

America's top 10 college ski racing programs — for slopes beyond the race arena BY BRYCE HUBNER

No Profs on a Powder Day

College

UAA physics lesson
on Alyeska's Headwall.

U.S. News & World Report famously publishes its "Best Colleges" rankings each fall. We recently examined the 2011 list and found the absence of ski-specific criteria unacceptable.

With that in mind, we evaluate the 10 best NCAA and USCSA college ski teams by a nontraditional standard: access to phenomenal terrain. Because sometimes you gotta put the books and the race skis away and study with a snorkel instead.

1. Sierra Nevada College Incline Village, Nevada

The Terrain: It's impossible to beat having tens of thousands of lift-serviced acres at your fingertips, especially when these moun-


tains are complemented by the high-alpine serenity of Lake Tahoe. Sierra Nevada College boasts super-easy access to more than a dozen hotspots. Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows, and Heavenly Mountain Resort are within a 40-minute drive. Kirkwood, Sugar Bowl, and Northstar are also stone's-throw destinations. Perhaps best of all, the SNC ski team trains at Diamond Peak, a mere five minutes from campus. You probably won't come close to covering all Tahoe has to offer, but Mammoth Mountain is roughly three and a half hours away if you need a weekend change of scenery.

The Team: SNC is the dominant program on the USCSA circuit

and typically features athletes capable of winning national titles at NCAA champs, too.

2. TIE: University of Colorado, Boulder; University of Denver Boulder, Colo.; and Denver, Colo.

The Terrain: The two most accomplished schools in college ski racing tie for second, and they're behind SNC only because their campuses are a little farther from the slopes. Some 22 miles up Boulder Canyon, CU's nearest quality option is the quaint and cozy Eldora Mountain Resort, where 12 lifts serve the more than



Exploring the Green Mountain State at Stowe near UVM.



College

300 inches of average snowfall. Denver has to travel just an hour up I-70 to get to Loveland. Better still, both universities are within two hours — give or take some time, depending on traffic and weather — of Breckenridge, Copper, Vail, Winter Park and more. Both schools also enjoy the nation's longest ski season most years. Loveland, Copper, Keystone, and Breck sometimes open as early as late October so the best racers on the planet can train between the first World Cup races at Soelden, Austria, and North American World Cup stops in late November. Nearby Arapahoe Basin was open for a whopping 245 days last year.

The Teams: These schools have 37 NCAA titles between 'em and are categorically the best programs in the history of the sport.

4. University of Utah Salt Lake City, Utah

The Terrain: For the Utes, Park City — home of the U.S. Ski Team, and the three world-class ski areas of Park City Mountain Resort, The Canyons and Deer Valley — is a pretty stellar option to have 35 minutes up the road. Add two of North America's premiere powder resorts in Snowbird and Alta (each about 40 minutes from campus) and things look even better. There are also backcountry options galore in the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains. Need a change of scenery? Jackson Hole is just a five-hour drive.

The Team: Utah is another powerhouse in NCAA skiing, third on the all-time list of titles with 10.



Shredding Big Sky country not far from Bozeman's Montana State.

Snowblind at Snowbird near University of Utah.

5. University of Washington Seattle, Washington

The Terrain: If you're surprised to see UW so high up the list, get yourself to Washington's Cascade Range this winter. Really. About an hour east of UW are Alpental and Summit at Snoqualmie (the homes of the Huskies' ski team), which average 435 inches of snowfall per year. You can also ski at night should your studies bog you down during the day. Ninety minutes away, 450 inches of the white stuff blanket Stevens Pass every winter. To put that in perspective, Vail averages 348 inches of snowfall per year. Meanwhile, Crystal Mountain, Washington's largest ski area with 2,600 acres of lift-serviced terrain, is also just 90 minutes away. It's produced U.S. Ski Team athletes such as Libby Ludlow, Scott Macartney, and Paul McDonald. Finally, Whistler Blackcomb — four and a half hours north — offers discounted season tickets to UW students.

The Team: This is a fun, relaxed USCSA program.

College

6. Western State College Gunnison, Colo.

The Terrain: Like CU and DU, Western State gives you access to the best resorts in Colorado. Closest to campus is Crested Butte, a freeskiing gem that's hosted numerous world extreme and freeskiing championships in addition to having been one of the most exciting stops on the NorAm downhill circuit for years. Famed Red Lady Bowl and seemingly countless other backcountry options are adjacent to Crested Butte, making it one of the greatest easy-access ski touring posts in the state. Also, small-but-mighty Monarch Mountain atop Monarch Pass — about an hour from campus — has one of the highest snowfall averages in the state.

The Team: Western State recently lost its NCAA program due to lack of funding and is now a competitive USCSA team.

7. Montana State University Bozeman, Mont.

The Terrain: Eighteen miles from Bozeman, Bridger Bowl is a relatively inexpensive and dynamic ski area featuring a 2,600-foot vertical drop and 2,000 acres of skiable terrain. A little more effort via the majestic 50-mile drive through Gallatin Canyon puts you at the base of Big Sky Resort. Having added a world-class tram to the summit of Lone Peak in the mid 1990s, Big Sky features an awesome, leg-scorching 4,350-foot vertical drop and around 400 inches of snow per winter.

The Team: Montana State is an NCAA program on the rise.

8. University of Vermont Burlington, Vt.

The Terrain: Despite the protests of hardcore New Englanders, the skiing in the East doesn't truly compare with the West's. Still, UVM makes an appearance on this list by virtue of its proximity to virtually all the good skiing east of the Mississippi: the Catamounts race and train 50 minutes away at Stowe, one of the East's finest areas; Killington and Lake Placid's Whiteface Mountain are each less than two hours away; and one can effortlessly skip across the border into Quebec for a little joie de ski

Five minutes from SNC classrooms at ▶
Tahoe's Diamond Peak.

at resorts like Tremblant and Mont Sainte-Anne. Everything New Hampshire and Maine have to offer are fairly easy, too — in fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find another place that has access to more ski resorts within a six-hour radius.

The Team: UVM has the winningest NCAA program in the East and is a perennial contender for EISA and NCAA crowns.

9. University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska

The Terrain: The days are short and it's tough to get there, but anyone who's skied the sublime slopes of UAA's home mountain, Alyeska, knows it's worth it. With an otherworldly average snowfall of 630 inches, Alyeska is Alaska's biggest ski resort and has hosted several U.S. national championships in recent years. Beyond tremendous skiing at Alyeska, though, Anchorage students are surrounded by some of the world's most rugged and pristine backcountry skiing. You can't beat it. Just ask Alyeska-trained Olympic downhill champ Tommy Moe, who leaves his home in Jackson to guide skiing and fishing in Alaska each spring.

The Team: Despite the burden of having to fly to every carnival but their own, the Seawolves are on the verge of being an NCAA team that can win it all.

10. College of Idaho Caldwell, Idaho

The Terrain: About a half-hour from campus, Boise's Bogus Basin serves as home base for this ski team. A couple thousand feet of vertical and eight lifts make Bogus perhaps the best urban ski area in the world. Sun Valley, sometimes called "America's Shangri-La," is about three and a half hours east of COI, while McCall's Brundage Mountain Resort is a few hours north. Like UAA, COI is at the gate of unspoiled backcountry skiing; here, the goods are in the Sawtooth, Payette, Nezperce, Boise, and Bitterroot National Forest regions. Jackson Hole is a manageable six to seven hours away for a long weekend.

The Team: The College of Idaho is historically a strong USCSA program, especially on the women's side. **SR**

