

Fall Free



Tamarack's lifts now sit immobile above the Show Low Trail; opposite, the Village Center at the base area awaits a construction sugar daddy.



In the wilds of Idaho,
a few ambitious
men set out to build
America's answer
to the epic park over
the border to the north.
Here's why they
failed—and how a few
dedicated riders **hope**
to pick up the pieces.

By Johnathon Allen

Careening down

the slopes of Idaho's Tamarack Resort on a stretch of singletrack called Smoke Jumper, I suddenly came face-to-face with the magic of the place. The lift-serviced trail meandered along a secluded ridgeline, teasing my two riding partners and me with spectacular views of Cascade Reservoir glistening far below. We then plunged into the valley on a series of fast, smoothly banked corners and sudden four-foot drops. Hoots of joy mixed with the occasional squeak of disc brakes as we bobbed and weaved through loamy S-turns and flame-colored trees.

Smoke Jumper's flowing rhythm is a signature of America's most experienced mountain bike trail architect, Joey Klein, who is head of IMBA's private design firm, Trail Solutions. For three years, Klein made Tamarack his test lab. Besides the great track, the impeccable Indian summer day didn't hurt my mood either. Recent rainfall made soil conditions tacky, and there was almost no one on the mountain, which meant I could pin it down miles-long descents and get right back on the lift without even pausing to take off my helmet.

And, for a few mind-blowing minutes, I got it. I understood all the hype and crazy mega-resort money and tantalizing promises that maybe Tamarack would become the first big destination resort in the United States with gravity-fed trails designed for long-travel suspension bikes—America's answer to Whistler.

But then Smoke Jumper began to wind toward the bottom of 7,700-foot West Mountain, and the view snapped me back to reality. Massive stone lodges and million-dollar mountain chalets stood empty alongside half-finished condos covered in industrial-grade tarps. The place had an eerie, abandoned-during-the-apocalypse feel. Village services—rental shop, café and bars—were still housed in what were supposed to be temporary high-tech yurts nearly five years after the place opened for business.

Somewhere on the way to big-time, Tamarack's multi-hundred-million-dollar plan had imploded. I'd come here to find out what went wrong—between runs, of course—and, if possible, figure out what that implosion means. Does Tamarack's collapse kill our chances of seeing a truly great American mountain bike park? Or was this just an ill-fated plan—a pipe dream that was all but doomed from the start?

Most of all, I hoped to find out: Where do we go from here?



"It was kind of a mountain biking *Field of Dreams*," said Kalen Boland, head of Tamarack's mountain bike program, one of my riding cohorts that day on Smoke Jumper. Looking down from the lift at the collection of sweetly shaped berms, large wooden wall rides, and hand sculpted jumps—all devoid of humans and dappled in vibrant fall colors—I could see what he meant. When the owners of Tamarack set out to create a high-concept four-season resort in the middle of Idaho, it seemed likely that during the planning process someone uttered that immortal cinematic line: "If we build it, they will come."


If the rise and fall of Tamarack Resort were rewritten to fit the narrative of that cinematic epic, Kevin Costner would play the part of Jean Pierre Boespflug, the charismatic and persuasive French visionary and majority owner who in 2003, after more than three years of lobbying, convinced the

Idaho state bureaucracy to grant him control over 2,100 acres of mountainous terrain for the next 50 years. Like Costner's hallucinogenic cornfield, the resort would be situated in an unlikely location: near Donnelly, Idaho, 90 miles north of Boise, or roughly two degrees shy of the absolute middle of nowhere. This geographical challenge made it imperative for Tamarack to appeal to affluent people who could afford a vacation home far off the beaten path.

When Tamarack opened in the winter of 2004 amid no small amount of fanfare, Boespflug and his minions tried to position the place as both the next big thing and the ultimate secret stash. The pitch seemed to work: The initial offering of 107 luxury homes and lots sold out instantly, generating \$46 million, and went down as the largest resort home-site launch in North American history. Within a year and a half, retired tennis stars Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf had signed on to build a luxury hotel-condominium complex that would include units with price tags as high as \$4 million. The ostentatious plan included a state-of-the-art ski area with 62 runs, seven chairlifts, two golf courses (one of them at a cost of \$6 million), 2,000 luxury homes, and a massive village center with 50,000 square feet of commercial space, 129 condos, a series of eight ziplines, and an underground multiplex movie theater.

To maximize year-round appeal, plans also called for a lift-serviced mountain bike park on par with Whistler—the resort's most obvious competition in the luxury four-season market.

