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XC AND SNOWSHOES 2019



The durable RS Skate Boot from Salomon



The Atlas Spindrift Backcountry snowshoe designed for performance on technical terrain

Over the past 40 years, there have been roughly a half-dozen technique and technological revolutions in both the Nordic ski and snowshoe worlds. The pattern seems to be: a dramatic innovation, followed by substantial tweaks, then a period of refinement, followed by another innovation that transforms the equipment and the sport.

For Nordic skiing, we've seen advances such as the introduction of machine-groomed trails, waxless bases, and skating; changes in ski design (including short and then mid-length models) and materials (fiberglass); and boot/binding

systems. For snowshoes, there have been constant improvements (farewell wood and rawhide, welcome aluminum, injection molding, synthetic decking, crampons, and vastly improved bindings). For both sports, there's been intelligent attention to gender differences.

Results for consumers have generally been superb—though perhaps less so for suppliers and retailers, partly because gear simply has improved longevity, and consumers don't buy as much as we might like.

We are perhaps due for one of those earthshaking product changes. Neither activity has seen a revolutionary change

for years. There may be such a change afoot in the snowshoe world, with the lightweight, all-foam, inexpensive Crescent Moon Eva, which debuted at Outdoor Retailer in 2017. Faber's new sliding step snowshoe S-line, a snowshoe/ski hybrid, could also foretell a new category of product. In the XC ski world, there are certainly changes and improvements for 2018-19, but not something that's genuinely going to transform the business.

Then too, changes in society can also spark growth. Increased interest in health, fitness, and human-powered activities, along with new events such as mud and obstacle runs, are bring-

ing more people into the outdoors and expanding their horizons. Perhaps we can help them discover XC and snowshoeing.

The “so much work” stereotype is still an issue for creating beginners, but events and programs such as the community development series of the New England Nordic Ski Association (NENSA) have been very successful. Steve Reeder, Fischer Nordic national sales manager, sees a lot of opportunity for suppliers to do more with XC areas, especially with demo days, where interfacing with customers can be key to a successful day. Similarly, Northern Lites’ co-owner Jim York sees both challenge and opportunity in programming for snowshoers. He notes that “There’s a huge need for activities related to snowshoeing in order to grow the rental market. Customers don’t necessarily want to just come out and tromp around in the snow.”

SHARED PRODUCT GOALS

It may raise hackles to say this, but cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are remarkably similar in many ways. The biggest difference is that some people love to glide, and some don’t.

It’s not just that both sports help you move over snow rather than post-holing. In both product categories, the materials and design (including bindings and poles) have much the same aims, those being more comfortable fit and support, stability, easier movement (lighter and more maneuverable), dependability (toughness and control), speed (if the user wants it), flotation, and dealing with diverse terrain.

Rental operators are also looking for the same things from both XC and snowshoes: getting more people out more often and giving them a great time. And who knows? Some of these renters might even buy their own gear.

So rental shops want to carry equipment that’s easy to rent and maintain. That includes things like minimal sizing variations, bindings that are pretty much self-explanatory, equipment that’s easy to rack, and models that don’t take a lot of expensive (overtime!) staff training. Remember, too, that quality “product designed for rental operations can lead to an enhanced experience which means repeat customers and more revenue,” says Bill Irwin, national sales manager for Alpina Sports.

Along the same profit-oriented/simplified lines, Guy Faber, president of Faber snowshoes, feels inventory sizing can be considerably simplified and rental product built less expensively. He says, “We have noticed that more and more people seem to be walking on compacted trails. For the rental industries, this means smaller snowshoes, but also that these smaller sizes will work well for a wider range of people, as there is no issue when it comes to flotation.”

HERE'S A LOOK AT THE MARKET FOR 2018-19

SKI EQUIPMENT

ALPINA’S Irwin believes that XC gives resorts an opportunity to broaden their activity mix, create an extended experience, and attract families interested in a snowsport at a lower cost than alpine skiing. That’s not a new philosophy; Alpina was the first XC rental-specific supplier with color-coded identification on skis, large print sizing, more durable boots, and a rental binding. The combination created shop efficiencies, a more polished look to attract consumers, and more dollars. For 2018-19, Alpina will continue to offer three unisex rental packages, Basic, Upgrade, and Deluxe, at slightly lower prices than last winter.

