

2018-19 RENTAL BUYER'S GUIDE

For rental shops and their suppliers, the overriding mission is to nurture and develop new skiers and riders. While serving beginners has long been the mainstay for rental operations, awareness of the importance of new-rider and new-skier development is more recent. At the same time, as more guests opt to rent rather than buy, the rental market has grown to serve a wider audience. That has brought more suppliers back into the rental market, too. Here's a look at next year's trends and innovations.

ALPINE RENTAL GEAR 2018-19

Currently, with the euro taking a beating against a strong U.S. dollar, the typically slim margins of rental sales are likely to feel an extra squeeze. "It's definitely affecting pricing," says Tecnica's Bart Tuttle.

Nevertheless, there has been a more aggressive push in rental-product development and sales, with more players getting more actively involved. Perhaps it is the volume of sales in rental—a few hundred or even a few thousand equipment packages at a time—that makes slim margins more appealing. Or perhaps it is because skiers of all ability levels are

increasingly favoring renting over buying. Regardless, more suppliers are getting into the rental pool.

RETURNING SUPPLIERS

Not only are the historically big players in rental—e.g., Head, Elan, Dalbello, and Rossignol—continuing to go after big market shares, other suppliers, such as Nordica, Salomon, and K2, are vying to get back into the picture. All that competition should create a buyers' market.

Many of these companies are intensifying their R&D efforts, for all the above reasons. The old approach of building

inexpensive but durable fleet-rental gear is giving way to more focused design and testing of gear, sometimes at a small uptick in price, aimed at enhancing the performance of learning skiers.

RENTAL R&D GROWS

Nordica, for example, worked closely with PSIA demo team leader Mike Rogan to optimize the design and test its new Drive 76 EXP entry-level ski. In the past, says Nordica's Sam Beck, fleet-rental skis have often "not been up to the quality needed for beginner skiers." To remedy that shortcoming, Nordica experimented until it finally found a design it liked, with a wide tip and tapered tail for "easy steering and shmearing," as Beck puts it.

Longtime rental market innovator Elan debuts a new entry-level Element 76 ski featuring a segmented flex pattern—a softer segment underfoot and stiffer in the tip and tail—that features almost accordion-like joints where the flex segments join. It is similar to the U-Flex design that was first introduced in junior skis.

FOCUSED ON RETENTION

In many respects, the product lineup for 2018-19 is playing strongly toward one of the current, top-tier issues in the ski industry: skier retention. For example, when K2 came out last year with its Konic (for men) and Luv (for women) as a step-up from its basic Strike rental model, the idea was to offer a major step up in quality, with a small step up in price, to improve the early learning experience.

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Top: New Nordica Drive 76 EXP.

Above (top to bottom): Rossignol Experience Series; Vökl RTM 8.0; Head's new freeride rental, the Kore 93; new Elan Element.

“AS THE IMPORTANCE AND STATURE OF RENTAL GEAR RISES, MORE SUPPLIERS ARE JUMPING (BACK) INTO THE POOL.”

SNOWBOARD RENTAL GEAR 2018-19

Snowboard brands are hard at work to create the most versatile rental fleet possible, and then improve on them year after year. The gear has to work for everyone—the first-timer, the proficient rider who rents, and everyone in between.

For 2018-19, bringing in and retaining new snowboarders remains a major challenge. “Improving the participation rates for snowboarding is possibly the biggest challenge facing our industry,” says Mike Poole, the rental manager for Head USA.

protects the sidewall from impact and has a “self-healing” quality that helps to repair dings caused by impact, says Poole.

Rossignol is adding to its EXP series with the EXP3, an upgrade to the EXP that is more accessible to most snowboarders than Rossi’s high-end EXP7. The EXP3 is compatible with Rossi’s tool-free rail system and traditional 4x4 bindings, says Nick Castagnoli, Rossignol’s brand and communication manager.