When it comes to lift-serviced downhill mountain biking, Interwest-owned Whistler eclipses everything else in North America. When it opened in 1998, it became the first ski resort to truly embrace the potential of modern suspension technology as a reason to keep lifts running all year long. The unparalleled terrain, diverse demographic, and vibrant cultural scene forever changed the way resort owners think about the economic potential of their summer slopes. Once you've tasted Whistler, you'll bunny hop over your own grandmother just to ride down A-line again.

A full-page photograph of a mountain biker riding a trail. The rider is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt, dark shorts, and a white helmet with goggles. They are leaning forward on a full-suspension mountain bike, navigating a dirt path that is bordered by large, grey rocks on the right side. The trail is surrounded by dense evergreen trees and some yellowing foliage, suggesting an autumn setting. The lighting is bright, and the overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and outdoor recreation.

Jake Warren rocks out on Tamarack's Rock Star Trail, one of many riders had mostly to themselves before the resort closed.

EVERY TIME I CAME BUZZING INTO THE BASE AREA, GRINNING AND EUPHORIC, THE LIFT OPERATORS WERE WAITING. IT WAS LIKE HAVING YOUR OWN PERSONAL BIKE VALET AND A PRIVATE NETWORK OF TRAILS.

WHAT NO ONE COULD HAVE GUESSED WAS THAT THE DREAM OF THE AMERICAN WHISTLER WOULD BEGIN TO UNRAVEL 6,000 MILES AWAY, IN THE LAPTOP OF A 31-YEAR-OLD ROGUE SECURITIES TRADER.

Which prompts the question: Why no replicas in the Lower 48? It hasn't been for a lack of effort. But since most American ski resorts are located on publicly owned land, the answer to this question usually arrives in an array of briefcases and is written in a language only lawyers and insurance agents understand.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, as mountain biking entered a time of rapid participation growth, public land managers considered mountain bikers to be an erosion-causing, lawsuit-inviting, animal-terrorizing pox on the forest. Scorned by Sierra Clubbers and equestrians alike, we were the outlaws of the '90s trail-use culture wars. It took a decade of lobbying and dedicated grassroots work by IMBA and other regional trail advocacy groups to begin to undo this bureaucratic skepticism—eventually clearing the way for Tamarack.

The fact that the first new American ski resort in a generation included the words “world-class mountain bike park” in its business plan shows how far the sport has come in 20 years. Because Tamarack sits on national forest land, its trails must meet strict criteria for environmental sustainability and erosion control. So Boespflug hired Klein, the most respected trail designer available.

Klein has emerged as one of the sport's top advocates mainly through his ability to convince Forest Service officials that he knows what he is talking about, and can deliver what he says he will. He also has the ability to turn groups of well-meaning but inexperienced volunteers into highly organized trail crews capable of producing miles of sustainable singletrack over the course of a few weekends.

Klein developed Tamarack as the first-ever showcase for IMBA's newly conceived Ride Center model (see “Centers of the Universe,” p. 50). The resort featured more than 30 miles of hand-built, gravity-fed trails connected to more than 80 miles of cross-country singletrack stretching through the surrounding Payette National Forest. Stealing a page from Whistler's playbook, the resort also provided a jump park and skills-training area. As part of the Ride Center model, a rental shop at the base area provided bikes of all types, as well as body armor and helmets, so cyclists of all abilities could show up with nothing but the clothes on their backs and pedal away on their favorite flavor of fun.

“Whistler is really its own beast, but the thing Tamarack has going for it is that there is something for everyone,” Klein told me. “The lines are fast and flowy, because it's not as rocky as [British Columbia]. We designed Tamarack's downhill park around a hub-and-cluster system—like a ski area—so that riders with a wide range of skill levels can do runs together and everyone will come out at the same place. Dad can rail berms while his teenage son hits the jump lines, or vice versa.”

It sounded like the perfect formula.

Even after things had begun to sour, the corporate folks argued

that Tamarack was uniquely appealing. “We're actually doing remarkably well when you consider how young the resort is and how tough the market has been,” Ken Rider, Tamarack's director of sales and marketing, told me during my visit. “Imagine where Whistler was in its fourth year. We still have a lot of growing to do, but the advantage is that we can still provide a highly personalized level of service because we aren't this huge mega-resort. People can come here, whether they're tourists or locals, and feel like they're getting a highly personalized experience.”

While this statement reeked of public-relations spin, I found Rider's description to be more or less spot-on. Every time I came buzzing into the base area, grinning and euphoric, the lift operator loaded my bike up again and bade me a good ride. He did this with all three of our 40-pound rigs in the amount of time it took us to walk across the wooden loading dock and sit down on the chair. The bikes were unloaded in the same fashion at the top and were waiting for us on arrival. It was like having your own personal bike valet and a private network of singletrack for half the cost of riding Whistler.



