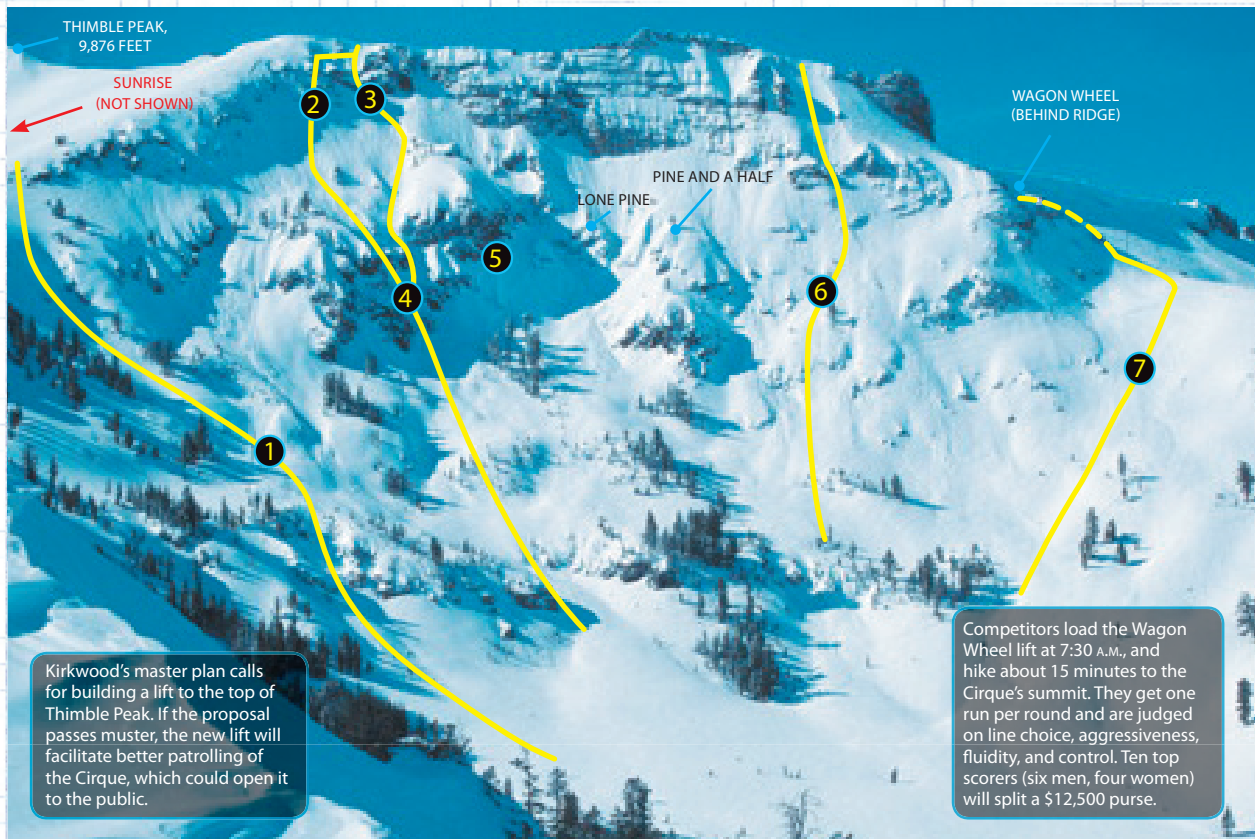


CALIFORNIA

The Cirque, Kirkwood

Only ski patrollers and competitors in the annual North American Freeskiing Championships get to sample Kirkwood's cliff-riddled, avalanche-prone Cirque. The rest of us get to drool. Until the resort reverses its permanently-closed policy and opens up the 1,200-foot shot of exposed steepness to the public, the only way to experience this epic bowl is vicariously. —CAMERON WALKER



Kirkwood's master plan calls for building a lift to the top of Thimble Peak. If the proposal passes muster, the new lift will facilitate better patrolling of the Cirque, which could open it to the public.

Competitors load the Wagon Wheel lift at 7:30 a.m., and hike about 15 minutes to the Cirque's summit. They get one run per round and are judged on line choice, aggressiveness, fluidity, and control. Ten top scorers (six men, four women) will split a \$12,500 purse.

1 HELL'S DELIGHT

In 1981, a monoskier traversed into the Cirque from Hell's Delight and started a wet slide that sent the skier below him over a cliff band. The avalanche victim emerged with only a broken tooth, but then-manager Dick Ruter upped the enforcement on the already-closed Cirque. Hell's Delight is the highest place from which to get a legal taste of the Cirque. From the Sunrise lift head skier's left on the cat track and drop over the ridge below the sign that states, THE CIRQUE PERMANENTLY CLOSED.

2 MEAT GRINDER

Mortals don't ski this line. But in the '05 finals, champion Craig

Garbiel veered skier's right out of Carnell's Couloir for a 25-foot air into the Meat Grinder—a granite-choked section that was skiable thanks to Kirkwood's record 804-inch season.

3 CARNELL'S COULOIR

The competition's third and final day starts at the 50-degree mouth of this couloir, named for Kirkwood's first patrol director, John Carnell, who pioneered the line. The couloir continues to skier's left of Frank's Alternate, but the chute's lower portion is off-limits during the championships.

4 FRANK'S COULOIR AND FRANK'S ALTERNATE

Competitors barrel down to

these shots after squeezing through the Meat Grinder or soaring through Carnell's. These two technical, high-scoring lines are linked by a huckable icefall. Competitors have no choice but to go big in here—Frank's Couloir has a mandatory air, and Frank's Alternate narrows to 10 feet—and impress judges with their brave choices.

5 EAGLE'S NEST

This boulder is home to golden eagles during the summer, and creates one of the more avalanche-prone areas of the Cirque in the winter. Off-limits to competitors, patrollers occasionally ski the area underneath the rock, and Eagle's Nest is a common landmark used by

spectators to orient themselves to the Cirque—as are Lone Pine and Pine and a Half, which are really mountain hemlocks and are way skier's left.

6 HOURGLASS

On day two of the three-day event, competitors start at the Hourglass, a 50-plus-degree bowl that narrows into a rock-lined funnel that can require giant hucks in low snow years.

7 SCREAMING EAGLE

It's a run-out for competitors, but mere plebeians can sample the lower part of the Cirque here. Head skier's right from the Wagon Wheel lift, also known as "The Wall," to score 1,000 feet of uninterrupted turns.