Background
This article was written with the goal of raising awareness, promoting safety, and helping resorts of all sizes to more effectively prepare and utilize resources in the event they decide to institute a terrain-based learning program. Terrain-based learning, while not a new concept, has recently gained popularity as resorts around the country diligently work to improve the beginner experience and increase the industry’s relatively low first-time participant conversion rate. However, not unlike terrain parks, the design, construction, and maintenance of terrain-based learning areas have the potential to be some of the largest on-mountain expenditures that resorts encounter during the operating season. Ski area managers need to be cognizant of what they are undertaking and what it takes to have a successful terrain-based learning program well before the first snowcat is out on the hill pushing snow.

General considerations
Early in the process, ski area management should make a commitment to daily maintenance of the individual features and area, have in place protocols for intradepartmental communication, as well as interdepartmental, and be prepared to provide training for managers, snowmakers, groomers, instructors, and terrain park staff — all of whom play integral roles in the success of the program. The ultimate success of the program relies heavily on the effective integration of participating departments along with true cross-departmental support and buy-in.

For example, early in the season, many resorts have been making snow for weeks if not months, and are open with limited terrain and ongoing snowmaking operations. As terrain opens and the focus shifts operationally to making snow for the learning areas, proper communication becomes even more essential. Regular communication between the builders and snowmakers on the amount of snowmaking needed and the placement on the hill has the potential to decrease the overall costs associated with the area by reducing water usage, cat hours, and labor costs. From a safety standpoint, staff not trained as snowmakers and assigned that task should be instructed to stay clear of snowmaking equipment even when not in operation. It’s also a good idea that staff be taught how to properly educate the resort’s guests in the event they get too close to snowmaking or other ski area equipment.

Signage and your ski safety statute
Some states have specific statutory requirements for making terrain, both natural and man-made objects, equipment encountered out on the hill, and what constitutes a risk inherent to the sport itself. It is the role of your resort’s safety professional or safety team to ensure that you comply with your state’s minimum requirements. However, as a general rule, it is a good idea that signs be properly placed so they are easy to read, highly visible, and clearly convey the proper messages to guests of all ages and abilities.
Waivers and releases

As this terrain is designed to coincide with a lesson or progression of lessons, this is a good time to reemphasize the practice of having the resort require participants sign a release before participating in the activities of the lesson. Prior to the beginning of the season, be sure that all of your releases and waiver forms are up to date. It is also suggested that you have your releases reviewed every two to three years by defense counsel as laws get revised.

A cautionary tale

I recently had the opportunity to talk with the management of a ski area that had attempted to integrate terrain-based learning into their ski school program. In the beginning of the process, a series of informal meetings and discussions had taken place between the general manager, the ski school director and the lead terrain park builder. At first glance, a seemingly well-laid plan had been devised for the location of the proposed area, a rough design approved, the timeframe for project completion agreed upon, and construction had commenced.

Originally, the plan called for all of the major snow work to be completed in one night. The final shaping of the features was to take place the following morning by a veteran snowcat operator and testing was then to be undertaken by ski school staff later that afternoon. If all went as planned, the new terrain-based learning area would be open and instructors would be teaching lessons the next morning. All in all, it would be a relatively quick and inexpensive total of two days from start to finish. To those involved in the process, the proposed plan was foolproof. What happened in the end was far from perfect.

A few days into the endeavor, major problems with the process as well as the plan began appearing. Finally, after a week of pushing snow both day and night, the features were ready to be tested. It wasn’t until the ski school director and other staff arrived to test the features that the scheme unraveled completely. During the initial discussions weeks earlier, the lead terrain park builder, general manager, and ski school director had discussed building a series of small rollers, banked turns, and a quarter pipe, which were to be used as teaching tools in a beginner lesson progression. However, during a subsequent meeting with the lead operator, the operators charged with building the features were instructed to build what amounted to a beginner terrain park with rollers, banked turns, and a mini pipe to act as a backstop.

Once onsite for the testing, it was immediately clear to the general manager and ski school director that the features that had been built were much larger and more difficult than what had been originally discussed, and that additional work was needed before the area could be tested. The group reconvened the following day, the agreed-upon changes having been made, only to discover that the features were still too large, the walls of the banked turns were too steep and that no one involved in the process had actually been formally trained on how to properly teach a lesson using the terrain features as originally discussed. Lastly, the group couldn’t even agree on how to properly designate and sign the area or where appropriate safety measures, such as fencing, should be placed.

The general manager, having had enough, pulled the plug and the area was dozed back to its original condition later that afternoon. The end result was that intradepartmental as well as interdepartmental relationships were stressed, tens of thousands of dollars were wasted in diesel fuel and labor costs, and the ski area’s beginner experience wasn’t improved.

Stories such as this shouldn’t stand in the way of an individual ski area’s efforts to “build a better mouse trap,” or prevent them from trying to implement similar terrain-based learning programs.

The simple takeaway should be that it’s important to remember that you don’t have to go it alone. Should your resort need a helping hand at any point throughout the process, there are experienced ski industry professionals available to help you properly plan and execute a successful terrain-based learning program.

For more information regarding this topic, contact your Safehold Special Risk sales executive.