What no one could have guessed was that the dream of the American Whistler would begin to unravel 6,000 miles away, in the laptop of a 31-year old rogue French securities trader. In what now sounds like a depressingly familiar story, a junior staffer named Jerome Kerviel blew through \$7.2 billion worth of funds at Societe Generale, France's second-largest bank, by making a series of unauthorized and ultimately ruinous bets on European stock markets.

The Real Next Big Thing?

COLORADO'S WINTER PARK IS THE NEW TOP CONTENDER.

For years, ski resorts looked at mountain biking as a way to keep activity on the slopes in the off-season. Now, with global warming and many other economic and environmental headaches at hand, U.S.

resort operators are taking a closer look at the Whistler model, which puts mountain biking front and center. With Tamarack's grand plans unraveling, Interwest-owned Winter Park, 25 miles west of Denver, might be the next best hope for an American Whistler, with an ambitious expansion in the works.

“There's tremendous potential for downhill mountain bike parks in the United States that isn't being tapped, and we're in a unique position to do that,” says Bob Holme, Winter Park's terrain park manager. “It's something we've been working toward with the National Forest Service for more than four years.”

In September 2008, after that extensive planning and permitting process, Winter Park got the federal green light to develop a network of gravity-specific downhill trails. Designed as a collaboration between IMBA's Trail Solutions and Gravity Logic, the creatively twisted minds behind Whistler, Trestle Bike Park represents the next evolution in environmentally sustainable, gravity-fed trail design.

The scandal forced the bank to renege on a \$118 million loan that Boespflug badly needed to pay down a \$250 million construction loan from another European banking giant, Credit Suisse. Boespflug was already struggling; despite posting a gross income of \$100 million in 2007, Tamarack had failed to make a \$6 million interest payment that November. After the Societe Generale meltdown and other factors forced him to miss another payment in February 2008, Boespflug and other investors filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, Agassi and Graf scrapped their planned hotel, and Tamarack's development dominoes began toppling.

All construction at the resort stopped and a legal thumb-wrestling match ensued for control of the existing assets. A bankruptcy judge eventually assigned Tamarack's management operations to a third-party receiver, and Credit Suisse put another \$6 million into winterizing unfinished construction at the resort while the bankers contemplated their next move. That decision took less time than everyone feared. The winter season shaped up to be a disaster—fewer than 30,000 skiers had visited by this February, and unusually paltry snow conditions contributed to a seasonal operating deficit that was more than twice the anticipated figure.

Faced with a seemingly endless downward spiral, Credit Suisse pulled the plug, officially shutting down Tamarack on March 5. All lift service, hotel accommodations, and golf course operations were mothballed indefinitely and most of the employees laid off.

Given the condition of the U.S. real estate market and economy, Tamarack may have collapsed under the weight of its own ambitions even without the help of a fraudulent trader. Tamarack

now looks like nothing more than a poster child of the Bush-era real estate bubble, when people built and bought things that were bigger and far more expensive than reality would dictate. Unlike Whistler, which sits alluringly close to both Vancouver and Seattle, Tamarack doesn't draw from a major nearby population center. The Boise metro region has just a few more than 500,000 people, which is sort of like being the biggest kid in middle school.

And while Tamarack may have been the best place in the West to take your family on a mountain bike vacation without breaking the bank or any major bones, it lacked the kind of terrifying technical terrain required to keep a serious downhiller interested for more than a few days. Like the underground theater and the \$4

THE RESORT'S GREATEST CLAIM TO FAME HAD BEEN PRESIDENT BUSH'S RIDE WITH A PHALANX OF SECRET SERVICE AGENTS, WHICH IS NOT THE KIND OF THING THAT SCORES CREDIBILITY WITH THE EXTREME CROWD.

million hotel condos, these elements were casualties of Tamarack's financial meltdown.

As a cycling destination, Tamarack lacked the kind of critical mass that generates buzz among the extreme crowd. There was a distinct absence of any sort of Taurine-enhanced advertising spectacles. Other than a cameo appearance in the Kirt Voreis segment of *Kranked VI* (the part featuring wooden-wall rides and killer berms), the resort's biggest claim to knobby-tire fame was that former President George W. Bush once rode a mountain bike here while on a junket with the then-governor of Idaho and a phalanx of Secret Service agents. This is not exactly the kind of thing that scores you credibility with the extreme mountain bike crowd.

Eventually, that part might have changed. "It's really unfortunate the funding ran out when it did," said Klein. "We were just getting to the best part of the trail development when everything stopped."

