

Denny and Chris Hanson: Pioneers of Ski Boot Innovation

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Denny and Chris Hanson, two brothers from the Midwest, began their skiing careers at an early age and became pioneers in the ski industry. Born and raised in Michigan, both brothers showed an early aptitude for skiing. Chris began at the age of seven, while Denny started at five. Their competitive spirit emerged as they became involved in racing, which set the stage for their groundbreaking contributions to ski technology in the coming decades.

In the 1960s, Chris and Denny began to experiment with new ideas and designs related to ski equipment. Chris designed a prototype fiberglass boot around 1960, while Denny spent the decade fitting boots for his friends and fellow competitors. His work focused on rebuilding inner boots and experimenting with different flowable fitting materials. Denny's career path also led him to work in the ski industry as a sales representative for Head Ski Company (1966-68) and the director of R&D for Lange (1968-70), where he gained valuable industry experience.

In the early 1970s, their vision truly began to take shape. In 1970, the brothers founded Hanson Ski Boots, a company that would go on to revolutionize the industry. They introduced the first commercially viable rear-entry ski boot, a design that focused on both comfort and performance. Unlike traditional front-entry boots, the rear-entry design offered easy access and a snug fit, making it easier for skiers to put on and take off their boots. The innovative design quickly garnered attention and set the standard for future ski boot designs.

The brothers' designs proved to be a game-changer. In 1971, they shipped 2,500 pairs of rear-entry boots across the U.S., marking a strong entry into the market. In addition to the rear-entry design, Hanson also introduced the first completely molded inner boot, further enhancing the comfort and fit of the ski boots. By 1975, Hanson was competing with Lange for the top spot in the U.S. ski boot market, and their boots became known for simplicity and ease of use. Their success culminated in the Avanti model, an injection-molded boot that featured a two-piece design, making the boots easier to remove from molds compared to the more complex traditional designs.

Hanson ski boots became synonymous with innovation and performance. The company's popularity grew quickly, and by 1978-81, they were shipping an average of 120,000 pairs of boots annually. Hanson's boots dominated the high-end boot market, representing nearly half of the market in terms of dollar value. In 1975, Hanson's boots even earned a place in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, showcasing the cultural significance of the product. The company also had a strong presence in competitive skiing, with athletes like Hank Kashiwa winning the World Pro Skiing Championships in 1975 while wearing Hanson boots.

In addition to their boots, the Hanson brothers expanded their business interests in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1979, Hanson had the opportunity to purchase the ski business of Hexcel Corporation, which they operated for a few years before selling it in 1982. The company also

acquired Spyder Racing Clothing, which they ran as a division before selling it back to the founder in 1983. Denny served as chairman of Ski Industries of America (SIA) from 1979 to 1981, during which time he played a key role in marketing the snow sports industry and lobbying for its growth.

The Hanson brothers continued to innovate throughout their careers. In 1984, the company was purchased by their Japanese distributor, Daiwa, which continued to produce Hanson boots in Japan until the late 1990s. However, Denny's passion for ski boot innovation didn't stop. In 2006, Denny founded Apex Ski Boots, another revolutionary design combining a snowboard-style inner boot with a rigid open chassis. Apex boots provided a higher level of comfort and support, benefiting skiers who previously struggled with traditional boot designs. Apex boots became widely available, with over 150 retailers selling them. Denny's vision for Apex won him numerous accolades, including the IQ Award for innovation in 2010.

While the brothers' impact on the ski industry is immense, the loss of Chris Hanson in May 2023, due to complications from Parkinson's disease, marked the end of an era for the ski community. Chris' contributions to the ski industry, along with his work alongside Denny, helped shape the landscape of ski boot design and innovation. Denny, meanwhile, continues to carry forward their legacy. His work with Apex Ski Boots and his long-standing advocacy for innovation in the ski industry ensures that their impact will be felt for many years to come.