Isaac Wilson, Nordic commercial manager for **ATOMIC** (like Salomon, owned by Amer Sports), observes that consumers are extremely influenced by snow, and more conservative in general with buying Nordic product. Atomic has seen most of its business migrate to the very high end and the very low end. The company doesn’t produce specific rental models, partly because retailers like to sell the same equipment customers rent, and partly because operators eventually sell the rental fleet. Wilson recommends several different packages, including some for women, such as basic skate, Skintec classic, and price-point compact

touring models. Some prices have been slightly reduced.

Steve Reeder, **FISCHER** Nordic national sales manager feels “Nordic skiing is well aligned as a healthy and affordable activity,” and he expects category growth after a good winter nationally. While climate can be a challenge, he noted that snowmaking has proven itself at a number of Nordic areas, and is especially popular with early season performance skiers. On the product front, Fischer has introduced new technologies that are easier to use, including the new Efficient Forward construction skis with

improved grip and glide, and the new, easy to enter and exit Turnamic® bindings. Pricing for 2018-19 has been adjusted for better retailer profitability, and Fischer's rental program combines great dating and discounts and free shipping. All levels of Fischer product are available for rental use, allowing areas to choose based on budget.

The big news at **MADSHUS** is the new Move binding on its Redline IntelliGrip ski. Madshus sales rep Jack Hart says the kick on the skin ski can be adjusted without having to take your boot off of it, giving "a new level of performance to high-end classic skiing." Madshus is concentrating on product that's easy to use, with the ski always the key. The company feels that the IntelliGrip waxless base system (which helps minimize icing on the skins, and like other skins, apparently doesn't create a waxless "buzz") provides a versatile approach for rentals. Skis are built for ease of use and selection, whether for sale or rental, including women's products.

ONE WAY SPORT'S owner Geoff Hurwitch sees more consumers interested in higher-end equipment, especially in the Mountain West. "We've seen a major uptick in classic, with mohair/skin skis," he says. One of the challenges

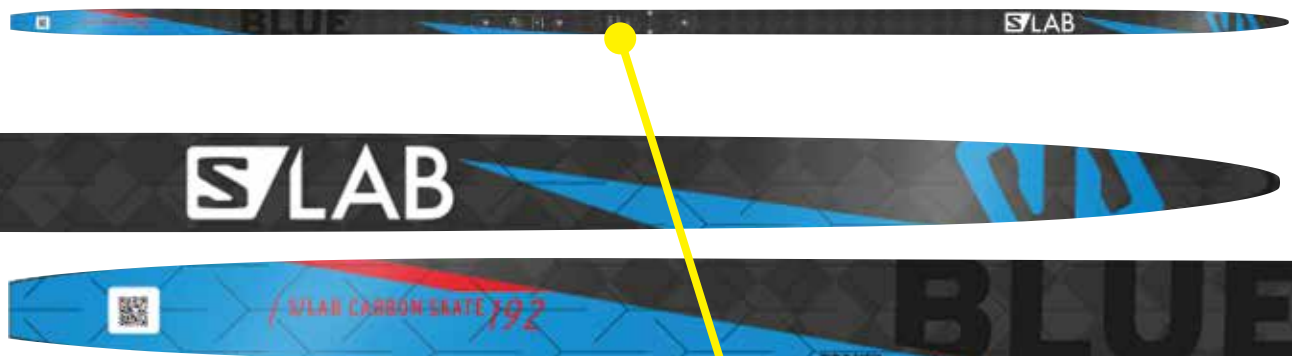
he sees for rental shops is how to choose among four competing binding systems in what is a small market. One-Way's boot/ski lines carry through from last year (including women's boot and ski models), but they're emphasizing pole selection, specifically a new super-light (SLG) series. Shops can choose any pole combination for grip, shaft, and baskets, along with customized graphics. 2018-19 prices are consistent with last winter's.