Never Summer is debuting its line of Guide boards. The Guide is a twin tip with a soft flex core, which makes for a softer mid-section, providing for ease in torsional control. The Guide builds on the men’s Snowtrooper and women’s Infinity rental boards from Never Summer. “The mid-flex stiffness of both the Infinity and Snowtrooper allow the boards to be forgiving, yet versatile all

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L to R: Rossignol EXP3, Arbor Parabolic Rocker, Elan Explore Rocker, Burton Women’s LTR, Head Rocka FW

UPGRADES AND INTROS

For its part, Burton is expanding its higher-end rental board offerings with the new Radius. The Radius is a true twin tip, and is made in youth, women’s, and men’s sizes. For those not yet at that level, the Learn to Ride (LTR) boards continue to bring new riders into the sport. They feature beveled bases and a soft forgiving flex. For the youngest riders, the Burton Handlebar gives the littlest of riders a scooter-like fixed grip that is attached to the board to hold on to.

Head continues to improve its tough fleet board, the Flocka. Head has added damping strips on the edges of the board, as well as damping material over the wood core. These changes improve performance and reduce the “shearing” that results from flex and counterflex, according to Poole. To protect the board, as well as help to improve the torsional characteristic, Head lays a polyurethane (PU) bead into a channel that is milled into the sidewall. This PU bead pro-





Left to right:
Alpina XR
Head Nexo Lyte
Tecnica Mach RT
Rossignol Speed Rental

ALPINE RENTAL *cont.*

Inexpensive products are still out there for price-conscious buyers, but companies seem almost reluctant to include them on their rental rosters. “We really hope [resorts] look at performance in equipment and not just the price side,” says Elan’s Bill Irwin.

The theory, of course, is that people who have a good experience their first few times on snow are more likely to stick with the sport. “We’re trying to do our part on the manufacturers’ side,” says Beck. Head’s Mike Poole concurs. “Our job is to support the industry with products that make learning fun,” he says.

WIDTHS FOR ALL REASONS

In the push to increase retention, companies are now offering more choices in waist widths. Because a width that works well at, say, a Midwestern area might not work as well in the West or in New England. Simply put, gear companies have come to the realization that one size does not fit all—that learning skiers will do better with equipment that matches prevailing snow conditions.

So how do suppliers flesh out their product lineups? Rossignol offers three new Experience rental skis in 72mm, 76mm, and 80mm waists. Nordica supplements its fleet-rental Drive 76 EXP with a wider, “premier-rental” variation on the popular inline Navigator. Elan’s fleet-rental Element 76 joins forces with the Explorer 82 and the Ripstick 86.

Völkl returns with its RTM 7.6 and RTM 8.0 models; as Marker-Dalbelo-Völkl’s Geoff Curtis puts it, “New isn’t always as good as proven.” Speaking of proven, Head continues with its BYS platform and Link models. And so on.

BRIDGING RENTAL AND DEMO

Manufacturers are trying to help build a more gradual bridge between fleet

rental and demo. Elan’s Bill McSherry calls the Element 76 a “game-improvement tool that’s pretty darned stable at moderate speed.” In other words, it’s not just a beginner’s ski. Yet Elan, like other companies, still offers step-up products to keep pace with the increasing skill levels of learning skiers.

Meanwhile, Head continues to address the basic learning progression by refining its Headway concept—three skis of graduating length to help never-evers through initial skill development. Headway is still being tested, says Poole, but is likely to hit the market soon.

TO TBL, OR NOT TO TBL?

A few companies have jumped aboard the terrain-based learning train in support of the novel program that is now offered at nearly 40 resorts. Rossignol is the official ski partner of TBL, and Elan offers a TBL ski, although it is essentially an Explorer 72 model at 130mm with a special TBL topsheet.

Still, some companies are keeping TBL at arm’s length. “We are not proponents of TBL,” says Salomon’s McKearin.

AS SKIS GO, SO GO BOOTS

As manufacturers focus on their ski offerings, there appears to be a bit less movement in the boot department. But the multi-model approach that has emerged in skis, steadily ramping up from entry-level to demo, defines boot lineups as well.

