

The Case for Custom: In the age of McEverything, are custom skis in your future?

Contributed by Taylor VanRoekel

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Got wood for custom skis? Pete Wagner does. [Photo] Brett Schreckengost

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"Custom skis are like the farmers' market of skis," says Pete Wagner, owner of Wagner Custom Skis in Telluride, Colo. "You relate to the person making the ski on a personal level."

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Wagner believes buying a custom ski is no different than getting your boots custom molded. Boot fitting improves balance, comfort and control—resulting in a more enjoyable, efficient experience. "Those are the same benefits you get with a custom ski," he says, arguing that a higher level of comfort on your skis correlates to a higher level of performance in the backcountry.

Wagner starts the custom process by asking a little bit about his client's skiing background. "We need to know where you're skiing most frequently, and what the mission of the ski is going to be," he explains. I grew up railing icy turns down Mid Western hills, I tell him, but I want the ultimate sidecountry slayer. From there, it's on to hypothetical scenarios: "A ski with more edge control, softer construction, or a nimble, light-on-your-feet, stiff ski—which sounds more appealing to you?" I opt for a soft stick. Wagner then presents multiple core and base options. I choose a sugar maple/aspen core with a heavier base. He explains that this option will increase the longevity of the skis. All of this information (plus height, weight and age) is entered into Wagner's computer program, which renders a ski design, he says, that fits...me. We talk for an involved 45 minutes, and afterwards, I get an email synopsis of the ski we designed together, including the rendering of the ski's shape. I feel like Pete knows my skiing better than I do.

But custom skis are expensive. Wagner's boards start at \$1,750. That's a lot of cash—and perhaps the ultimate turn-off for many prospective buyers. But is there value enough to justify the cost? "Our skis tend to last longer because we use clear grained wood cores, extra thick bases, oversized steel edges, stout P-Tex sidewalls," Wagner says. "And we build everything with an attention to detail that you don't see from the big factories." This can equal a longer-lasting ski. Wagner reckons that some of his customers ski their customs for upwards of 400-days. That's roughly four and half bucks per day. Compare that to the roughly 200 days skied on an 800-1000 dollar pair of mass-produced boards (at a cost of around four dollars per day) and you get a difference of only 50 cents per day. You could get, quite literally, what you pay for.

But the level of customization depends wholly on the manufacturer. With several companies jumping into the customization market, each has their own process. ROMP of Crested Butte, and Folsom of Denver, let consumers modify a variety of base models. Others, like Skilogik, offer personal consultations with the builder in order to hone in on the best fitting ski. Still more, like Birdos Freeride Skis of Andermatt Switzerland, have a personalized, one-on-one approach that involves an on-hill examination of the customer's skiing style.

"I enjoy taking a few runs [with a prospective buyer] on the Gemsstock to see how they ski," says Dan Loutrel, owner of Birdos, who believes that customer relations are the very essence of successful business. Dan raps with his customers about skiing style, intended use, typical conditions, skier size, etc. "Listening to the customer's desires and observing their skiing style allows me to create the optimal custom-built ski for them," he says. It's like a mani-pedi spa-day of ski buying. But where did it all start?

Loutrel started Birdos in a Massachusetts basement in 2003. Wagner started his company in 2006. But when I asked about the roots of customizing skis, I received multiple answers. Wagner considers Igneous in Jackson Hole, Wyo. to be one of the first company to sell custom boards as early as the mid '90s. But the history of custom skis is a convoluted and varied one. "A company out of Salt Lake called Evolution started making skis around the same time that we did," says Mike Tierney of Igneous. "We've given a lot of help to upstart companies over the years." And it's the upstart companies that Wagner believes instigate growth in the industry.

Wagner says that custom companies can create a core feel not offered by the Bigs like, Atomic, K2 or Rossignol. "We're creating awareness that you don't have to buy...other big brands," he says.

Loutrel also believes that custom brands are often the harbingers of new ski technology. "Some of the latest trends with freeride skis came first from small companies like ours," he says. "For example, we have been pressing traditional skis with rocker tip since 2004." This sort of grassroots innovation, according to Loutrel, is what drives innovation. "Custom-built skis," he adds, "are a product with soul and ingenuity."

There's a lot to consider when purchasing skis. For some, deciding which pair best fits their style is a yearly or bi-yearly ritual. But if you value handmade, tailored products, custom skis are an increasingly available option.

"What keeps us going is building a shape and going out and riding it," Tierney says. "There's no better feeling than standing on top of a burly line with a pair of skis that you dreamt up and then built." Or, in my case, had someone else build for me.

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