

# Demo event proves all gear is not the same



Jenn Sheridan of the women's line Coalition Snow sets up a pair of SOS all-mountain skis. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

**By Jessie Marchesseau**

ALPINE MEADOWS – New ski and snowboard gear can set you back hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Most of the time we're expected to spend this money based solely on the recommendations of salespeople, friends and gear reviews.

Occasionally you can catch a ski or snowboard company doing a demo day at a local ski resort, allowing you to try out their lineup. While a side-by-side comparison of different brands would often prove more useful, it's not generally an option.

However, on Jan. 21, Tahoe City's Alpenglow Sports hosted North America's largest backcountry gear demo event. More than 20 vendors came out to share their wares with the skiers and riders at Alpine Meadows.

For 11 years running, the Lake Tahoe Backcountry Demo Event has provided skiers and riders the opportunity to ride this year's top-of-the-line telemark, alpine skiing, touring and snowboard gear.

Testing out the gear is totally free, and hundreds of snow sports enthusiasts took advantage, as did I. Mixed in with the major ski companies like Blizzard, Salomon, and Volkl was a selection smaller, less mainstream ski companies. Those were the ones which piqued my interest.



More than 20 vendors set up shop at Alpenglow Sports' 11th Lake Tahoe Backcountry Demo Event at Alpine Meadows on Jan. 21. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

## **The gear test**

My first stop was Coalition Snow. I've heard of the women-run

ski and snowboard company, but had never seen any of the gear in person. Based in Truckee, Coalition Snow was started by a group of women fed up with riding skis and boards designed for men. Their lineup of snow sticks is engineered specifically with women in mind. Coalition's creative director Lauren Bello assured me there is no reason men can't ride their gear, they even had a few men demo it that day, it's just designed with a focus on the way females ride.

I'm not usually one to judge a ski by its cover, but I have to admit, the stuff was pretty. I think I may have drooled a little over the peacock feather topsheet of the Abyss powder ski. Ultimately though, Bello suggested I test out the SOS. It's a solid all-mountain design and what their website calls a "one-quiver" ski. I normally ski on a 166 length, but she put me on a pair of 173s, assuring me they ski shorter. She was right.

A full 7 centimeters longer than what I'm used to, the skis didn't feel too long at all. In fact, after a couple runs, I was thinking maybe I could go even longer. They smashed through the crud with a little help from the rockered tip and tail, and even though I didn't test them out on a groomer, I have no doubt the traditional camber underfoot would arc a nice turn there, too.

Next, I made my way over to the Moment tent. I've been dying to try a pair of handmade skis from the Reno-based ski company for years, but always seem to miss the local demo days. Colton Shaff, and intern with Moment, put me on the Hot Mess in a 172. The women's version of the popular PB&J, it's an all-mountain ski with camber in the center and rockered tip and tail.

At first glance, I thought the Hot Mess may be a little too narrow for the afternoon's chopped up crud. On the contrary, they charged right through. I didn't find myself being tossed or bounced around, but instead felt like I was in four-wheel

drive, crushing everything in my path. Not bad for a ski that was only 91mm at the waist.

For my final test ride of the day, I asked Alpenglow manager Jeff Dostie to hook me up with a ski. He grabbed one from a collection of brightly-colored skis all the way at the other end of the aisle. I wasn't familiar with the company, but they seemed to have the largest presence at the event. The ski brand was DPS.

Based out of Park City, DPS has been around for a decade, constructing skis out of materials such as carbon, bamboo and even balsa wood. Dostie handed me a pair of Foundation Nina 99s in a 168 and I was off to the chairlift. Much like the other skis I had been riding all day, DPS considers this a middle-of-the-road, all-mountain women's ski. I admit, having never heard of the company before, my expectations for the skis were not high. They proved me wrong.

The choppy crud I had been skiing all afternoon suddenly felt like butter. Smooth sailing all the way to the bottom. I thought perhaps the wind had just filled in the ruts, so I tried again on a slightly more bumped out slope: the same thing. Cut, camber, construction or some combination of all three, the skis managed to practically cancel out any unevenness underfoot. I was smitten.

While all the skis I rode were fun and legitimate contenders for my next ski purchase, the DPS took the cake for me. More of a boutique ski company, and, according to Dan Benshoff, director of marketing and PR, the pioneers of the carbon fat powder ski, DPS has the prices to reflect the exclusivity, ranging from \$799 to more than \$1,200.

"When they can get out there and ski and have fun, that's what it's all about," Benshoff said of giving people the chance to demo their skis. "It's not easy to sell a \$1,200 ski, but once they ski and experience and see what it's all about, they get

it.”

And while that price tag may be a lot to swallow, I totally get it.



Colton Shaff works on a pair of Moment Hot Mess skis at the Moment demo tent. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

## The event

I was far from the only one testing out gear last weekend. The annual event averages more than 500 participants a year, both resort and backcountry riders.

I rode the chairlift with Monica, a local who was excited to be trying out a new pair of Scarpa boots she'd had her eye on. She was riding them with the same DPS skis she had at home, but with a different binding. She explained how she has been skiing with A/T bindings but was considering switching to

telemark. Trying the new boots and bindings on skis she already owned was a great way to see if she would like the new setup with her existing skis.

A few chair rides later I met Chris from Folsom. He had on a pair of Salomon skis, his fourth pair of the day. It was his first time at a demo event, and he readily declared the Moments and Black Diamonds his favorites so far. Accustomed to riding relatively narrow skis, he was enjoying the opportunity to try out some fatter more powder-oriented ones.

Both the conditions of the day and the available terrain provided an ideal opportunity to test a variety of ski types. Known for its backcountry and sidecountry access, Alpine Meadows is a "natural fit" for this demo event, said Brendan Madigan, owner of Alpenglow Sports.

Madigan explained that backcountry snow sports is the only growing segment of the snow sports industry right now. This is part of the reason he believes the event is so important, and so successful. The way Madigan sees it, everyone benefits.

Alpine Meadows benefits from hosting the largest consumer backcountry event in North America. Ski companies get the chance to have hundreds of people try their gear. And, most important, skiers and snowboards have the opportunity to try myriad gear before they purchase.

This was Moment's sixth year as a vendor at the Lake Tahoe Backcountry Demo Event. Dane Dacus, event coordinator and ski builder for Moment, said the consumer is the biggest winner of the day. "Otherwise they're buying something on a hope and a dream and a prayer," he said.

Alpenglow even added non-gear companies to the list of partners at the event this year such as Sierra Avalanche Center, Clif Bar and Alpenglow Expeditions. Their booths stood alongside companies including DPS, Black Crows, Dynafit, Tecnica, Blizzard, G3, Scarpa, NTN, Salomon, Scott, Marker,

Volkl, Twenty-Two Designs, La Sportiva, Voile, Moment, Julbo, Fly Low, Jones Snowboards and more.

With so many options in one place, the event is a goldmine for anyone considering new backcountry, alpine, telemark or snowboard gear.

Madigan said Alpenglow hosts the annual demo day, not so much for the shop, as for the community. "We've been doing it because we want to share the passion behind the sport," he told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We feel we want to support the community who supports us."