In 1964, ski areas first introduced color-coded signs to indicate difficulty of terrain.

BY JOHN FRY AND BOB CRAM

The first signs indicating degree-of-difficulty of the terrain within a ski area were introduced in the winter of 1964-65. As editor-in-chief of SKI Magazine at the time, I was trying to devise a way to make the new regulation interesting for readers, or at least not dull. It dawned on me to ask master cartoonist Bob Cram how he would announce the innovation to skiers. The result is the art you see on the following three pages, brought to life again 48 years after it was published in October 1964. Cram, a Seattle native, recently won an ISHA Lifetime Achievement Award for his cartoons, which have highlighted the sport’s humorous side since 1960. (For more on the ISHA Awards banquet, see the May-June 2012 issue of Skiing Heritage.)

The color-coding of terrain came at a time when the newly formed National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) was under pressure from insurers to make the sport safer. NSAA’s first signs in 1964-1965, when Cram lampooned them, were unlike the signs of today. A maroon, not a black, diamond indicated a very difficult trail ahead. A problem should have been foreseen: European trail signs at the time used red to designate intermediate trails, which in America were marked yellow—confusingly unsafe if an American was skiing in the Alps, or a European in the Rockies. At many European resorts today, yellow is used to designate unpatrolled terrain.

The solution came less than three years later, when NSAA discovered that the Disney Company, which was thinking of buying or building a ski resort (Mineral King in California was one), had gotten as far as determining what kind of trail signs it would adopt. The company had even tested skier’s reactions to different geometric figures, concluding, for example, that the symbol for easy terrain should be a circle, perceived as soft; its color should be green, perceived as mellow. More difficult terrain would best be indicated by a blue square, and most difficult by a black diamond. NSAA saw the Disney formula as an improvement, and switched to today’s shaped colors in 1968.

IBM employed the color shapes in 1960s ski-magazine ads aimed at luring engineers and techies to jobs at a new manufacturing plant in Burlington, Vermont, where they could ski nearby. An IBM career path marked by a diamond shape was “Extremely Challenging.” The U.S. Transportation Security Administration, in the aftermath of 9/11, briefly used skiing’s trail symbols to speed airline passengers through security lines.

From ski area to ski area, trail signs don’t calibrate terrain uniformly. They measure the relative difficulty within a single ski area. A skier struggling down a black diamond at Ski Butternut in the Berkshires, for example, will likely be unable to handle a black diamond at California’s Squaw Valley.