Steve Poulin, president of pole specialist **SWIX SPORT USA**, says that "Packages that include skis, boots, bindings and poles remain the biggest challenge for us." Swix's is to focus on super-durable carbon-fiber and double-anodized aluminum poles, with aggressive pricing and terms, and a "no questions" warranty policy. He notes that "NOT all poles are created equally, there are stringent manufacturing parameters that must be followed in order to create a product that will stand up to the rental market." Swix offers a color-coding size system, including women's sizing, with custom graphic capabilities. Since Swix has seen consistent growth in rentals, its program will be largely unchanged.

Ryan Green, **ROSSIGNOL'S** Nordic division manager, sees strength in fitness, skate, and skin-base skis. He feels

that the public perception of XC as a "hard" sport remains a challenge, and the industry needs to tell the story that XC is not all a race, using images showing family and fun. For 2018-19, Rossignol continues with a rental-specific touring boot built on its own boot soles. Its general aim with the product collection is ease of use and adjustability, with unisex skis and M/F-specific boots. Some ski models are built with rental in mind, with tail protectors and clear-coat graphics.

SALOMON'S Isaac Wilson says that "though the touring and package business is very important to us, our biggest growth has come in high end racing product," and that's where the brand will continue to concentrate. Rental and touring packages will carry over for 2018-19, since Salomon likes to offer long life spans in these categories so shops have the option to amortize inventory over longer periods. Salomon feels it's important that consumers can buy the same skis and boots enjoyed in lessons, so it doesn't provide rental-specific products. Wilson says, "We make all our touring and skate product [including women's] with odor control and durability features that would make additional rental product unnecessary." Package product prices remain unchanged.



The S Lab Carbon Skate Ski from Salomon offers a lightweight ski designed for stability and control

SNOWSHOES

CRESCENT MOON may be instituting simultaneous revolutions in materials, design, and pricing. President Jake Thamm is seeing more interest from Baby Boomers, who have both disposable time and income. The radical Eva, a versatile all-foam snowshoe that's (as Thamm puts it) "completely different from all other shoes—inexpensive [retail is around \$160] and intuitive, easy to use, lightweight, comfortable and fun!" The binding is a "Velcro-like" harness of three straps, and makes getting into and out of the shoe a cinch. A rocker shape accentuates forward momentum, while traction is enhanced by hard plastic spikes under the ball of the foot. The shoe is made of two layers of EVA (ethylene-vinyl acetate). Rental shop durability hasn't been proven (it's a relatively new product, after all), and it may work best on compacted snow, but the Eva has gotten great press (*Men's Journal*, *gearjunkie.com*, *digitaltrends.com*, *SAM*, and a lot more) including several Gear of the Year awards. From what *SAM* has seen, it's well deserved.

ATLAS & TUBBS Snowshoes Marketing Specialist Jill Nazeer told *SAM* that they're seeing an increase in snowshoe participation, along with more interest in entry level snowshoe product. She says Tubbs is popular in rental departments—the Flex Jr. and Snowglow with kids, and the Flex series with adults. None of these are rental shop-specific. Both Atlas and Tubbs will see new graphics on the tubular shoes in 2018-2019 as well as ease-of-use updates, such as one-handed binding and heel buckles and a new-and-improved Boa system. For Atlas, 2018 will see a stronger focus on the Spindrift, its backcountry snowshoe, which isn't designed specifically for rental but is a great option for mountaineering and specialty stores.

Quebec-based **FABER** is relatively new to the U.S. snowshoe market, though established in western Canada. It's a well-thought-out line. President Guy Faber recommends the Mountain Pro, designed for rental: "Since we believe we have come up with a great product,

we do not play around with the design, nor do we plan on changing them in the near future." Faber uses high-quality unpainted 6063-T832 aluminum tubing for the frame. Decking is made of TPR lightweight, durable plastic that's highly resistant to cold and won't rip if pierced. Prices are remaining steady. New for 2018-19 is the sliding step snowshoe S-line, an off-trail snowshoe-ski hybrid that offers a gliding experience going downhill with better traction and movement than a traditional snowshoe. Faber says there's a lot of rental demand for from customers who want to try them out.

