Pursuits
Skiing

# Bode Miller's New Skis Are Testament to 15-Year Quest for Perfection

## We tested the first skis created by the racing legend and now co-founder of Peak Ski Co.

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Bode Miller (right), co-founder and chief innovation officer of Peak Ski Co., with Andy Wirth, Peak's co-founder and CEO. *Source: Peak Ski Company*

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By Gordy Megroz
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Bode Miller was already a dominant force on racing's World Cup circuit before he found a pair of skis he really liked.

During the 2004 season, the New Hampshire native got a pair from Rossignol, his sponsor at the time, that were extremely stable and smooth yet also easy to turn–a trifecta that's hard to achieve, especially in race skis. "My ability to adjust to terrain was miraculously better," says Miller. "But from a design standpoint, I had no idea why this particular pair of skis was better than everything else out there."

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Miller piloted the skis that season to three Alpine Skiing World Cup giant slalom wins and clinched his only overall title in that discipline. The next season, he signed a lucrative contract with Atomic, and the beloved pair of Rossignols, which had been raced and filed so much that there was hardly any metal edge remaining, were passed on to Thomas Grandi—a Canadian racer who proceeded to win two races of his own, the only World Cup victories of his 16-year career.

Eventually, Miller got his hands on the skis again. This time, he dissected them to find out what made them superior.

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WE ARE NOT HERE TO DO WHAT HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE
PEAK

Peak Ski's headquarters is in Bozeman, Mont. *Source: Peak Ski Company*

The secret sauce, he discovered, was a manufacturing flaw. Rossignol engineers normally glued a vibration-damping device to the tip of the ski. But in five pairs that were produced prior to the 2004 season, including the pair Miller raced on, they cut a hole through the metal in the ski and stuck the device to its wood core. Miller believes this was done because the glue the company was using to adhere the anti-vibration device to the ski's topsheet wasn't working. "Once they got better glue, they went back to sticking it to the top of the ski," he says.

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For 15 years, he dreamed of building a consumer version of those skis, but it wasn't until he co-founded Peak Ski Co. in 2021 that he was finally able to realize it.

This spring, the Montana manufacturer released its first pair, claiming they contained technology and construction that made them perform unlike any other ski on the market.

I've been testing skis for almost two decades, and I have never seen any other ski company make such a bold claim. Naturally, I needed to see if they lived up to the hype.

Miller with the new skis. *Source: Peak Ski Company*

In May, I took two pairs to Colorado's Arapahoe Basin, where I found a variety of conditions including icy slopes, slushy moguls, and soft-groomed trails. The moment I started down the mountain, one thing stood out: I could make a nice, clean arc in the snow while going very slowly. Typically, skis require a certain amount of speed and pressure to engage the tip and initiate the turn. But these carved without having to apply that force. At speed, on the steeps, they held the turn like a race ski, and in bumps and slush they were quick and forgiving. Not once did I feel off balance.

Anybody could use these skis, I thought. Beginners would love them because they're easy to turn; experts would, too, because they still can ski aggressively and feel solid underfoot.

Miller believes it's that cutout in the tip of the ski that makes it perform so differently. "Skis historically have a uniform characteristic from the shovel to the tail—they're either stiff or soft depending on the material and construction," he says. "Because the tip of this ski is softer and conforms to the terrain, it doesn't jolt you,

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so you’re able to keep your balance. For the general public, balance is the most challenging thing.”

That checked out during my tests. For me, a single run down a slope is a series of recoveries–a fight to find balance while transitioning from smooth to choppy terrain. During my first few runs on the Peaks, I threw my weight forward while descending, a common technique to prevent crashing by being thrown onto the tails of your skis.

But I quickly learned that on Peaks, I could stand more upright in the middle of the ski, an easier and less tiresome stance, and not feel as though I was going to be bucked backward.

Miller tests a prototype in February 2022. *Source: Peak Ski Company*

Over the years, Miller kept pitching his idea of a superior consumer ski that would make people feel better about their skiing and allow them to advance quicker. But for a variety of reasons, whether conflicting opinions or budgetary issues, it never worked out.

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Then, in 2021, he teamed with Andy Wirth, who’d been the president and chief executive officer of Squaw Valley Ski Holdings, the parent company of prominent ski areas in California. When Miller spoke to Wirth about starting a ski manufacturing company, he says, “There were only two parameters for me: that we get funded properly and that we don’t have too many cooks in the kitchen. I’m open to ideas, but I need to be able to do the stuff that I know is right.” Wirth agreed: “The most important element to success was letting Bode be the core driver of innovation.”

In just a few months, the two men were able to raise $5 million, enough to build the initial run of 10,000 pairs of skis, most of which are being made with Miller's design—now known as Keyhole Technology—in the Elan factory in Slovenia. (Several small ski manufacturers rely on larger companies with infrastructure to build their skis.) "There are a lot of great companies that make skis," says Wirth. "But we found that Elan's focus and attention to detail and precision was the strongest. We also trusted that they wouldn't allow IP to leak."

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Through his connections, Miller was also able to develop a proprietary thermoplastic material for the skis. Made by ATC Manufacturing, an Idaho company that also makes plastics for NASA and the US Department of Defense, the material is a composite that damps vibration and is energetic while keeping the ski strong underfoot, Miller says. Other than that and the keyhole technology, the skis are like most others: vertically laminated wood-core with two sheets of titanal.

The Peaks are $890 and come in four waist widths—from a more groomed trail-specific ski that's 88 millimeters to a pair that's more suited for powder skiing at 110mm. The company is also producing two lighter versions for those who earn their turns by skinning up the mountain before descending.

And Miller and Wirth aren't finished innovating. They're are also working with Bihler, a German company that makes industrial equipment, on developing a machine that would completely automate the ski-building process. "I'd love to see skis cost no more than $300," Miller says.

But even at the current price, the Peaks feel like a bargain. At Arapahoe Basin, I'd intended to ski a few hours, get a feel for the skis, and then go home. But I was having so much fun that I continued to make turns almost until the lifts stopped spinning. On my last run down a slushy bump trail, I still felt fresh.

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