There was no money in 2008 to pay for Trail Solutions, or even a committed on-site trail crew, so by the time I visited last fall, popular runs like Super G had begun showing the braking-bump abuse of a surface that hadn't seen the shiny end of a spade in a year.



So what happens next?

Much of the infrastructure sits untouched while the banks wait for a future investor. "It's not going to be quick or painless," says Doug Wilson, the court-appointed third-party receiver. "But I believe that eventually Tamarack's problems are going to be solved and a long-term solution is going to be found."

How that translates to the next six months, or even five years, is anyone's guess. "No one knows what's going to happen with Tamarack," said Mike Van Abel, executive director of IMBA. "Because of the loss of funding, they weren't able to renew their contract with us, which has been a bit of an issue. But we still have

"When it comes to what the market wants, we've learned that the most popular trails are not steep fall-line trails where you're blasting through all this sensitive stuff," says Holme. "It's the longer, flowy jump trails that average less than 10 percent grades—like Whistler's Crank it Up or A-line."

Built on IMBA's Ride Center model, Trestle's downhill system (currently 28 miles, with another 10 coming soon) will connect to an existing 300-plus-mile network of alpine cross-country singletrack winding through Fraser Valley. When complete, the area will comprise the largest multipurpose mountain biking destination in North America.

IMBA Executive Director Mike Van Abel says these developments have allowed Winter Park to leapfrog Tamarack in terms of priority—even before Tamarack folded. "There's been a lot of support from government agencies, private industry, and nonprofit organizations to really push forward with development of mountain biking in the area," he says. "The Fraser Valley also has a lot more volunteer bandwidth available because of the population centers of the Front Range."

In 2008, IMBA channeled development funding from Trek to Joey Klein, its chief trail architect, for work at Winter Park. Some of SRAM's \$200,000 donation for new trails this year will also go to the Fraser Valley, Van Abel says.

All of which has people thinking big. "If the numbers continue to grow as they have over the last few years," Holme says, "I could see Winter Park doing 100,000 riders a year on three lifts, and doubling our rideable terrain in the next 10 years."—J.A.

Centers of The Universe

IMBA'S NEW INNOVATION TRIES TO BRING IT ALL TOGETHER

After a long, soul-searching session in 2006, IMBA's head honchos came to an important conclusion: The agency was trying to do too much, and as a result never really got much of anything done. The solution? The leadership decided to create a collection of highly evolved multiuse epicenters that could increase overall exposure and attract new riders.

"The problem was that, for many years, IMBA had been working an inch deep and 10,000 miles wide," says executive director Mike Van Abel. "So we decided to turn that paradigm on its head and pick a few strategic locations where we could leverage existing relationships and get really deep into building truly comprehensive trail systems."

IMBA's new Ride Center is now the model for 21st century growth. The idea is to create a few extensive trail networks designed for mountain bikers of every skill level. IMBA is collaborating with private developers and government agencies that can help generate the necessary funding.

The concept got its first test ride at Tamarack, where developers teamed with IMBA, Forest Service officials, and local volunteer groups to build trails in the Payette Valley that would be combined with lift-serviced bike park and downhill freeriding. "We realized right away that if Tamarack was going to be this new kind of epicenter for mountain biking, we needed to look well beyond the resort into the state and national forest lands around it," says Van Abel. "We're still in the early relationship-building phase of trying to get people in central Idaho excited about continuing that work."

"The key for us from a marketing perspective is putting a vision out there for the Ride Centers that sets the bar really high, particularly in the minds of government agencies, who need to understand that if they're really serious about creating quality recreation options on public lands that include sustainable mountain biking trails, then it's going to take millions of dollars of investment to do it right," he adds.

Besides Tamarack and Winter Park in Colorado, other Ride Centers in the works include:

SANTOS TRAILS, FLORIDA

This is a classic case of renegade bad-boy trails turned state-sanctioned family playground through intensive IMBA intervention. Santos, billed as the largest freeride park in the United States located on public land, features 45 miles of singletrack and two miles of freeride-oriented trail with all the trimmings, including 20-foot drops, sweetly shaped dirt jumps and a pump track.

CUYUNA LAKES RECREATION AREA, MINNESOTA

IMBA has spent the past five years working with the state to develop 50 miles of multiuse trail in the Cuyuna Recreation Area, near the communities of Crosby and Ironton. While the area is still in development, plans call for the creation of 15 new miles of trail annually until the project is done.

UWHARRIE MOUNTAINS, NORTH CAROLINA

This ambitious Ride Center, developed in a partnership between IMBA and the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association, is slated to include a 70-acre freeride center. —J.A.

