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October snowfall has skiers looking forward to season

By PAUL POST , The Saratogian

KILLINGTON, Vt. - In a classic case of overlapping sports seasons, Killington got seven inches of fresh snow Tuesday and the World Series hadn't even started yet.

Throughout the region, ski officials are hoping for the kind of outstanding conditions that made last season one of the best in recent history.

Seven inches of white stuff fell on Killington Peak from Tuesday evening into Wednesday morning.

"It obviously gets everybody in the mood and builds anticipation for the coming season," spokesman Tom Horrocks said. "We're shooting for a Nov. 14 opening. It's all weather dependent. Mother Nature will probably throw us a few curves, but the long-range forecast looks promising."

Elsewhere, work crews at Whiteface spent Thursday installing towers for a triple chairlift that will serve a new area called Lookout Mountain, to the right of existing ski trails. Whiteface also got hit with five to seven inches of snow Tuesday night.

Lookout Mountain is a \$5.5 million expansion featuring glades and three trails - two expert, one intermediate - with a 1,500-square-foot Porcupine Lodge atop its 4,000-foot high summit. One trail will follow the path of the old Cloudsplitter trail that dates back to the 1950s.

"It hasn't been used for a lot of years," spokeswoman Stephanie Ryan said.

In North Creek, Gore Mountain is set to unveil a new \$7 million expansion of its own called Burnt Ridge that will have four trails for intermediates and experts, plus glades, serviced by a high-speed quad chairlift. Gore's longest continuous run will now be 3.7 miles with a 2,300-foot vertical drop.

The new area will give visitors another five miles of skiable terrain on 55 acres. Other improvements are targeted for the base area, inside and out. These include increased shuttle system capacity, an enlarged sundeck, expanded and new bathrooms, more guest seating and newly configured entryways.

Stratton Mountain in Vermont has made capital improvements, too. Two new intermediate glade trails have been added to the Sunbowl area. A separate project has seen the creation of an all-natural terrain park that uses logs, felled trees, rocks and other natural obstacles to create features normally found in man-made terrain parks.

Stratton has also added two new machines to its grooming fleet and spent \$500,000 on snowmaking upgrades including 40 new tower guns, and an energy-saving pump and air compressor.

Like many seasonal businesses, ski resorts rely heavily on international workers to help fill their employment rolls. This year, however, many foreign workers won't be allowed in the U.S. because of failure by Congress to renew the H2B visa program.

"A lot of resorts are having difficulty filling their positions," Horrocks said. "Loveland in Colorado gets its snowmaking crew from New Zealand."

Killington has a seasonal workforce of up to 1,600 people, about 10-15 percent from overseas. Last year it hired 180 people with H2B visas, from South Africa to Poland. Such workers fill a variety of positions from cafeteria staff to chairlift attendants.

About half those workers won't be allowed back, because of the visa snafu, Horrocks said.

"Our first priority will be to hire people from the local workforce," he said. "Or we might be able to get people with student visas from the Southern Hemisphere, because this is their summer vacation."