

Ski, snowboard equipment designed with women in mind

By Karissa Bell, Wired

Adrienne Schneider, a former racer and member of Salomon's women's ski team, now runs women's clinics and coaches master's programs for men and women.

She sees the advent of rocker skis as one of the most exciting advancements in the industry, particularly for women. Unlike other cambered skis where the contact points are located at the tip and tail, a fully rocker design positions the contact points almost completely underfoot. Schneider says this makes for a more forgiving ski that's much easier to coax into turns – especially for women, who tend to not be as strong as guys, who are more able to “muscle through” turns.

“Rocker technology is going to make more women want to ski,” she says. “Turning is a lot easier, they are more playful and friendly. They are like little Ferraris.”

Schneider says ski manufacturers have come a long way in making skis lighter and more optimized for the way women ski.

“Ten years ago, it was not a good experience to have a women's ski,” she says. “They were junk, but now they are much more forgiving.”

Sarah Allen, a lifelong skier who now does marketing for a few Colorado resorts, says she has seen women's lines improve by leaps and bounds during her 20-plus years in the sport. Though women's gear is still not as plentiful as the men's selection, women have a far wider range of equipment to choose from than ever before.

And, Allen says, we've thankfully moved on from the days when

manufacturers just added pink graphics to their men's models and called it a women's ski. "Women and men ski completely differently," she says. "They're creating gear more customized to the way we ski."

Snowboards: Better boots, new bindings

Amanda Cooper fell in love with snowboarding at an early age. When she started competing during her high school years, there weren't many other women in the sport.

"There were some events when I would actually end up competing against guys because there weren't enough girls," she says.

Cooper thinks some of the most drastic improvements she's seen have been in snowboarding boots.

"When I first started riding, it was hard to find boots that really fit very well." She says she would do all kinds of funny things to get a good fit, like tear apart the boot liners and stuff her boots with inserts and footbeds. She laughs about it now, but it was frustrating at the time.

"Definitely, the women's boots have come a long way. They've been able to make boots that are really solid and form-fitting and have the support and still allow for flexibility."

She cites improvements like rear-entry bindings and the Boa system – a boot closure mechanism that uses steel cables and a crank knob instead of laces or clamps – as innovations that make it easier for beginners to hit the slopes.

"The Boa system is really good for new riders too, because it gives a lot of reinforcement and security and a custom fit."

Rae Jamison is a self-described ski bum who lived in Denver and Jackson Hole before coming out to California, where she feeds her snowboarding habit in the mountains of Lake Tahoe. When it comes to gear, Jamison has a special appreciation for the fashion side of things.

“It’s about standing out,” she says, speaking of her preference for less-mainstream companies like No Mist. “It’s a small brand,” she says. “If someone has that on, they’re in. It shows they didn’t just go to the store down the street from the mountain.”

Get out of the park

Both Cooper in California and Allen in Colorado will say they’ve recently seen a significant increase in snowboarders and skiers heading into the backcountry.

If you look at the culture of a decade ago, Allen says, parks were huge – riders flocked to halfpipes, boxes, and other man-made terrain features. “Now, you’re seeing the pendulum swing back to where people are taking everything back to the backcountry,” she says, “kind of like taking it back to where skiing used to be where you just found a mountain and you skied it or snowboarded it.”

This shift is also reflected in the recent changes in gear, particularly on the ski side, according to Allen. AT (Alpine-Touring) bindings are becoming more popular and readily available. AT bindings are a cross between traditional alpine bindings used for downhill skiing and those used for telemark or cross-country. This gives skiers the flexibility to have their heels free for “skinning” up hills, as with a traditional cross country or telemark ski, and the ability to lock them down again, alpine-style, when descending.

In snowboarding, splitboards have gained momentum in recent years. Splitboards are often used by snowboarders who need versatility in backcountry conditions. They come apart like skis and have bindings that can be converted for skinning up hill and then reattached for riding on the descent.

Cooper says she sees this trend as a broader reflection of snowboarders and skiers wanting to take their respective sports back to their roots. Particularly in snowboarding,

which began as a renegade sport – snowboarders' only choice for access to the best terrain often was to take split boards onto the mountains or to head out into the backcountry.

“I feel like that’s a very natural and soulful thing,” says Cooper. “You’re connecting back with nature and you’re experiencing what snowboarding is really all about – going fast and experiencing the feeling and joy of being able to cruise at high speeds.”