Sven Coomer

As a prolific boot whisperer for half a century, Coomer made plastic perform without pain, then birthed custom insoles, silicone liners; his designs still resonate today.

Ski boots remain the foundation of skiing, the most critical piece of gear—even if the explosion of ski shapes in the past quarter century has hogged all the headlines. By general consensus, Sven Coomer is the most prolific and influential boot designer of the modern era, perfecting the work of the plastic pioneers who preceded him. Coomer first made plastic boots perform better with comfort, then established meticulous, timeless design standards for everyone else to follow.

His achievements include a two-piece, four-buckle overlap design that won hundreds of World Cup events and is still in vogue today, as well as the three-piece cabriolet popular from World Cup downhill tracks to terrain parks. He pioneered the high-backed spoiler and, critically, counter-balanced it with an also raised, plastic-reinforced tongue that allowed skiers to leverage fiberglass skis. Attentive to the entire foot and lower leg, he added touches like the power strap and the removeable liner, then pioneered on-site custom insoles and silicone injected liners, bringing on-site custom fitting and after-market expertise to the masses. Leaving no stone unturned, he even created the Hot Gear Bag for carrying and warming boots (both the shell and liner) that became a staple on the World Cup tour and a must-have for serious skiers worldwide.

Born in Sydney on Oct. 12, 1940, to a Swedish mother and an Australian father, Coomer demonstrated his elasticity at an early age. At 16, he competed in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics in the sprawling modern pentathlon, requiring the skills of an equestrian, fencer, swimmer, pistol shooter, and runner. He first skied in 1960 in Åre, Sweden, and was "immediately smitten." University trained in Sweden as a designer and mechanical engineer, he collaborated with Puma in 1965, using new materials to adopt its running shoes to artificial running surfaces. But Coomer would ultimately focus his energy

on skiing, and he arrived at a critical juncture, just as plastic boots and fiberglass skis entered the scene.

Arriving in the U.S. in the mid-1960s, Coomer first ran ski schools at Solitude, Utah, and then Mt. Rose in Nevada, where he coached the McKinney kids, including Tamara. The turning point came in 1967, when he was recruited by *Skiing's* Doug Pfeiffer to participate in the magazine's inaugural ski and boot tests at Mammoth Mountain.

"Over six weeks, I found that testing equipment, analyzing and problem-solving, were my true calling," recalls Coomer, who was soon spending summers at the magazine's New York City offices to write up the test results and to author technical articles. In 1968, Norm Macleod from Beconta (which distributed both Puma and Nordica in the U.S.), was so impressed with Coomer's transformative ideas that he hired him to boost Nordica's efforts. Coomer soon moved to Montebelluna, Italy, where at the Nordica factory the brand was behind the curve in making the transition from leather to plastic. Leather had touch, feel and comfort, but the models would break down after two weeks of hard skiing. Plastic was clearly the future, but most models were painful (remember Lange Bang?). They were also cut low, barely covering the ankle, and didn't provide the needed leverage and stability to power the new fiberglass skis.

With Coomer's detailed analysis and resulting design scheme, which included a list of 173 criteria, Nordica was able to reinforce its boots front and back and stabilize the ankle. "We called the extensions 'spoilers,' because they were so effective at helping retain balance, stability and leverage that they 'spoiled' you," Coomer says. He designed the Astral Slalom, which to the adoring public was known simply as the "Banana Boot." Following its success, Nordica soon achieved an astounding 30 percent market share. The next year, Coomer one upped himself by developing the gold standard, the still beloved two-piece Grand Prix race boot. A few years later, he debuted the cabriolet Comp-3, the openthroated, three-piece shell that was also Coomer's basis for the Raichle Flexon, still sold today under K2's Full Tilt banner.

In 1976, Coomer partnered with Dr. Chris Smith and Dennis Brown to create Superfeet custom-molded insoles. He would eventually relocate to Mammoth, where he would open the award-wining Footloose Sports retail store, which began as a slopeside R&D facility to further his boot innovations. More advances followed, including using

Birkenstock cork to create the Skithotic, the first molded footbed that could be created in a ski shop.

In the 1980s, Coomer continued to work with various brands, including San Marco (which would become Head), and Koflach (now Atomic). He introduced the Silicone Personalization System (SPS) at Footloose, then Zipfit, the first custom liners that didn't require hazardous materials or bulky injection equipment.

Along with partner Hans Martin Heierling, in 1999 he began development of the flexible sole I-Flex system, and with Atomic used it to design the hugely popular Atomic Hawx series. It was also the basis for the Atomic Redster race boot, worn by World Cup champions Mikaela Shiffrin and Marcel Hirscher. Meanwhile, Nordica introduced the praiseworthy Doberman, which drew on Coomer's original 1972 Grand Prix design.

Coomer lives in Aspen with his wife, Mary Dominick, and is working on his memoirs. Mary's grandson, Chris Dominick, now runs Zipfit in Aspen. Seth's two grown children are Robin, an acclaimed singer based in San Francisco, and Seth, a mechanical wizard who is best known for installing massive, monument-scale sculptures.

Career Accomplishments

Born: Oct. 12, 1940 (Sydney)

1956: Competes in the Melbourne Summer Olympics in modern pentathlon.

Late 1950s: Attends university in Sweden, studying product design.

1965-69: After consulting with Puma on its running shoes, moves to the U.S. and oversees ski schools in the West.

1967-69: Finds his calling at the *Skiing* on-snow equipment tests, gets hired by Nordica and eventually works at its factory in Montebelluna, Italy.

1971: Designs the Sapporo, adding "spoilers" to Nordica's last significant leather boot; Spain's Francisco Fernandez "Paquito" Ochoa shocks the world on the model, winning gold in the Olympic slalom by more than a second.

1972-73: Brings the Nordica Astral Slalom (the "Banana Boot") and then the Grand Prix to market. Nordica eventually achieves a 30 percent market share.

1976: Designs the Nordica Comp-3, his last major work with Nordica, then adopts it to the Raichle Flexon, today known as the Full Tilt from K2 and still popular with free skiers. Introduces Superfeet to leading ski retailers.

1978: Moves to Mammoth and opens Footloose.

1980s: Continues to work with major boot designers.

1990s: Further develops Zipfit, designs Hot Gear Bag, leads Atomic Hawx boot series efforts to unprecedented popularity.

2000s: Continues to be active and influential as ski boot design consultant and with Zipfit and its Sidewinder and Stealth versions.