Splitsville - 2006 Snowboards that Part Ways

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Today's split-boards bridge the schism between Polynesian surfers and Scandinavian skiers by combining the natural ease of skinning up a mountain with the fluid rush of surfing down the crystalline waves. This makes them the tool of choice for the avid backcountry snowboarder.

No longer do you have to pack snowshoes or mini-skis and bear the weight associated with them; no longer is territorial bickering over skin trails necessary. Now all a rider with a split-board needs is the board, collapsible poles and skins, and, of course, the requisite snow safety gear and the backcountry knowledge and experience to use it.

According to Sean Colin at Voile, split-boards were originally the brainchild of Brett "Cowboy" Kobernick. A guide for Exum Mountain Guides in Jackson and Dean Cumming's H20 Heli Guides in Alaska, Kobernick "fashioned one of the first split-boards using door hinges and other fasteners to keep the halves together."

The evolution continued when Mark Wariakois, the owner of Voilé, provided the capital needed to get the project off the ground. The first production split-boards were produced by Voilé for the 1995-96 season.

Other companies, such as Burton, Prior out of Canada, the Blaho Brothers of Colorado’s Never Summer factory and Duotone/F2 (only available in Europe), have followed Voilé’s lead and now manufacture split-boards. Yet still only two interface systems—Voilé's Universal Binding System and Burton Snowboard Company's system—are available in today's market. It's the interface—the means by which the board halves are connected together and to the bindings—that transforms touring boards to a snowboard and ultimately defines the connection between rider and stick. In a snowstorm or spring slop, the dynamics of the changeover are drastically different from those tested in the confines of a shop. Hands get cold and numb; snow, slush and ice build up in tiny, difficult to manage spots; it is the rider's responsibility to find the system that is best suited to his or her backcountry needs.

Voilé's system is a simpler mechanical design without moving parts. It features unique own touring hardware with a "puck" system—a rubber block gasket allowing the rider to customize the stance before stepping onto the snow. A pin system is the main link between getting the board from uphill to downhill mode. On ascent, the pin attaches the bindings (on an aluminum slider system) to the deck via a toe clamp—this is the pivot point. On descent, the pin holds the slider tracks in place on the pucks. The slider tracks are self-cleaning and are designed to keep snow and ice from building up within the system.

Burton started researching split-boards in 1999, and introduced their first production board as a late model in '01, bringing their technical advances to the interface system. Their mechanical interface uses a lever to open and close a jaw that locks into either a crescent plate on the deck for descending or a toe clamp on the deck for ascending. The binding is attached to the interface, which the rider sets to the desired stance and angle via a center plate before stepping on snow. With the late Craig Kelly, freestyle ruler Dave Downing, and big mountain diva Victoria Jealouse at the core of the S-Series development, you can count on a truly rider driven system with all-around great performance.

With both interface types, riders should take the time to adjust their stances properly before heading into the backcountry so that they will not have to make changes on the trail other than to switch the interface from touring to descending.

Originally, there were concerns that cutting a board in half lengthwise would cut the performance and torsional rigidity as well, but those fears have been qualmed with each advance made in the interface systems. The actual binding-to-board interfaces as well as the latching systems that connect the halves together are cleaner and lighter in the '03/'04 models.

Nose clips and Yin/Yang Latches (Burton) or Chinese Hooks (Voilé) have created a damp ride with enough torsional stiffness to make these boards' performance akin to that of traditional snowboards.

Voile Split Decision www.voile-usa.com $660

sizes[cm]: 159, 166, 173, 182 nose/waist/tail[mm]: 303/250/302

sidecut radius[m]: 7.85 effective edge[cm]: 132.2

weight[g]: 4540 (166 cm) includes all binding interface hardware

The Split Decision set the standard in the split-board world. Over nearly ten years of production, the design has ch for the better with reduced weight, increased dampness and improved torsional stiffness. The Split Decision, the lightest of the boards tested, has an aspen core and sandwich design. The heel riser pad for climbing is a bit tricky to get to on the fly, but the overall design is very easy to set up and use. The Chinese Hooks on the Split Decision can swivel out of the way so riders can use either edge while climbing. Voile also makes two swallowtail split-boards in 178cm and 195cm.

