

Culture Shift: Raising the Bar By Putting It Down

|| BY MIKE REITZELL, NSAA PRESIDENT & CEO



Those who've been paying attention have probably noticed that chairlifts have lately found their way into the news more often than usual. Most of this past season, it was due to an atypical number of mechanical issues. But the more recent buzz is not because of a technical debate or an engineering breakthrough; it's around restraint bars and their use (or lack thereof).

We see stories every year of unseated passengers. While these incidents are extremely rare based upon the sheer volume of lift rides, they always make headlines. The resulting injuries, impacts on those involved, and the public perception and scrutiny that follow are real and lasting. Even without injury, the unsettling video of an unseated passenger hanging from a chairlift always goes viral and casts the industry in a bad light.

I've been interviewed for several of these stories in my first year at NSAA. It's always a challenging conversation, but it's also an opportunity to speak honestly about the real issue: Chairlifts are very safe, but they're not risk-free. The decisions our guests make — including whether and how to use the restraint bar — matter enormously.

That's why I strongly believe it's time to change restraint bar culture.

Chairlifts Are Safe

Let's start with the simple truth: Chairlifts are among the safest modes of transportation. Millions of riders safely use the thousands of lifts across the U.S. every season. These systems are highly engineered, carefully maintained and rigorously inspected.

In a perfect world, a guest who loads, rides and unloads responsibly will almost certainly arrive safely, *with or without a restraint bar*. But we do not live in a perfect world. We rely on human behavior every single time a chair is loaded with one to eight people. When human error is introduced, so too is the risk of falling, sometimes from a few feet, sometimes from significantly more than that. That's why every layer of risk mitigation matters. Restraint bars, when designed and used correctly, add a critical layer.

The Challenge: No Consistent Culture of Use

Despite their potential for increased safety, we have not made a consistent, industry-wide effort in the U.S. to promote or instruct the public on restraint bar use. Ski areas have no doubt made individual efforts to educate guests and promote restraint bar usage, including employee training to always lower the bar, but we have not collectively addressed this issue.

It's difficult to pinpoint when the lack of consistency or coordination originated. Restraint bars began appearing at different times, in different places, with no shared understanding of why, when or how to use them. Some lifts were built with them, others without. Some states passed laws requiring their existence (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York) and/or their use (Vermont, Massachusetts, New York and Idaho), but most have not. No state requires ski area enforcement. ANSI B77 mandates their *existence* on all new and relocated chairs, but not their *use*. In parts of the Northeast, using the bar is second nature because the laws and local culture support it. In the West and Midwest, it's far less common. The lack of use in the U.S. stuns Europeans and Canadians, who use the restraint bar without question.

Over decades, this patchwork effort has left the sport without a clear, consistent culture of or approach to restraint bar use in the United States. As to why this issue has yet to be resolved, the answer is more complicated than it seems at first glance.

DAVE CAMARA, DIVISION ONE PHOTOGRAPHY



There's the fundamental reality that restraint bars are not standardized in the way helmets are. A helmet is simple: Put it on, secure it correctly and you're good to go. It works the same in Montana as it does in Vermont. That's what made the helmet push so successful. It was easy for us as an industry to say: Wear a helmet. Guests could understand and do it immediately without much variation. We've seen the payoff. Helmet usage among U.S. skiers and riders reached 91% in the 2024–25 season, a staggering cultural shift from the early 2000s, when helmets were often resisted.

Restraint bars vary in design, manufacturer (some existing, some defunct), age, deployment, usage mandates and, of course, existence. Some are simple pull-down bars, others have varying types of footrests or closing mechanisms. Some have vertical drop posts that settle between each rider's legs (my personal favorite). Some bars are spring-loaded. Sometimes lift design does not accommodate restraint bars. And then there's the operational factor: The bar must be deployed while the lift is in motion. Unlike an amusement park ride that secures before departure, a chairlift asks the riders — occasionally distracted, chatting, wrangling kids, handling equipment — to pull it down immediately after they load.

These are meaningful differences that make a universal solution elusive.

A Complicated Issue Demands a Thoughtful Solution

Given all these variables, NSAA isn't looking to create a one-size-fits-all, national "Bar Down" campaign. We're not going to tell every ski area in the country to retrofit older lifts that don't have restraint bars. That's not our job, nor is it realistic, practical or even possible in many instances. And it wouldn't reflect the diversity of our member resorts that span small local hills to large destination mountains.

But sticking with the status quo and hoping things evolve is no longer the path forward. When something is left to chance, especially in an industry with such guest variety, what results is a confusing and inconsistent approach at best — one that leaves many guests unaccustomed to thinking about the restraint bar as a routine safety measure.

That's why we need to change the culture.

Learning from the Seat Belt

To be honest, I am loath to bring seat belts into this discussion. Many people want to make the comparison, but typically in an improper way. I even recall a time when a government official tried to convince me that chairlifts should have seat belts ... but just for kids. Chairlifts and cars are not the same thing. The environments are different, the physics are different and the way people use them is different. And yet, despite those

differences, the history of seat belt adoption in the United States offers lessons that are profoundly relevant to us as an industry right now.