Sarah Courtney, **MSR's** winter category manager, says that "Kids is a growing market—it is one of the few areas we are seeing steady growth, but it is still a very small percentage of the market." She adds, "Our most basic model with the fewest features and entry level price point is always our biggest seller units-wise. I believe you get a lot more people at this price point that just want to try it,

The Youth Blazin' Blue snowshoes are designed with the same high strength and light weight decking as Northern Lites adult models.



For new snowshoers, Tubbs offers the value-conscious Flex STP with QuickPull Binding

and it is a very low barrier to entry to just get out in the snow when you compare it with getting a ski or snowboard setup.” MSR offers Evo Ascent, Evo, and kids’ Shift and Tyker models for rent, with no women’s-specific shoes in its rental fleet. All have a special blend of polypropylene deck, TPU bindings, and Martensite Steel traction bars. They weren’t developed specifically for rental but are super durable, easy to use, and the bindings fit a large variety of foot and shoe sizes. Prices are mostly unchanged.

NORTHERN LITES plans to hold its general price levels while at the same time continuing to refine and lighten their snowshoes. Co-owner Jim York sees growth in performance, women and beginners models. The company

has higher-end models for women (Elite, Backcountry, and Race). Of particular note are the new Race Wave (21.5 ounces per pair) and the Elite Ultra (34 ounces per pair). Both of these are significant advances for runner and ultra-athletes. Northern Lites also introduced a line of Technical snowshoes for glaciering and mountaineering. For rentals, York suggests a mix of QuickSilver 25s, QuickSilver 30s, and Youth models, with a couple of pair of Tundras for larger customers. All have aluminum frames, polyurethane/nylon decks, and aluminum cleats for durability, light weight, and ability to quickly repair damage.

Randy Christenson, **REDFEATHER’S** R&D/art director, says “the rental market has been good to us. Most challenges focus around ‘How do we set up programs?’” He sees growth in trail running and cross-training as well as hiking and day-trip snowshoeing. For rental programs, Redfeather concentrates on the Hike and various V-tail models for adults (including a women’s version), and the Hike and Elf designs for kids. Redfeather uses durable aircraft-grade 6000 series aluminum frames, with tear-resistant vinyl decks and powder-coated aluminum crampons. Christenson notes that “we build them for simplicity in putting on and taking off, with no powder coating on the frames, to reduce scratching and the look of wear over time.” No price changes are planned for 2018-19. ■

CROSS-COUNTRY GEAR MANUFACTURERS

MANUFACTURER	WEBSITE	PHONE
Alpina	www.alpinasportsus.com	1-800-425-7462
Atomic	www.atomic.com	1-800-258-5020
Erik Sports/Whitewoods	www.eriksports.com	1-800-247-6579
Fischer Sports	www.fischersports.com	1-800-844-7810
Leki	www.leki.com/us/	1-800-255-9982
Madshus	www.k2sports.com	1-800-426-1617
One Way Sport	www.onewaysport.us	435-659-6641
Rossignol	www.rossignol.com	1-888-243-6722
Salomon	www.salomon.com/us/	1-800-225-6850
Swix Sport USA	www.swixsport.us	1-800-343-8335

SNOWSHOE MANUFACTURERS

MANUFACTURER	WEBSITE	PHONE
Atlas	www.atlassnowshoe.com	1-888-482-8527
Crescent Moon	www.crescentmoonsnowshoes.com	1-800-587-7655
Erik Sports/Whitewoods	www.eriksports.com	1-800-247-6579
Faber	www.fabersnowshoes.com	1-866-842-8476
Northern Lites	www.northernlites.com	1-800-360-5483
MSR	www.msrgear.com	1-800-531-9531
Redfeather	www.redfeather.com	1-800-525-0081
Tubbs	www.tubbssnowshoes.com	1-800-882-2748