Prior Backcountry Split-board www.priorsnowboards.com $760

sizes[cm]: 154, 161, 165, 168, 172, 176 nose/waist/tail[mm]: 302/260/298

sidecut radius[m]: 9.5 effective edge[cm]: 124 weight[g]: 4740 (168 cm) includes all binding interface hardware

Introduced to the market in 2000, the Prior Backcountry Split-board is the widest of the test boards. With its 26cm w this board might be your best bet if you have larger feet. The additional width also helps the board float in powder—a bonus to the performance of this already solid freeride board. All Prior boards are handcrafted in Whistler, B.C., and offer an uncompromised ride. With full-wrap metal edges and sandwich construction, these decks are built to last. The core is made up of vertically laminated aspen wood core with birch hardwood stringers along each edge. For an added $100, Prior options their split-board with a quadraxle glass weave, reducing the weight to 4040 grams. Prior also produces a swallowtail split-board. These boards accept the Voile Universal Binding Interface.

Burton S-Series www.burton.com $899.95

sizes[cm]: 165, 170 nose/waist/tail[mm]: 302.5/254/302.5

sidecut radius[m]: 8.52 effective edge[cm]: 133.5 weight[g]: 4920 (170 cm) includes all binding interface hardware

Based on the Burton Custom, Face and Cascade models, the platform for this split-board is a rock-solid freeride/fre board. The lever-operated interface system is simple when all parts are properly lubricated and connected—if not, it can be a struggle. In an effort not to sacrifice the ride for the ability to split, Burton’s contribution is slightly heavier than the other boards tested. The Burton skins and machined die-cast aluminum interface are bomber. The S-Series has the Super Fly II Core, a vertical sandwich of soft and hard woods engineered for strength, snap, and durability.

Split and Swallow

Prior and Voilé have combined the practical split-board design with the hybrid swallowtail to help satisfy even the greediest backcountry powder hounds. These big guns, none shorter than 178 cm, conquer the deepest of deep snow conditions—think over-the-head snorkel deep. Both manufacturers claim the boards perform well in all conditions, but since the swallowtail design moves the rider's center of balance forward, it provides a more powerful ride in pow. The swallowtail design also helps the board plane faster. These boards, built and tested in the off-piste havens of the Whistler (Prior) and Wasatch (Voilé) backcountries, are some of the most specialized sticks on the market. Both models come with the Voilé hardware and skin packages and can be used with virtually any binding set-up.

Split Tips

In essence, the two split-board interface systems are simple—pull a pin or adjust a lever, switch the bindings and l ascend or descend, then replace the pin or readjust the lever. But in the reality of backcountry travel, things can go wrong. Snow builds up in the nooks and crannies, pins can be lost, skins can be temperamental and parts break or are forgotten. A majority of the headaches can be avoided by remembering the six P's: Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance. Voile has a retention device for the pin and Burton has a tool for getting snow out of the wee places where ice can build up, but there are always more preventative maintenance steps to help the process.

Here are a few more split tips:

• Ride the board at your local hill to fine tune the stance and try switching it around between runs for practice.

• Take the time to make sure the skins properly fit the hooks that connect them to the board halves.

• Bring along a stiff-bristled brush for clearing any snow or ice build-up.

• Spray the interface with WD-40 or similar lubricant.

• Make sure the bindings have the ratchets facing the outside while ascending—attach the left binding and interface onto the right half of the board and the right binding and interface onto the left half. If you don't do this, they can catch on the bindings and come undone.

• With the Burton split-board, always switch board halves around so that the side cut is facing inward, alleviating the risk of catching the Yin/Yang latch.

• Use lock-tight on the mounting hardware.

• Bring along duct tape, a multi-tool, and zip ties just in case.

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