Latest Episode of Epic By Nature: "Epic By Nature Is Back and So Am I, Why?"

BROOMFIELD, Colo., Oct. 8, 2025 — Rob Katz returns as CEO of Vail Resorts and revives Epic By Nature, sharing why he came back and what it means to lead the company today. In conversation with his chief of staff, Sara Schwandt, Rob reflects on the challenges, opportunities, and the people who make the mountain experience possible, kicking off a season of stories about leadership, culture, and the journeys that define Vail Resorts.

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Full Episode Transcript

Rob: One of the misperceptions is, I'm coming in here with all the answers, and I'd say not only was that never true, but it's not true now. And so I need everybody in the company to kind of rise up and meet the challenge that we're facing today. And I obviously want to be a part of that, but I'm just a part.

I'm Rob Katz, CEO of Vail Resorts. For those familiar with this podcast, welcome back to Epic by Nature. For those tuning in for the first time, thanks for joining us.Nearly seven years ago, we started this podcast to tell the story of Vail Resorts and the Epic stories of the people who work here.

Now that I've returned to CEO, I want to bring back Epic by Nature to build on that foundation and tell the stories about the Epic journeys that define our company, our industry, and the people who shape both. This time around, we're making it a bit more conversational, including having the occasional guest who can speak to the stories, and the heroes that create these experiences.

I'll also be joined by my Chief of Staff, Sarah Schwant, as Co-host. Sarah, why don't you introduce yourself?

Sarah: Thanks Rob. I'm super excited to be here with you co-hosting. As Rob mentioned, I'm the Chief of Staff. I've been in role for about the same time since Rob rejoined the company. And previous to that, I was the VP of Operations for the Retail, Rental, and my Epic Gear division.

And, Rob, you know, you and I have talked about this, but in this role, a lot of people, they ping off of you, and there's a lot of just general curiosity about things that are going on in the company, you in particular.

And one of the things that, you know, I think a lot about is when you called me to tell me that you were coming back and that my role would be reporting into you.

And I think after I said something like, yeah, this phone call wasn't on my bingo card, I asked you the question that I do really think is on, you know, everybody's mind, which is, you know, yeah. Why did you come back?

Rob: Yeah, that is a good question. I have to think about that every day. I think it's for a lot of reasons. It felt like this was the right moment for me to come back. First and foremost, the reason I came back is the same reason I've been. Yeah. I started back in 2006 as CEO, which is, you know, I've like everyone else here, I have a passion for the mountains. I have a passion for the outdoors, for being active. I love skiing, I love cycling and mountain biking. And yeah, there's something incredibly grounding about being around these experiences that we get to provide everyday.

And I think that kind of permeates throughout the company. And I feel like no matter where I go within the company, I can feel that same vibe, this kind of ethos about the outdoors, about authenticity, you know, and it's, it's a way, I think being at the company for me is kind of a way to, you know, align who I am with what I do. And that's not always that easy to, to find. And so I kind of feel like, yeah, I feel pretty lucky to be able to do that. I also feel like it's, it's a challenge. This is not an easy company to

work at, for a lot of different reasons. But the first is, you know, I think sometimes we forget how difficult it is to put on a ski and snowboard experience. You know, I try and remind folks that, right, we first of all, we're seasonal. And so we only have a short number of months, you know, somewhere between three and five months for the most part to really put on the season, depending on where you are in the, you know, in the world.

And we're putting on this like literally allowing people to slide super fast, right, on this slippery surface. And we're doing it all at the top of a mountain in all the changing weather. And so just like the very nature of what we do in terms of the safety, in terms of providing people food and shelter and comfort, teaching people how to do the sport, renting them equipment, you know, it is there's a lot of hoops that people have to jump over.

And our company's job is to try and make those as easy as possible. But we wake up every day and we don't know, right, what it's going to look like. And, you know, so I kind of feel like that's a challenge that I love. I love the fact that it's different every day and that things are constantly changing.

I also think our company has made this commitment to reimagine the mountain experience. And I think that means that as a company, in addition to all the changing weather and dynamics that's going on at the mountain, we're constantly trying to change, you know, what it means to do this sport while still preserving what's so core and important about it.

But it means when you wake up every day at Vail Resorts, we're doing something new. And so there's like a saying about Colorado, if you don't like the weather, right, wait 10 minutes, right? And it'll change. And in some respects, if you don't like Vail Resorts, wait 10 minutes because something's going to change. And it might address the thing that you're, you know, upset about.