Trails to Remember

Is it still OK to ride at Tamarack? Technically, no. Tamarack has leased the land through January 2010, so by the letter of the law, it's closed to private property. Still, there were ongoing discussions at press time about the resort's future, and hope remains that the mountain will officially reopen—and that riders will again be able to rip down the trails mentioned below. Watch these pages for updates, or write to Kalen Boland (kalenbol@gmail.com).

● PURA VIDA [Easy]

The first of its kind when it was conceptualized, Pura Vida was designed as a "beginner freeride" trail. If that sounds like an oxymoron, picture a wide series of banking turns interspersed with small, forgiving jumps that seamlessly flow together.

■ SUPER G [Moderately Difficult]

Tamarack's most popular trail, Super G features a collection of table tops, banked turns and large wooden-wall rides that are perfect for channeling your inner Kirt Voreis without the threat of snapping a femur.

◆ ROCK STAR [Difficult]

Fast, fun and peppered with rock drops combined with steep off-camber roll-ins, Rock Star is guaranteed to have you pumping a devil-horn fist.

◆ SMOKE JUMPER/ PUCKER-N-TUCK [Difficult]

The longest and least ridden trail on the mountain, Smoke Jumper is a combination of lift-serviced polish and local-rider grit. While it requires riding up a short climb from the lift, the payoff includes jumps, drops, ladder-rides, steep roll-ins, dense forests, and epic views. If Pucker-n-Tuck ever opens, it will be the best ride in the valley.

◆◆ STAGE FRIGHT [Expert]

A series of steep narrow chutes and strangely timed 15-foot rock drops that take you down a glory line under the main lift, Stage Fright offers the opportunity to either impress strangers with your badass riding skills or publicly humiliate yourself before limping off to the bar. —J.A.

our eyes on the public lands outside the resort and we're working on inspiring local groups to continue building out the system. There are already a lot of great trails up there, they just need some TLC."

In fact, the demise of the grandiose corporate plan might not be such a bad thing after all, because even before Tamarack closed, something interesting—something transformational—had already started to happen.

A few local guys—mainly Boland and some of his buddies on the resort's biking staff—started putting in work on the trails, often on their own time. They even began building their own trails with the resort's approval.

As I kept track of the various financial struggles, I thought back to my visit, when Boland took me on one of these grassroots creations—a black-diamond run his volunteer crew had obtained permission to build off of Smoke Jumper. The not-quite-finished trail, Pucker-n-Tuck, is a tight technical twister with steep-faced roll-ins, narrow wood-ramped drops, and progressively elevated log-rides. As we descended, Boland stopped to point out the nuances of each element, much like

THE GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY IS NOW FULLY EMBEDDED: "I'M SURE A LOT OF THE RIDERS IN MCCALL ARE GOING TO RALLY AROUND THE TRAILS AND DO WHAT THEY CAN TO HELP MAINTAIN THEM."

an artist offering a behind-the-scenes look at his work. This trail wasn't part of a business plan. It was the result of a crew of individuals working out their own personal relationships with gravity.

For the moment, at least, it appears that the trails are in the hands of the people who are likely to care for them most. "Right now, I'm organizing trail crews of local riders who will continue maintenance and development," Boland said, after the resort closure in March. He plans to offer guide services and shuttle rides up the mountain, and to coordinate volunteer work. "A few of us have already agreed that we're going to finish Pucker-n-Tuck and keep

riding it. We put a lot of blood and sweat and time into these trails, and we're not just going to walk away."

Chris Cook, a volunteer coordinator at Idaho Velo Park, a newly developed mountain bike area near Boise, agreed that volunteers will likely keep up existing trail networks on the Payette Valley's public lands. "Me and my fiancée would head up to Tamarack at least once a month in the summer," he said, "and it's definitely some of the best riding in Idaho because it's never crowded and it has some great trails. I'm sure the riders up in McCall are going to rally around the trails and do what they can to help maintain them. I know a lot of riders in Boise would get involved if they were asked."

Maybe that's Tamarack's destiny, to turn into a scruffy, grassroots-type DIY experience. Maybe, because of the way this country was developed and the limitations of publicly owned land, we'll never have our own Whistler, and we'll have to be happy carving out patches of playground here and there. The soul of the sport might be too compromised anyway, mingling with golfers.

Obviously, Tamarack's story has yet to be completely written. But no matter what happens, I wouldn't bet on Boland and his buddies going away. The odds are good that something will rise from the ashes, maybe some alliance of corporate dollars and volunteer sweat. Maybe it will be something surprising and new—something we should have been wishing for all along. **MB**



Kalen Boland queues up for a drop on Pucker-n-Tuck, the trail he created with his buddies, and hopes to maintain even with Tamarack shut down.