The value of instant comfort and easy entry in a wide, soft-flexing boot for first-timers is well established, and almost every company has something that fits that bill. From there, narrower and stiffer upgrades are based on or modeled after retail products.

Rossignol, for example, offers three new models in its Allspeed collection, with 100mm, 102mm, and 104mm lasts. The widest of these represents what Ros-

signol is calling a “comfort” fit, another take on the traditional big-bucket rental boot. Tecnica’s new rental models in the Mach Sport line will be offered in an HV (high-volume) version and a narrower MV version. Head continues with a 104mm model with a very soft flex (index 75 for men, 65 for women) as its entry-level boot. But for better performance, there is the inline-inspired Nexo Lyte, with a 100mm last and a 100/90 flex that is made lighter thanks to a thinner but still-rigid shell.



Gripwalk on a Dalbello boot

WILL GRIPWALK GAIN TRACTION?

In some cases, efforts to improve the beginner experience have nothing to do with actually skiing. Marker-Dalbelo-Völkl has become a big proponent of Gripwalk, a sole designed for easier and safer walking on snow and ice when not on skis. Salomon, too, is looking to adopt Gripwalk as it renews its rental effort.

The current drawback is that regular alpine bindings are not Gripwalk-compatible. Salomon has developed a series of so-called MNC bindings (multi-norm compatible), but there are still hurdles to clear. “We are working with various players in the industry (e.g., Marker) to get to a norm,” says McKearin. “But there hasn’t yet been a wholesale industry adoption.” MDV’s Curtis thinks any compatibility issues will soon be resolved as Gripwalk begins to become more widely accepted and integrated into rental fleets. ■

SNOWBOARD RENTAL *cont.*

over the mountain,” says Never Summer’s Laura Brands.

Arbor offers a Parabolic Rocker profile, which provides “a more forgiving ride, with less grab,” says Ryan Turley, global sales manager. Arbor also offers a rental board with a true Rocker System design, without hybridization. This gives the beginner rider a smoother ride with improved control, he says. Its System Rental board gives customers a “forgiving ride that will progress with them,” adds Turley.

BINDINGS, BOOTS, AND MORE

While the board is what scrapes the snow, other components are just as important.

Flow, acquired by Nidecker in 2016, continues with its well-known Speed-Entry binding system, which allows the rider to easily step into the binding without traditional toe and ankle straps. “These feature our award-winning Pi-Technology system for easy mounting and adjusting, and full versatility to suit any rental operation’s needs for storage and quick set-up,” says Lucien Vink, product manager and designer for Flow and Nidecker.

K2 offers several boots, including the Raider, that are widely used in rental shops. The Raider will utilize new materials that are “ten times more abrasion resistant than our previous material,” says Will Knudsvig, global product line

manager. There’s also the higher-end Maysis Rental with the K2 Conda system and upgraded PU materials. “This is a great way for customers to try the best-selling boot in snowboarding before they buy it,” says Knudsvig.

To appeal to as many riders as possible, Burton offers rental boots from size 7c to men’s 16—the widest range of sizes in the industry. In addition, its Progression rental helmet line is available from XXS to XXL.

And new innovations aren’t just aimed at the end user. Case in point: Head’s new Flatbed binding, which folds down to a height of only 3.25 inches. This greatly improves stackability in the rental shop, providing more efficiency in storage, according to Poole. It comes in three sizes, and with very few moving parts for simplicity’s sake.

...AND LOOK GOOD TOO.

Rental gear takes a beating, year after year. Getting renters to treat gear as if it were their own may be a pipe dream, but renters still want it to look good. That conundrum has led manufacturers to pursue a variety of solutions.

Rental gear is at its finest when it doesn’t look like rental gear at all, says K2’s Knudsvig. “Younger renters want new or like-new products, they don’t want to feel like a renter,” he notes.

