

NEW ZEALAND SKIer



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KINGSWOOD skis

BY KRIS KUENNING

It seemed like a Herculean task, but through the right combination of persistence, luck and improvisation, Alex Herbert has created New Zealand's first ski manufacturing company, Kingswood Skis.

One day about five years ago, Alex Herbert decided it would be cool to make his own skis. Now, the average skier understands about as much about how to make a pair of skis as a New Yorker knows about cattle ranching. For most people, skis – like steaks – are something you buy, not something you make.

But Alex had been given a glimpse into ski construction through his 12 years as a ski technician. From his major repair bench at Christchurch's

Ski and Snowboard Surgery, Alex had seen broken skis, bent edges and bugged bases. He cursed cap construction and exalted sidewalls. It was clear to him that all skis were not created equal.

Around the same time, fat skis excited and frustrated New Zealand free skiers. They were so good, but so hard to get. In the early days of the 2000 season, Alex and then-business partner Sam Masters scoured the country for old-school fat skis that had been abandoned in heli-guide sheds. They dragged up nearly 20 pairs and then dealt them round to friends with the secrecy and discretion of Colombian drug lords.

Though fat skis gradually made their way into New Zealand, it was probably



If you want to test a ski, who better to hang out with than Todd Windle.



Alex carefully puts the skis in the purpose built pneumatic press.

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this early scarcity that motivated Alex to explore ski production. It was one way to make damn sure that he was never left short of surface area on a powder day. This theory also explains why for the first three years, Alex mostly made skis for himself.

He started with de-construction. It was a day of true commitment when Alex sliced his favourite – and only – pair of skis into 42 pieces. He studied their construction and measured their core profile. He found other sacrificial skis – peeled back topsheets and poked under bases. And then he began the slow process of putting it all back together in his own way. Today, you can watch ski factory tours online and download step-by-step instructions for building a press, but five years ago, the industry was dominated by large, tight-lipped manufacturers and for Alex every part of the process was puzzling and mysterious.

In September 2001, the first pair came out of his makeshift press – two pieces of metal squeezed together with a series of car jacks and an I-beam. It was a triumph. Not only did they look like a real pair of skis, but they were actually quite nice to ski on. Alex seemed pretty satisfied with his work. He went skiing. After 60 days, the plain black, nameless skis were still going. In fact, they're still going. There's probably some grommet at Broken River hitting rails on them right now.

Could it really be that easy? Well, of course not. After the surprising success

of the first pair there were many, many mishaps. Sometimes, the cores slid off-centre in the pressing. Or the tips delaminated. Or the bindings ripped out. Just as one problem was fixed, another presented itself. Alex tried to source materials locally but it wasn't always possible and the large, European materials suppliers weren't interested in his minuscule orders.

But some alliances were formed. Long, technical phone conversations with an Auckland snowboard manufacturer Jon Malcolm-Smith (Rib Cage snowboards) yielded some valuable advice. And Christchurch kite board manufacturer Underground shared materials and technical expertise.

Now, with a pneumatic press (built with help from Underground), Alex is cranking out the first 50 production-quality skis this season under the name Kingswood. He's making three models – the Skinny (which is 86mm underfoot), the Mid-fat (a beefy 110mm underfoot) and the just plain Fat (which is a powder loving 116mm underfoot). All the skis are twin-tips made with the traditional sidewall construction using a bamboo core, strengthened with tri-axial fibreglass and carbon fibre.

Alex handcrafts each pair to the only standards he knows: his own. As such, they're fat, they're strong, and he can make himself as many pairs as he wants.

Check them out at www.kingswoodskis.com.



Alex puts the Kingswoods to the test in Chamonix, France.



Kingswoods handmade construction of bamboo, fibreglass and carbon fibre.