

Obermeyer at 93 still a visionary in outerwear industry

By Suzanne S. Brown, Denver Post

He laughs. He yodels. He talks to everyone from the new kids just getting started to industry kingpins. At age 93, Klaus Obermeyer is a snow-sports veteran with no thoughts of retiring.

An estimated 19,000 people will file through the Colorado Convention Center this weekend buying and selling ski parkas and snowboards, boots and poles at the annual Snow-Sports Industries America trade show, and many of them will make a point of stopping by Sport Obermeyer's showroom to show their respect.

While a brigade of sales reps shows the brand's collections, Obermeyer acts as the company's genial ambassador, greeting buyers with a hearty handshake or hug and honest interest in finding out what's on their minds. Sometimes he'll wear lederhosen or an embroidered shirt as a nod to his native Germany, where he learned to ski as a child in the Bavarian village of Oberstaufen.

Obermeyer's now-legendary story goes like this: He was teaching skiing in Aspen in 1947 when he got tired of being cold during long days on the slopes. In those days, people skied in wool coats and suits. Looking for a solution, Obermeyer cut up a down comforter his mother had insisted he bring with him when he moved to America, and fashioned part of it into a crude parka.

"I looked like the Michelin Man and had feathers in my cereal for weeks," he said with a laugh. But the jacket was warm. And

one of his students paid the unheard-of sum of \$250 to buy it off his back. "A new Buick was \$1,250 in those days!"

Next, he had to design a better prototype and figure out how to manufacture it. Obermeyer persuaded a friend in Bavaria to do so. "But he told me I'd have to supply the zippers and knit cuffs," Obermeyer recalled.

Sixty-five years and many innovations later, the crafty German is still in business in Aspen. The privately held company sells its men's, women's and children's apparel at 600 specialty retailers in the United States and Europe, and is moving into such markets as Russia and China.

"He's the patriarch of the industry," said David Ingemie, who has known Obermeyer since the 1960s. Now president of SIA, Ingemie worked in a New York retail ski shop back then and remembers Obermeyer as a friendly guy who looked out for what would be good for the industry as well as his own business.

"He was funny, always smiling and yodeling," Ingemie said.

But beyond the joviality, Obermeyer had solid plans for his company.

"He was looking long-range," Ingemie said. "In those days there were a bunch of egotists, but Klaus wasn't that way. He knew the importance of making the industry grow."

Retailers today say the same thing.

"He is one of the most forward thinkers I've met – he's always thinking of the retailer and what our needs are as well as his own business," said Linda Klein, who with her husband and son owns six Willi's Ski and Snowboard Shops in Pennsylvania and Virginia. She has known Obermeyer since 1970.

"When you have a meeting with him," she said, "you don't have to feed his ego. He just wants to know what he can do to make the line better and improve business."

That simple philosophy continues to be a driving influence in the company, according to Robert Yturri, who joined Sport Obermeyer as senior vice president for product and brand management three years ago after working for such companies as Spyder and North Face.

“Klaus just wants to get all kinds of people outdoors, which is why we fit everyone from a kids size zero to adults size XX,” Yturri said.

The company is also staying current by using eco-friendly and sustainable fabrics, such as recycled polyester made from textiles and bottles, and Cocona, made from coconut shells. It has also instituted practices to be more environmentally conscious in its manufacturing processes, such as using water-based dyes.

Yturri describes Obermeyer as a big family and says Klaus often walks around the office with a basket of apples, which he hands out as he checks in with employees.

Obermeyer takes it all in stride and tries not to work so hard that he forgets to enjoy the mountains. In Aspen, he skis every winter day the weather is good, and company policy is that if it snows more than 6 inches, employees can hit the slopes in the morning and come to work later in the day. Obermeyer broke his leg in an accident on Buttermilk two years ago, but with surgery and physical therapy, he was back on the slopes the next season.

He swims in the company’s solar-heated pool and plays tennis in the summer, but skiing remains his first love. And you won’t find him on the gentle or intermediate runs.

“The steeper, the better,” he says with a hearty laugh.