

outdoor extremes - high life

Palmer boards make big leap

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Article Last Updated: 12/11/2006 10:10:39 PM MST

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Copper Mountain - The Austrians laugh. They make up a funny word for it. "Schnaubling," they call it, or some similarly phonically clunky rhyme that loosely translates to "wobbling." It will never work, they say.



Then again, it just might. Snowboards already have had a pretty major impact on skiing for the past 20 years. Why shouldn't a snowboard company build its own line of skis? Especially if its name is Palmer?

Palmer Snowboards - the namesake brand of original knuckle-dragging bad boy Shaun Palmer - recently unveiled its mysterious Palmer Project '08 at Copper Mountain Resort, proudly displaying two new models of skis - an all-mountain carver and a twin-tipped freerider - it plans to present to the masses next fall alongside its latest line of snowboards. Lest you forget the snowboard's influence on everything from ski shape, style and the modern terrain park movement, you would do well to at least remember the attitude. The upstart sport that wouldn't take no for an answer is currently sitting in the catbird seat.

"This brand is actually built for this kind of crossover," Palmer president Jurg Kunz of Switzerland said of his company's attempt at becoming the first major snowboard manufacturer to start making skis. "We don't want to reinvent skiing. As a snowboard company, we want to make the snowboarding feeling accessible to skiers."

Taken literally, the feeling Kunz refers to correlates to what he considers "the next evolution in ski technology," a Palmer-patented design the company calls Dynamic Power Distribution, or "DPD." It's essentially a lot of marketing mumbo-jumbo used to describe an edge shape engineered by snowboard racing mastermind Hansjurg Kessler that transfers power to the sweet spot in the center of skis while the tips and tails drift effortlessly out of the way once the edge is engaged.

"Feels like flying," Kunz says. Feels like schnaubling, say the Austrians.

But the Austrians - presumably from race ski manufacturing juggernaut Atomic, which, ironically, purchased Palmer's more modern board pressing technology to build its skis two years ago - are missing the point. Kunz's "snowboarding feeling" - the figurative edge, if you will - has as much to do with attitude as it does with turn shape, arguably more.

Snowboarding, for the most part, rarely has been about perfect form or ultimate edge control. It's much more about having fun and expressing yourself through a sort of athletic art, like surfing or skating. That is, unless your name is Shaun Palmer. Then it's always been about kicking tail and taking names, but that's another story.

As good as these new skis are, the best part is that they pretty much perfectly bridge the gap between the two activities with the same relaxed, confident attitude the company has built its reputation upon.

Palmer, the man, is the original crossover athlete, having won X Games medals as both a skier and snowboarder (not to mention a mountain biker). Palmer, the brand, has an opportunity to parlay that cred into a successful new enterprise that might once and for all dismiss any lingering misunderstandings between the two sides.

Are they just in it for the money? Maybe, but it seems like they've got more to lose than to make. Will the snowboarding world suddenly take a radical turn toward skiing? Doubtful, but the crossover technology certainly makes freeriding as attainable on two planks as it does on one. Is the apocalypse upon us? Probably not until we see Palmer skis atop the World Cup racing podium, and even then only if you live in Austria.

Rest assured, it's a major risk. But it's also a commitment. And, so far at least, nobody's wobbling.

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