

All in a Name? K2 to Kill "Telemark" Brand

Contributed by Adam Howard
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One of the last major ski manufacturers with a dedicated telemark program, K2 was a holdout in a market that saw big names like Rossignol, Black Diamond, and G3 market their skis more universally as backcountry/telemark/freeride skis, or some combination thereof. The future of sister-company Karhu's freeride telemark series remains unclear.

However, Director Sportif for K2 Telemark Mike Hatstrup says his company's dedication to the sport is unwavering, despite the shift toward a more androgynously branded series of skis.

"K2 telemark is not dead," he said in Vallee Nevado, Chile in September while testing the new 2009/2010 skis with sales representatives, select retailers, and media. "K2 Telemark the brand is dead. It won't be going forward, but we're still building telemark applicable skis. We've got a lot of skis in the line that are going to be great telemark skis."

Not long ago, he says, there were real differences between what telemark skiers and alpine skiers demanded. Traditionally, telemark skis were lighter for quick transitions, and softer to match up better with the boots and bindings of the day. But with the progression of stiffer boots and bindings, telemark skiers now demand more and more powerful, damp and, at times, heavy skis.

The progression of AT boot/binding technology mirrored that of telemark equipment, and though lighter telemark skis were desirable to a wider range of backcountry skiers at one time, tele-specific graphics and telemark binding inserts made them impractical. And because of this convergence Hatstrup says, the "Telemark" and "Backcountry," and even the "Alpine" lines from K2 had a lot of overlap.

"Most people don't distinguish between a backcountry ski and a telemark ski," he says, when speaking about what testers might prefer during one of K2's blind tests. "We've built both, but those differences got smaller and smaller over the years. And it got to a point where we didn't see the reason to build both any more."

And so the current Backcountry and Telemark line—consisting of 14 skis with waists between 78 mm and 102 mm, all of which have cap construction—will be totally overhauled and refocused. The "Backcountry" brand will move forward with seven cap skis from 82 mm at the waist to 102 mm. And the new "Sidecountry" series will feature full sidewall, race-room construction, and run from 98 mm to 128 mm.

"We're still testing all these skis for telemark so don't think we're getting out of the discipline," Hatstrup promises. "We're still deeply involved in the sport; we're still passionate about the sport. But the market is changing and we wanted to build a broader range of skis for that skier."