And so being in that environment is, you know, I think I think pretty compelling. You know, one of the things that I've had to sit with and coming back though is I think there's some sense, you know, because I was the CEO for a long time, the company, you know, had success during that time period, which is amazing and a great testament to the teams and everybody here.

But yeah, I think there's some sense that with me coming back, I will personally solve like all issues and resolve all the challenges that we face. And, you know, and we have like trying to align, we have these very, very passionate stakeholders, guests and, you know, our communities and our employees and all the governmental regulators that we deal with.

Yeah, trying to align all of them is not a simple task. And yeah, I think one of the misperceptions is, is that I'm somehow coming in here with all the answers. And I'd say not only was that never true, but it's not true now. And so I need everybody in the company to kind of, yeah, rise up and meet the challenge that we're facing today. And I obviously want to be a part of that, but I'm just a part.

And two, like I'm new. And so I don't know everything, like a lot has changed over the last, you know, four years. You know, a lot has changed about how the world works. A lot has changed about how people communicate. A lot has changed about what people's expectations are. And the company has changed, even the people that I know at the company who were here when I was still CEO, almost every single person is in a different position.

And so, I come back to kind of looking at everything kind of in a, in a completely new way. I would say that two things that were on my mind, you know, as I, as I really, you know, I, I shared with my kids when, when, you know, the news came out that I was going to be taking this role again.

And, you know, my kids were six and eight when I took the CEO role back in 2006. And so they, they kind of grew up with me in this role. And so when I was telling them, I was wondering like, what their reaction was going to be. And, you know, they had kind of two reactions. One reaction was, what about all the negativity? Are you really ready to deal with all that again?

And it's true that there is a lot of negativity. You know, I think some of, that's about Vail Resort, some of that's just the way the world is right now.

And yeah, I think, think in the end, I, what I shared with them and I, I kind of have shared with people when I've been back is just, yeah, that I want to, I want to make sure that I respect all the feedback we get.

And I don't want to, I'm not going to stick my head in the sand. I'm not going to kind of turn the volume off right of all feedback and not worry about it. I want to absolutely listen to it and take it in, but maybe I want to turn the volume down. And I don't think you can take everything you read online and everything you read in a, you know, a newspaper or digital magazine or whatever forum as, you know, as the truth, right? It's just one piece of feedback.

And we have millions and millions of guests and millions of community members and right, almost 60,000 employees. And so I tend to like take it all in with a little bit of a grain of salt.

One of the other things they said to me, though, was, yeah, Dad, if you go back now, like what if you don't succeed? And I was like, yeah, maybe I won't, right? That's, there's no guarantee on that. But I kind of feel like you do your best. And in the end, like, that's maybe the most important thing as I come back to this role, for me, it's just realizing, yeah, I just need to, it's the same advice I'd give everybody in the company.

Like, I need to be myself, right? I, I, I'm not here to, you know, work some kind of magic trick. It's like I can just be me, try and connect with the people around me, try and make an impact, try and lead. And yeah, you know, my view is if I can do that and we create the right culture and the right connection within both internally and with our stakeholders, yeah, that usually leads to some pretty good outcomes.

When we originally started this podcast, we named it based on one of two definitions of Epic. In this form, it means a journey, a story recounting the deeds and adventures of a legendary figure or historical hero. Every hero faces peaks and valleys, and it's through those moments that we grow, evolve, and reimagine what's possible. There are so many heroes in the story of Vail Resorts and our industry as a whole, and those are the journeys we'll use this podcast to explore. We'll delve into the values that guide us, the decisions that shape our future, and the stories that inspire us to keep pushing forward.

And we'll do it all with honesty, curiosity, and hopefully, a little bit of fun. You can expect these podcasts all season long and shorter than you remember.

While they're shorter, we'll also touch on some thornier topics that I know a lot of people are curious about, like what does it mean to be a publicly traded ski company? Something that can sometimes seem in odds with the essence of the ski industry and questions around crowding, labor issues, ticket prices, and accessibility. We'll dive into the relationships between our corporate headquarters and our resorts and wrestle with the tension between being unique while also being part of a team.

We'll share where we see us going as a company and as an industry, and the potential steps we can take to get there.

Thanks for tuning in and look forward to seeing you all up on the hill.

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