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Doug Pote, one of the owners, poses at the top of a ski run at Deer Run near Dexter.

Area slopes a hit with skiers

By Walter E. Shotwell

Some of Des Moines' more recent "surprising places" are the three downhill ski spots only a few minutes drive away.

For sure, they aren't the Swiss Alps or Colorado. But, on the other hand, it doesn't take a week of vacation and a ton of money to try them.

In fact, many Colorado-type skiers from Iowa are doing just that, either as a warmup for the bigger slopes out West or simply for a workout.

And most surprised of all are Harold and Luella Schell, whose Ski Valley is mining gold where other people once mined coal about three miles west of Boone on U.S. Highway 30.

"We had no idea it'd ever expand this rapidly," said Harold Schell.

No one is enjoying this tough winter any more than Schell and his counterparts at Sun Set Ski Slope southeast of Pella and Deer Run Sports Area just north of Dexter.

You can reach any one of the three in less than an hour from downtown Des Moines, rent everything you need on the spot, get instruction, and quickly get the hang of the tow ropes.

Skiers with mountain experience say Iowa slopes are plenty steep, but short. In Colorado you can ride a chairlift for maybe half an hour going up, then spend a couple hours skiing down in stages.

On the central Iowa slopes it's a

quick ride both ways, but it sure beats Waveland golf course. One of the runs near Dexter is called a "trail," somewhat longer than its four other "runs."

'Foothills'

As you swoop down Highway 30 near Boone toward the Ski Valley place, the scenery reminds you of foothills. The highway dips onto



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the Des Moines River bridge, crosses the valley floor for about a mile, then rises sharply and disappears into the west.

"There used to be a small community here — Coal Valley," said Schell. "There were two or three coal mines."

The ski runs are on bluffs, part of the Schell farm. They are covered with hardy — and stubborn — locust trees, but the trees and brush are being cut away as the ski area expands.

Iowa State University has been using the ski slopes for gym classes, for college credit. It's been common this winter to see classes of about 30 students skiing, falling and flailing their arms and legs with varying degrees of skill.

But the three main slopes offer

enough space that classes are no problem to other skiers. Instruction is \$5 an hour for individuals; \$4 each in groups of four or more.

Good skiing days

On a "good day," Schell said, Ski Valley may have 300 skiers. This usually happens on a weekend, and several have been "good" this year. Weather has been cold enough to hold the snow without driving away the skiers.

"But two years ago we had a dry winter," Schell said. "We'd make snow, but we'd no sooner get it down than it'd start to melt. We had only two skiing weekends all winter."

This winter the two snow machines are used to cover spots worn bare or hardened by ski traffic.

The Sun Set ski area near Pella is new, the one near Dexter is under new management, and Ski Valley near Boone is in its eighth year. A fourth central Iowa ski area is near Montezuma, a little farther from Des Moines than the other three.

Asked how skiers accustomed to Colorado slopes like Ski Valley, Schell replied, "Well, I've heard no complaints."

And he described what gives him pleasure about operating the place.

"It's just great to mingle with people," he said. "They want exercise and want to have fun. When you see 'em leave they have a satisfied look — sometimes a look of exhaustion."