In the early days, cars were built without seat belts. In the 1950s, seat belts began to appear in a few vehicles, usually as optional add-ons. But even with growing evidence of their efficacy, adoption was slow. People thought they were unnecessary, uncomfortable, even a nuisance. Automakers were wary of installing them because they worried customers would see it as admitting their cars were dangerous.

By the early 1960s, just a fraction of drivers actually used seat belts despite their availability. There was no uniform standard, no consistent messaging, no expectation of use. Starting to sound familiar? There wasn't a silver bullet that drove seat belt adoption. It came from a combination of forces, including engineering improvements (three-point belts replaced lap belts) and public education (campaigns like "Buckle Up for Safety"). The result was a culture shift: Over time, not wearing a seat belt went from normal to unthinkable.

It was neither fast nor universally popular. It took decades, but it worked. Today, seat belt use in the U.S., just like helmets, hovers around 90%. It's so ingrained that when there's a serious car accident, the public reaction is almost automatic: "Were they wearing seatbelts?" A similar question is now automatic for helmets.

Responsibility is clear. The social expectation is set. Not wearing a seat belt isn't seen as brave or rebellious, but irresponsible. That's the kind of shift we're talking about for restraint bars, and we want our guests to think the same way: "Of course I use it. Why wouldn't I?" Because if something does go wrong, we want the first question to be: "Was the restraint bar down?" It's not about assigning blame in the moment of crisis, but rather doing what is needed to prevent or reduce the risk in the first place.

Changing a culture does not happen with a single message, a single rule or in a single season (Vermont's restraint bar law is 64 years old). It takes sustained effort, education, consistency and reinforcement. But as the history of seat belts shows us, it can be done. And the payoff — fewer incidents, safer guests and greater public trust — is worth every bit of that effort.

Making "Bar Down" Part of Skiing's DNA

Changing a culture is more than raising awareness. It's about building expectation.

We saw it with helmets. It's not just that people know helmets reduce head injuries. It's that they now expect to see everyone wearing one. That shift didn't happen by accident. It was the product of sustained industry effort, guest education, signage, rental programs, role modeling and operator encouragement. ►

That's the model we need for restraint bars. We don't just want guests to know they should use the bar. We want them to expect to use it every time. Indeed, it's truly part of their personal responsibility. Your Responsibility Code requires guests to know how to load, ride, and unload chairlifts safely. If the lift has a restraint bar, putting it down is part of their responsibility.

In reviewing comments to the many articles about restraint bars this past year, several people indicated that they are fine with the bar if people ask first. By the time someone seeks and receives permission, the bar should already be coming down. If each person loads the chair with the expectation that an available bar will be used, then only a "bar!" will be necessary.

We want to make restraint bar use part of the DNA of riding a lift safely.

Our Approach: A Toolkit for the Industry

NSAA is developing a Restraint Bar Toolkit. It will not treat every region, every area, every lift and every guest the same. Instead, we're going to provide resources our members can adapt to their own operations, chairlifts and guest profiles.

The toolkit will help areas think through and address:

- + How to educate guests about restraint bar use
- + How to train operators and staff to model and encourage use
- + How to use consistent, effective signage
- + How to integrate restraint bar messaging
- + How to build a culture of expectation around using the bar
- + How to handle chairlifts without restraint bars

It's about giving ski areas the tools to lead this change in ways that make sense for their unique circumstances. And we don't want to limit this to just restraint bars. Unseated passenger incidents frequently go beyond the use of the restraint bar. We need to continue and even amplify education on lift operations for guests.

This is going to take all of us in the industry, from lift operations, ski instructors and patrol to marketing and even race teams, in partnership with our guests.

The Expectation, Not the Exception

I want to be clear: This isn't a quick fix. We're not going to transform the culture of restraint bar use overnight. Just like getting helmet usage to where it is today, it will take the same kind of sustained, patient, determined effort to make restraint bar use a true norm.

But it's work worth doing. Because when you strip away all the complexity, all the variation, all the debate, it comes down to something very simple: If there's a tool that can help our guests act safer, they should use it. And we should do everything we can to help them. Consider this column a preview, not a prescription. We don't have the entire

toolkit finalized yet. The NSAA team is hard at work on that now. You'll see more detail on pg. 42 and through other communication channels as we roll it out.

But I want our members thinking about it now. Think about your lifts, your guests, your signage, your education and your employee training. Think about what you can do this season, and in the seasons to come, to make restraint bar use the expectation, not the exception. Consider whether you're among the skeptics who rolls their eyes when somebody starts lowering the bar, and think about how your opinion on helmets has changed with their prevalence over the years.

If your ski area doesn't have restraint bars on some or all of your lifts, that's OK. As we've said, lifts are safe with or without restraint bars. It's all about guest education and helping them understand how to use lifts safely.

Changing a culture doesn't start with a mandate. It starts with leadership and education, particular strengths of our industry we can apply to this effort. 📌

Comfort, Restraint or Safety?

All these words have been used to describe bars on chairs. "Comfort" bar is a wishful euphemism that conveys little to the guest, almost suggesting that it's not meant for restraint. "Safety" is a bit generic and broad. At NSAA, we are going to use and encourage "restraint" bar for three main reasons. First, ANSI B77 refers to a "restraint device." That device is usually, if not always, some type of bar. Second, it aligns with the term that manufacturers use. And finally, the bar's purpose is restraint when needed.



