

Bobbie Burns

'First hotdogger' created remarkable legacy as skier, ski designer; lit the flame for freestyle and beyond as a core ski culture icon.

By Andy Bigford

Bobbie Burns personified the freeskiing culture before it was a thing, possessing world-class skills as both a skier and ski designer, plus the keen sense of style and showmanship to sell it. The first signs came in the early 1960s on Sun Valley's bumped-out double-black-diamond trail Exhibition, and the legend only grew from there. With his long mane of blonde locks (and later kitted out on his signature The Ski, along with eye-popping Scott boots and Spademan bindings), Burns skied twice as fast and skipped over the tops of the moguls, brandishing 60-inch-poles high above his head. According to techniques of the time, he did everything wrong—and yet it was all perfect.

"The sight changed my life as a filmmaker," recalls Dick Barrymore, who would feature Burns in "The K2 Performers" and several other movies to follow. "He attacked a field of moguls like Errol Flynn attacking a band of pirates. He sat down in a permanent toilet-seat position, with his arms wide over his head... Bob Burns was, in 1969, the *first hotdogger*." The flame spread to the up-and-comers who would launch "organized" freestyle, including Hall of Famer Wayne Wong. As a wide-eyed 20-year-old entrant in the inaugural world freestyle championships at Waterville Valley in 1971, Wong put it this way: "I was in the same arena as Bobbie Burns? HOLY S**T!!!"

"I had large cojones and no ability," laughs Burns.

Bobbie Burns was born in Athol, Idaho, 50 miles northeast of Spokane, on June 27, 1938, just as World War II was ramping up abroad. He barely knew his father, a Union Pacific engineer doing a stint on the railroad that connected Sun Valley to the world; the man departed the scene when Burns was three. His strong mother guided him through a childhood spent mostly in Ogden, Utah, where the maternal family had a strong Mormon background; his grandfather was an early follower and was highly placed in the church. Burns grew up not as a skier but mastering ballet, gymnastics and diving. This focus on balance and coordination would come in handy in his early 20s, when he went to work for

legendary Dean Perkins's ski shop in Ogden and started skiing regularly at Snowbasin, where he remembers getting advice from Stein Eriksen.

He didn't like gates ("You have to slow down to do it!"), but in order to continue working in the ski business he took a job tuning skis for the Chuck Ferries-led women's U.S. Ski Team in the mid- and late-1960s. Burns has a way with people, and soon became fast friends with racers ranging from Spider Sabich to Marilyn Cochran. When Ferries accepted a job to oversee the K2 ski company on Vashon Island, Wash., Burns went to work for him there, while also moonlighting to earn his Master's in chemical engineering at University of Washington (he had attended University of Utah as an undergrad). The two meticulously dissected the successful race skis of the era, particularly the Dynamic VR17, and after much trial and error, Burns made K2s for a growing stable of racers. On Burns-built skis, Cochran won the U.S.'s first season-long World Cup discipline title in giant slalom in 1971, and Sabich collected a pair of World Pro Skiing tour titles in 1971 and 1972. Through a college buddy who had a ski-racing son, Burns was introduced to a pair of fast (and possibly promising) junior racers from Yakima. "I conned them into skiing on K2," Burns says of Phil and Steve Mahre.

At the top of his profession in a part of the sport that wasn't his true passion, Burns sought to diversify further into mogul skis and other cutting-edge designs. Unable to move K2 in this direction, he set out on his own in 1974, creating Wood River Valley-born The Ski, arguably the most successful forerunner of what is now dozens of "indie" ski brands on the market. The Ski's geometric color block cosmetic (with no brand name) initially triggered some strong industry pushback, but remains today as one of the most identifiable topsheets in the history of the sport. Burns signed freestyle world champion Bob Salerno among his athletes, and "The Ski" helped drive freestyle to new heights in the sport's glory years. It never attained the mass commercial success of the big European skimakers, but with 10,000 pairs of high-end skis sold annually, The Ski was much more successful than virtually any of today's indies.

As the story goes, on Burns' long drive from Vashon back to Ketchum, he passed through hundreds of miles of desert sagebrush, and hit on the idea of using this super-light, indestructible wood as the core material for his new skis. For the bumps, he needed a design that was soft in longitudinal flex but torsionally stiff. Sagebrush theoretically fit the

bill, but the rumored use of it was almost entirely a marketing myth to further burnish The Ski's mystique (though eventually Burns did sprinkle sagebrush in the foam cores underfoot, when clear, see-through P-Tex bases were introduced, so it was, of course, visible as a sales closer).

Burns is the ultimate storyteller and thus a natural marketer, often blending personal anecdotes with the professional, like this gem: Living briefly in Ketchum as an 18-year-old, Burns managed to catch the eye of a local curmudgeon who didn't have many friends. This was really more of a contractual arrangement, as the elderly man's wife would ring Burns late at night and ask him to drive her tipsy husband home after a long night of drinking. Burns now regrets that he never pushed the man for the promised memento of their friendship, perhaps a signed first edition of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, after Ernest Hemingway died in 1961.

