

STORY BY SEAN FORBES

# MADE FOR THESE MOUNTAINS

## Seneca Boards handcrafts skis, snowboards for Montana slopes — and everywhere else

Pulling a page from history, Seneca Boards owner Eric Newman has gone back to the way skis used to be made – by hand. As a result, the perfect pair of skis, or snowboard, has become easier to find in the Gallatin Valley.

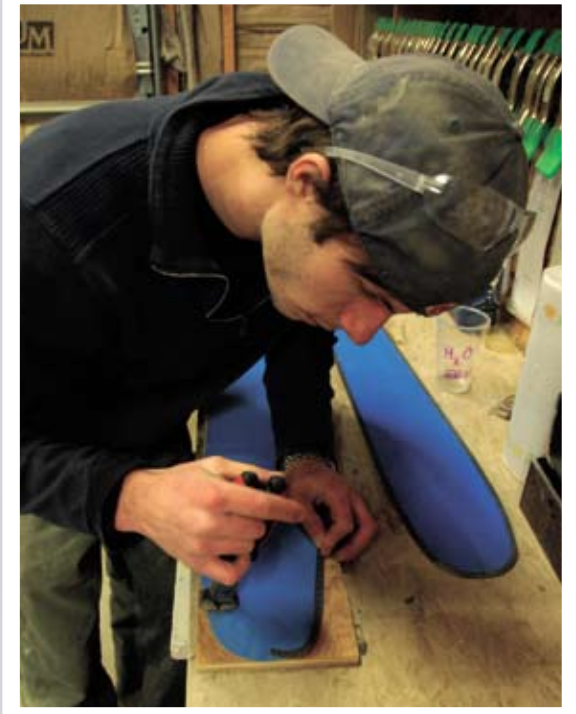
Born from a relative disappointment with the ski industry, Seneca – an Iroquois word for people of the big mountain – deviates from the norm by offering custom and semi-custom skis and snowboards and longboards, in the summer.

“Most people think, ‘Oh, I want to start a ski company, I’ll go find some place that builds skis and I’ll just have them do it.’ But it’s like, what’s the fun in that? If you’re going to start a ski company you might as well build them yourself,” Newman said.

With the equivalent of a graduate degree in skiing experience – including racing in New England, competing on the freeskiing tour and starting non-profit Bonfire Films to produce promotional video footage for various resorts – and a willingness to read engineering textbooks, Newman, 26, seems to be from the school of want something done right, then do it yourself. Through trial and error and a lot of research, Newman has taught himself most of the engineering side while getting a business management degree from Montana State University.

Aside from the completely custom option, which runs about \$1,000 depending on materials and the like, Seneca offers three basic models for no more than any other high-end pair of skis. The goal is to keep the price down to encourage local skiers to take a chance on a young company and help develop its reputation.