To give renters gear that stands on par with the rest of its lineup, Nitro offers

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Top to bottom:
Burton Women’s BOA boot
Elan Fastec binding and rental boot
Head Flatbed binding
Nidecker Evolve binding



Salomon Pact Helmet

HELMETS HEAT UP

At least two companies, Rossignol and Salomon, are making strong plays in the helmet rental market. “We’re back in the helmet game in rental!” says Salomon’s McKearin cheerfully. The new Pact model, with a removable winter liner, is designed to be ski- and bike-compatible,

a feature intended to appeal to ski resorts with a summer biking program.

Rossignol’s new Templar and junior Reply models offer a unique twist of their own: they incorporate Impacts technology designed to absorb multiple shocks. Perhaps, after its entry this year into the rental mountain bike market, Rossignol will follow Salomon’s lead with an interchangeable ski/bike helmet.

More product choices, especially in performance and price, appears to be the basic rental story for the upcoming buying season. In a buyer’s market, these could be especially happy times for resorts looking to turnover their rental fleet for 2018-19.

Rental Buyer's Guide

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its in-line boards as rental boards—even its best-selling Team snowboard, ridden by members of Nitro's pro team. "We believe that a rental customer should be able to ride the latest technology, and graphics, not just a rental board," says Knut Eliassen, global marketing for Nitro snowboards. Nitro adds a rubber topsheet for added durability and to reduce chips and dings.

"At first glance, a rental board can appear to just fill the gap between beginner to intermediate and advanced skill," says Brands. "But expanding that definition to incorporate more technology, quality, and approachability is a key aspect in developing and progressing the rental world."

THE GROWTH CHALLENGE

"Participation continues to be a challenge for everyone, so it's more important than

ever to ensure your guests have the best possible experience," says Burton's Shaun Cattanach. That's not just about gear, or the instructor, or the rental process itself. It's about all those things, and more.

Often, beginners form an opinion of the sport based on their rental experience. "A rental product is a first impression to not only the brand, but the entire industry," says Brands. "A rental product can set the foundation for the rider's present and future on the mountain. The challenge is exceeding the expectations of the consumer, the expectations that they might not even know yet."

Companies are developing strategies to increase snowboarding interest, and not just among the usual suspects. "It doesn't matter if it's your guests' first day or tenth season, there is a set-up in the line that will be a great fit for them and help ensure they want to come back for more," says Cattanach.

Increasingly, piquing that interest takes the form of offering better rent-

al products to those riders outside the beginner demographic. "More riders are looking at performance rental products. This includes boards, boots, and bindings," adds Poole.

Some companies are seeing increased popularity in the older renting demographic. Count K2 among them. "As we see more adult customers wanting to rent rather than own, we have expanded our line to include more intermediate- to advanced-level equipment," says Knudsvig. To further help, K2 has instituted an "Adult Season Lease" program that is growing in popularity.

Nitro believes that the more high-quality products are available to the general snowboarding public, the better for all. "It is important for the industry as a whole to offer products and programs that make snowboarding more accessible and enjoyable for first time snowboarders," says Eliassen. "Let's share the joy of snowboarding with as many people as we can." ■

How Effective Is Your Staff?

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14 SURVEY YOUR STAFF ON SATISFACTION, ENGAGEMENT AND LOYALTY

Solicit feedback regarding how well you are engaging your frontline staff; this helps reveal how effective your efforts are. Measure engagement, loyalty, and advocacy in each operational area, as well as the resort overall, in an employee NPS (eNPS) survey. Other metrics might include turnover rates, the amount of sick time taken, and the staff's willingness to make incremental effort to enhance the guest experience.

The more you can do to engage your frontline employees, the greater their job satisfaction, loyalty, retention, and advocacy. This, in turn, will enhance the guest experience and help generate higher resort revenues through increased repeat and referral business, the two primary sources of ski resort visits.

Increasing employee engagement, however, requires effort. You are likely using at least some of the practices outlined here already. See which practices you can add to your system this season, and then measure the engagement of your staff in an eNPS survey late in the season. Consider other changes—such as hiring for attitude and personality traits, and onboarding—that you can address this spring or next fall.

And continue to measure your eNPS. Increases in eNPS will drive higher guest NPS, and with that, greater revenues. ■

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