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Ski-lovers can find slopes in midst of prairie

By Betty Stevens
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Fifty people called Trailridge ski area before noon Wednesday, the day after the season's first snowfall. They were asking when they could hit the slopes.

The answer is soon, but not quite yet, Trailridge President and General Manager Tom Valasek said.

The ski area near Gretna should open about the first week in December, after a new double chairlift is installed and safety tested.

The ski area also has a T-bar, handle tow and two tow-rope lifts.

Prairie Hills, 10 miles north of Kearney on Nebraska 10, also plans to open the first week of December, but the opening will depend on the outside temperature, manager John Weber said.

Although snow at Nebraska's ski areas is artificially made, the weather is a factor.

To make snow at Kearney, Weber said, the temperature needs to be at 25 degrees or below around the clock for three days, during which time enough snow can be made to ski.

The snowmaker at Prairie Hills forces water through a fan blade, creat-



ing a fine mist. It is the outside air that turns that mist into tiny snow pellets, Weber said.

Snow is made at Trailridge after the ground is frozen and the continuing temperature is 20 degrees or below, Valasek said. A different model of snowmaker at Trailridge forces water through a nucleator where air is added and the droplets are frozen. When the particles are propelled into the air along with swirling

moisture, they pick up the moisture and fall to the ground as snow — a human-made system that copies nature's style of snowmaking.

Prairie Hills has one major hill with rope tows and runs of different skill levels branching off in all directions. The longest run is one-fourth mile, Weber said, and the slope has 450 sets of ski rentals.

Lift tickets at Prairie Hills are \$6 on the weekend, \$5 during the week and \$4 after 5 p.m. Ski rentals are \$6 weekends, \$5 weekdays and \$3 after 5 p.m.

The slope is open from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekends and from noon to 9 p.m. weekdays.

Prairie Hills opened in 1981 and Weber said its biggest problem is getting people to believe there is enough snow to ski when they have none in their backyards.

"We'll have a 12-foot base through the middle area and a 20-foot base at the top, but since people can't be convinced of that, we usually report a 40 or 45-inch base," Weber said.

Trailridge, beginning its seventh season, will be open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m.

Friday through 4 a.m. Saturday, 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday.

"The college kids just love that all-night session," Valasek said of the Friday-Saturday time slot.

Trailridge has an alpine lodge with cafeteria and lounge and 750 sets of rentals.

Lift tickets on weekdays are \$15 all day and \$11 after 3 p.m. On weekends and holidays, lift tickets are \$18 all day and \$13 after 3 p.m. The 9 p.m. Friday to 4 a.m. Saturday lift tickets are \$15.

Ski rentals are \$10 on weekdays and \$11 on weekends and holidays.

Trailridge has 15 trails of all skill levels; the longest is one-third mile.

On Monday nights, Trailridge offers free skiing for people training for Special Olympics and their trainers. The ski area also will host the "Snow Box Derby, a Special Olympic fund-raiser around the first of February.

Contestants, either singles or teams, pay an entrance fee to race down the hill in cardboard boxes, propelled only with their hands.

The entry fees go to Special Olympics, Valasek said.