

Brian Fairbank
By Andy Bigford

This energy is 100 percent renewable: For five decades, Jiminy Peaks leader Fairbank has tirelessly driven national innovations from his Berkshires resort.

As a 17-year-old, Brian Fairbank broke his back launching off a jump at his hometown ski area, Kissing Bridge in southwestern New York, and in the aftermath provided a preview of the tenacity he'd demonstrate in a groundbreaking 50-year ski resort leadership career. He was back on snow within a week, skiing in a full upper body cast, which he credits for curing him of the malady that inflicts most all skiers—bending forward at the waist. “Though I wouldn't recommend it to anybody,” he quickly adds.

From PSIA examiner and Eastern Demo Team member to resort leader, owner and innovator, Fairbank steadfastly built Jiminy Peak into a Berkshires gem, deftly developing a southern New England style village for 3,000 people and increasing visitation sixfold, while also overseeing, at various times, five other Eastern ski areas. It's not just this “day job” that elevated him into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame, but his penchant for taking what he discovered in the Berkshires, from learn-to-ski programs to wind turbines, snowmaking efficiency and lift op training, to adoption and success with the “big guys” on a national stage. These pioneering efforts would earn him the esteemed Eastern resort honor, the Sherman Adams Award, in 2005, and the highest honor from the NSAA, its Lifetime Achievement Award, in 2017.

Back in the early Jiminy years, with only telephone and power provided by the municipality of Hancock, Mass., and basic issues such as zoning and density governed primarily by the water and sewer capabilities that could be self-generated, Fairbank had to learn the development business from scratch to provide “warm beds” for his ski area. He brought in the man who had planned Deer Valley, Jack Johnson, started with the 100-room Country Inn, and now has a village with some 750 units plus retail shops and five restaurants.

As a lifelong PSIA innovator, he knew early on that beginner ski school needed a reboot. In the early 1990s, he found an adult ski manufactured by Atomic that came in a short 120 cm. length and which never-evers could readily control and begin to carve rather than skid. He went beyond the gear by prioritizing the best instructors to teach beginners, and in elevating the first-timer experience in creating a separate, stand-alone rental instruction facility, the Sugar Shack, and a dedicated beginner area. This was the foundation for Jiminy's Guaranteed Easy Turn (GET) program, and it would be much adopted as NSAA President Michael Barry launched the signature Model for Growth for the country's resorts in the late-1990s. Fairbank would also team up with 20 other Midwestern and Eastern resorts to share his findings and create the Mountains of Distinction, whose members would swap ideas as a hedge against the rising conglomerates.

Jiminy had a power problem in the 2000s, with ever-escalating energy costs reaching a half-million dollars annually and threatening its very future. Fairbank ran with the suggestion of a Hancock town selectman to pursue a wind turbine, but endless research hit dead ends when no one would sell Jiminy just one installation. Enter Joe O'Donnell, Fairbank's longtime partner, the acclaimed Boston-area concessionaire and business magnate, avid skier, and resort troubleshooter in his spare time. Fairbank asked O'Donnell if he could call his friend, Jack Welch, the legendary steward of GE, to help out. Little Jiminy soon had the benefit of all of GE's formidable resources. The 1.5 MW turbine ended up being twice as large as first needed, but Jiminy would end up using every bit of it. Financing was ultimately resolved in the 11th hour by using renewable energy credits, and the actual installation of the 350-foot-high "Zephyr" went down to the wire for the 2007-08 season opening. This would be Jiminy's most significant management decision in its history, and one of the most complex projects ever undertaken by any resort—moving 250 million tons of sophisticated machinery up a fairly steep mountain to the summit.

The turbine paid for itself in eight years and saves an average of 66 percent in energy each year. After adding a 2.3 MW community shared solar facility in 2015, Jiminy is now 100 percent powered by renewable energy. The resort has earned overwhelming national green recognition and an NSAA Golden Eagle Award for these sustainability efforts, but Fairbank always interjects that Jiminy first pursued the project because it made good business sense.

Right about the time the turbine was installed, Fairbank's son joined the company and the Fairbank Group was hatched. Tyler had a senior medical equipment sales position, but was tired of spending months flying around the country and was looking for a new challenge closer to home. Fairbank and partner O'Donnell pitched the idea of Tyler leading a startup, called EOS Ventures, to share Jiminy's hard-earned renewable energy expertise, and the company would oversee three turbine projects and 10 for solar panels. They would also start an efficient snowmaking gun-equipment company they had developed on-site, and then buy one historic Eastern resort, Cranmore in New Hampshire, and assume management of a second, Bromley in Vermont.

As chairman and CEO, respectively, of the Fairbank Group, the father and son are inseparable, sharing a love of the outdoors, powder, entrepreneurship, and creating an extended family among the workforce. They now find themselves competing successfully in a hyper-competitive climate where the competition to the north includes A-list resorts that are part of the Epic or Ikon mega-pass families, offering multi-resort season passes that are cheaper than what Jiminy can offer its loyal customer base. Meanwhile, they were preparing for a 2020-21 Covid winter with their three resorts in three very different political worlds, with Vermont leading the country in lockdowns, New Hampshire operating at the other end of the spectrum ("Live Free or Die"), and Massachusetts in the middle, though closer to the Green Mountain State. The new challenges never end, and while Jiminy Peak may be pocket-sized compared to the big guys, its 1,150 vertical drop and nine lifts, including a high-speed six-pack, pack a punch—and, more importantly offer a tight family vibe the others can't match.

Even as Fairbank starts dreaming of shorter work days, he keeps thinking up new ideas. He and his wife of 12 years, Vicki, have purchased a summer home on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, and Brian immediately set out to buy his first boat. When he saw the huge gap in knowledge between taking a written boat-pilot-certification test and the actual hands-on operation of navigating the lake, he saw a corollary ski resort challenge with running a ski lift. Bullwheel Productions was born, and it now trains staff at some 50 resorts, having just added two Aspen areas.

"Never in my life," reflects Fairbank, "did I think all this would wind up in the Hall of Fame."

Career accomplishments

Born: Feb. 12, 1946, Jamestown, N.Y.

1966: PSIA certified instructor and examiner from 1971-1986.

1969: Recruited to Jiminy Peak at age 23 by the Crane Paper Co. (of stationary fame) to manage the then-tiny resort.

1985: Purchases a controlling interest in Jiminy with Joe O'Donnell.

1990-2004: Member of NSAA board, chairman from 2000-2002.

2003-present: Member of U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame board

2005: Wins Sherman Adams Award.

2007: Makes international sustainability headlines with the installation of the "Zephyr" wind turbine.

2008: Launches EOS Ventures with son Tyler and creates Fairbank Group, LLC.

2010-11: Fairbank Group buys Cranmore, N.H., and assumes management of Bromley, Vt.

2012: Launches Bullwheel Productions, LLC.

2015: Launches Snowgun Technologies, LLC.

2017: Receives NSAA's greatest honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award.