

# A HALF-INCH GODSEND

## PRE-SEASON AFFIRMATION ON ASPEN'S SHORTEST CHAIR

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**THE 1976-'77** ski season in Aspen, CO was “just one of those years.”

It was that season that, for only the sixth time in Aspen history, a Thanksgiving opener was out of the question. Ski patrollers were laid off until early January. Business in the small—and at that point still largely mining—town was at a standstill. The area had just invested \$1 million in snowmaking equipment, a band aid for an increasingly dire situation. Substantial snowfall didn't accumulate on the mountain until Feb. 22, 1977.

To salvage the situation, Aspen Highlands owner Whip Jones had a different idea than relying on snowmaking. He'd open the Highland's then-9-year-old Half-Inch Chair for one day—November 24, 1976—which would allow access to the artificial snow on what could be called the “Bunny Hill” of the Highlands at the time.

Built in 1967, the Half-Inch Chair's humble, 500-foot lift wasn't the makings of anything epic, much less the means of salvaging a season. But Jones decided to open the lift and charge \$3 (about \$15 today) for a day pass. The promise of the mountain's smallest lift opening wasn't much, but whether by a simple desire to say “well, we tried,” or to give the somber town of Aspen a little jolt of pre-season affirmation, it was something. Especially when Aspen's summit only held a 10-inch base come late November.

While much of the lift's specific history has faded into the typical convoluted comings-and-goings of a rapidly growing resort, the Half Inch Chair can lay claim to one more moment of fame... or at least a few seconds. The chair made a feature appearance in the legendary cinematographer John Jay's 1970 film, “Winter Magic Around the World,” where Jay mentions its part in the daily

life of Aspen—particularly, its role among the droves of beginners trying desperately to master the slopes.

For instructors, the Half Inch was a godsend. The Half Inch existed as a supplement to Aspen Highland Ski School's renowned (and occasionally controversial) Graduated Length Method (GLM) ski instruction. GLM instruction revolved around the idea that student muscle memory could only be achieved if they were actually using those muscles, and using them repeatedly. As such, instructors—specifically those teaching the ‘Snow Puppies’ groups, packs of ambitious three-to-six-year olds—would spend only a short time talking to students before having them embark on the terrain accessed by the Half Inch Chair. If there was a place to practice the necessary repetitiveness of the Graduated Length Method, it was on those 500 feet.

This was particularly helpful for the young Snow Puppies. When the program began in the mid-70s, one of its core principles was that ski school was not merely an extension of the resort nursery or babysitting service—skiing was the primary goal, and the Half-Inch was a stepping stone along the way.

Once students mastered the Half-Inch, they graduated to the nearby One Inch, which accessed other lifts and would give them the opportunity to try bigger terrain. Peter Pawlak, who instructed at the Highlands in the mid-'70s, said it wasn't uncommon for Snow Puppies and other Highlands Ski School students to be skiing all over the mountain with only four or five days of instruction.

Eventually the Half-Inch Chair was dismantled in \_\_\_\_, and has since fallen



into obscurity beyond those few seconds in John Jay's “Winter Magic.” But it's fame lives on in the countless beginners whose first experience began on its 500 feet, and who continued on to become passionate, life-long skiers. And in remaining consistent to the method that it taught to so many, that sometimes that passion means getting out for the all-important season opener—even if it's paying \$3 to ski on fake snow, accessed by one of the most obscure (and shortest) ski lifts in Aspen history.