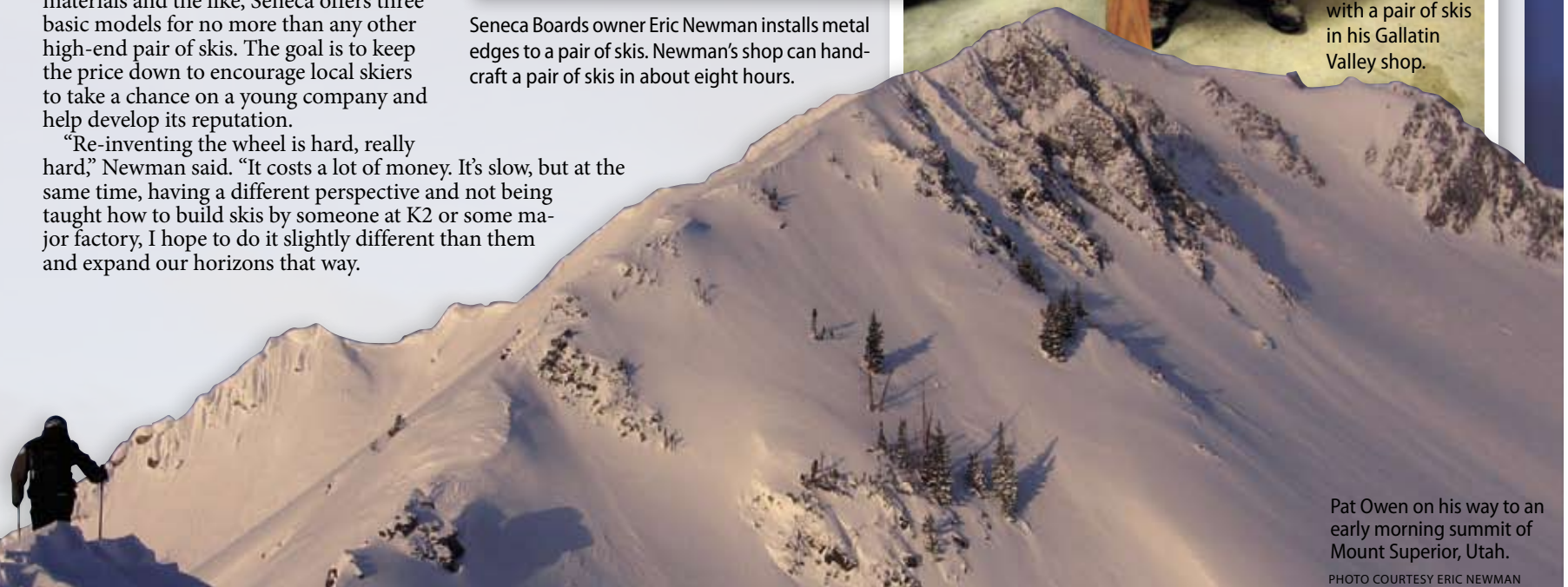
“Re-inventing the wheel is hard, really hard,” Newman said. “It costs a lot of money. It’s slow, but at the same time, having a different perspective and not being taught how to build skis by someone at K2 or some major factory, I hope to do it slightly different than them and expand our horizons that way.”



Seneca Boards owner Eric Newman installs metal edges to a pair of skis. Newman's shop can handcraft a pair of skis in about eight hours.



Newman poses with a pair of skis in his Gallatin Valley shop.



Pat Owen on his way to an early morning summit of Mount Superior, Utah. PHOTO COURTESY ERIC NEWMAN



Sawdust flies as Newman runs a pair of boards through a planer at his Gallatin Valley shop.

“Everything we have is customizable. So you could change simply the top sheets, to everything in it. You could even specify the width and thickness of your edges, the color of your base material, graphics on your bases, the types of wood in your core. You could go cut your own wood down and we’d mill it and put it in a ski for you. So, the sky is the limit for that.”

Newman admits that while there is a large custom market, not everyone needs a ski made so specific. Hence, the park (\$550), all mountain (\$525) and big mountain/powder (\$600) standard models Newman has been developing, which he also hopes will make it easier to get his work on the racks in area shops.

“More than anything, when you start getting into the shop skis, and even all the custom skis, the one thing that ties it all together is the performance,” Newman said. “And the materials and the care that goes into it.”

That quality has caught some attention. “I got a big pair of powder skis from Eric. I love them. They’re great,” said Pete McLane, a Bozeman-area skier. “They were just what I was looking for. I’m a little hard on skis and I tried my best to break them like I do every pair of ski and nothing, didn’t even chip them at all. They were very durable and ... just as stiff as I could possibly ask for, which was real nice because I could customize exactly what I wanted just by talking to him.”

Operating out of a warehouse on Andrea Drive in Belgrade, Seneca’s website (senecaboards.com) is the best way to get started on a purchase. Even though Newman has been building skis for six years, Seneca Boards wraps up its first full season of production this month.

“The funny thing is, when you ski a lot – I’ve skied a lot – you have an appreciation for a really finely crafted piece of equipment. But at the same time when you’re somebody that’s about the skiing, not necessarily about the equipment, you also have an appreciation for pretty much anything that gets you down the hill,” Newman said. “They’re complicated, but they’re really relatively simple. The whole idea of a ski hasn’t changed hardly at all.”

“So where it goes from here, I’d say that the design phase will kind of be played out and you’ll start seeing the technology side pick up, especially as more and more independent manufacturers spring up and think outside the box a little more.” ♦



For more information on Seneca Boards, visit: [www.senecaboards.com](http://www.senecaboards.com)



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