Burns had to stop skiing in 2014, but in his early 80s he still walks every day in Sun Valley, dotes on his children and grandkids, and continues to live the surreal life. He's the father of two, including Montana Burns, 34, a doctor of acupuncture and Chinese medicine in Burlington, Vt., whose mother is Cherie Hansen. Cherie and Bobbie were married for eight years in the 1980s; she was a fashion model who helped him create and launch his successful apparel line and would be the primary talent for its catalogues. She still lives in Sun Valley and remains close to Burns. Daughter Montana has two young children, Vera and Bruce, Bobbie's prized grandchildren. Much more recently, he is the father of Deva, who turns 14 in March 2021, and is a main focus of his life (yes, do the math). Their mother is Tyia Wilson, an acclaimed jazz singer who also lives in Sun Valley and earlier had a daughter, Leyla, who lives in New Orleans and whom Bobbie treats as one of his own.

Against the backdrop of a life well-lived, there's healthy debate on whether Burns' most significant accomplishment was as "the first hotdogger," as a ski designer, or perhaps as an apparel innovator with various Bobbie Burns clothing lines. This part of the story is also vintage Burns: When launching the company in the brutal fashion world, where lines come and go like restaurants, Cherie tapped a sorority sister who became the head buyer for Nordstrom's. Perhaps mostly as a favor, she bought the line, but just for the Salt Lake City store. When it sold out immediately, it was rolled out in Nordstrom's locations across the country with shockingly robust sales. This caught the eye of the man who would create

the Anne Klein fashion house; he bought the line and Bobbie ended up spending three years in Manhattan as head designer, with Cherie often commuting to the city from Sun Valley to model and consult. Afterwards, when Bobbie returned to Idaho, he launched an après and activewear line with the Bobbie Burns Collections stores in Sun Valley and Park City for much of the 1990s and 2000s.

So it's best just to say that it was Burns' paradigm-shifting inspiration in all corners of the ski world that left the indelible mark. But...if some of Burns' "ahead of their time" ski designs had reached a wider audience and mass consumption, that legacy would prevail. After imagining a ski for those days when Sun Valley got a big dump, Burns went into his lab and eventually emerged at Baldy with the Fat Albert, measuring a then-outlandish (but now common) 140mm at the tip, and with girth throughout, including the waist. This elicited more than a few snickers: "They told me I had to quit smoking that stuff," Burns says. Then he floated effortlessly in the deep snow, and they all wanted a pair. The ultra-wide Albert was near impossible to steer on Sun Valley's hardpack, which led Burns to pinch the waist. The Bad Ass Sidecut was born, a little-known forerunner to the shaped-ski revolution of the mid- and late-1990s. Burns now wishes he'd patented those specs. "I could have made a lot of money."

Burns did get a late boost in 2012 when Scott Europe contacted him about a relaunch of The Ski (the company had been founded, appropriately, in Ketchum, by the late Ed Scott). For the 2013-14 season, it won the European Ski of the Year award.

Overwhelmed by his induction into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame, Burns is particularly pleased because of what it means for his progeny, who are all suitably impressed. Burns, slightly subversive, never hewing to the mainstream path and always blurring the line between fact and fiction, says he still can't quite believe it himself. Occasionally the doubts surface, like on a recent morning at a coffee shop in Ketchum, when the renegade encountered a staid, elderly couple and they told him he'd be inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame "only over their dead bodies."

After 82 colorful years and counting, Burns is the one still standing.

Career Accomplishments

Born: June 27, 1938 (Athol, Idaho)

1960s: Emerges as a Sun Valley presence for his inimitable style, plays prominent role in hatching the concept and skiing in Barrymore's "The K2 Performers."

1968: Joins K2 as a designer to build race skis while getting his master's in chemical engineering at University of Washington.

1969-1974: U.S. skiers thrive on Burns-made skis: Marilyn Cochran wins 1969 World Cup GS title; Bob Cochran would later win a GS, Mike Lafferty finished third in the 1972 downhill standings, and Spider Sabich wins the World Pro Skiing title in 1971 and 1972.

1974: Burns departs K2 to start The Ski in Sun Valley.

1974: Appears on famous *POWDER* cover doing the wheelie "Burns Turn," with full on base up view of The Ski.

Mid-1980s: Sells The Ski, but continues to churn out custom-made skis, create a sweater line and design men's and women's ski apparel, including a line for the fashion house of Anne Klein.

1990s-2000s: After selling his first clothing line to Anne Klein, opens the Bobbie Burns Collections stores in Sun Valley and then Park City.

2012: Burns signs deal with Scott Europe to license "The Ski" for manufacture and sale abroad; it wins 2013-14 European Ski of the Year.