the Supervisor of Grooming at Northstar-at-Tahoe Resort. One of a relatively small number of women in the grooming industry, Sarah is passionate about taming massive amounts of snow with a humongous machine. We had the exciting opportunity to ride with her in a Snow Cat affectionately called “The Beast” starting at midnight one night.

### ***What are your favorite moments on this job?***

*The sunrises are it. Sunrises are worth doing the graveyard shift. The title of your book is really interesting to me because just recently I was just telling my Mom that the sunrises are the most spiritual part of my life. That is the moment I feel a connection to something Higher–God–or whatever you want to call it. It is my “little sanctuary.” I try to time it so I’m at the Summit to see it. I’m alone. There’s not a lot of chatter on the radio. Depending on the weather, there are just some amazing sunrises. Especially before a storm, the clouds come in layers and the sun peeks through, shining right between the layers. But then the chatter of the morning begins on the radio, with day staff, terrain park groomers, and control dispatch and the quiet solitude of the night is gone. That’s a good time to be getting off work.*

### ***What is it like for you to be out here doing this?***

*I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. There is so much that’s different being here at night. It is a whole different perspective on the mountain. Groomers know things about the trees, the runs, the terrain that know one else knows or notices. You see things that other people never see—certain perspectives like going UP the runs. We see lots of coyotes and there are bears and their cubs. It’s a rare opportunity to get to do something you love and get paid for it!*

### ***Laying out these swaths of corduroy is a bit like my memories of growing up around farming, tilling the soil, going back and forth.***

*Yes, this is “snow farming!” It is so satisfying to be smoothing over what we call “dirty” snow—the cut up snow from the day of skiers and riders—and turning into “clean” snow. In fact, it is hard for me to see it messed up the next day! I’m a neat freak anyway so this is so satisfying to make the mountain neat and tidy, to smooth over the rough stuff.*

***Tell us a little bit about the technique of grooming.***

*The most important aspect is the blade in the front of the machine. Learning to get that right, the right depth depending on the condition of the snow, using it to fill in the holes or move the snow to create a smoother surface. It takes a while to learn to blade well. It's also amazing how much we have to destroy in order to create something new! The tilling of the snow, chopping it up, gives it back some air so it can be made into a much finer substance for grooming. When we get the light snow falling—about 2-6" worth—that's what we call "hero snow" because it grooms so nicely that we look like heros!*

***Northstar-at-Tahoe is well known for its stellar grooming. What makes the difference between just doing the job and doing a fine job?***

*We really take pride in what we do. We have a crew that is passionate about this, experienced, and there is a culture of pride in what you put out behind you. Sometimes it is like "hive mind" when you have an experienced crew working together for a while. We talk to each other, help each other out. We have an attention to detail. I choose to have us work independently on the mountain most of the time rather than grooming a run with multiple machines at the same time. That way a groomer can pay attention to the little things and go back over something that came out rough if needed in order to put out that beautiful smooth corduroy. There is a satisfaction in "leaving it clean"—putting it "to bed," as we say. And nobody knows the mountain like the groomers!*

***You listen to satellite radio in the cab as you work. What are you listening to?***

*I love listening to movie soundtracks. Also classical music. I'm a pianist so I get to spend all this time listening to music I love. It's great once you are an experienced groomer because maneuvering the machine and noticing what you need to do comes second-nature and then you just get into a groove and don't have to be so intensely focused—unless you are in the middle of a storm or something. But usually I just get to really enjoy the music while I do what I love to do!*

***Dave Myers, another groomer at Northstar, spoke to us as well. Like Sarah, he has great excitement for the job.***

*Driving out on the hill, it is almost like getting fresh tracks on powder nights. You get to see the runs, and play in the snow. It's more of a game, getting to slide on the hill in a big machine. It's more like play than work because the mountain itself is like one big playground to start off with. But it is also fun working the snow, shaping things, building things, cleaning things. I get to create. It is entertaining but it is also a challenge. In a storm when you can't see you might wonder if you will get up and down safely. But then you get to feel good that you met that challenge, that you know the routes without seeing. That's the fun stuff. I wish it would snow every night! It is a privilege to be out here.*

Find out if your favorite mountain resort allows "ride-alongs" in their Snow Cats. If they do, you are in for the ride of your life!