

# Rocky Mountain News

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: [http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/winter\\_activities/article/0,2777,DRMN\\_23946\\_5135761,00.html](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/winter_activities/article/0,2777,DRMN_23946_5135761,00.html)

## Fitting way to begin

To maximize your skiing or snowboarding venture, step right up for custom tailoring

By **Brian Metzler**, Special to the News  
November 10, 2006

Trent Wilcken knows this winter is going to be one of the best ski seasons of his life.

Why is the Highlands Ranch resident so sure? Three weeks ago, he bought a new pair of ski boots that specifically matched his foot shape, and he had them custom fit by one of North America's premier boot fitters.

Wilcken drove 45 miles to Larry's Boot Fitting in Boulder, then spent about 90 minutes watching Larry Houchen work his magic with a new pair of Salomon XWave 8 alpine ski boots and a pair of heat-molded custom liners.

That's in stark contrast to last season, when

Wilcken picked a pair of boots off the shelf at a big box retailer and wore them 20 to 25 times right out of the box. He said he never felt he got the performance out of the boots that he would have liked. His biggest complaint was that there was too much room for his feet to swim around, making it hard to have precise control of his skis.

"I never felt like I could get those boots snug enough," he said. "But after this experience, I'm confident it's going to be much better than last year."

Houchen uses a variety of techniques, tools and tricks of the trade to find solutions to a wide range of customer complaints, which might include numb toes, lack of circulation, sore calves, cold feet or heel slippage.

He might start with a custom moldable liner or foot bed, but grinding, stretching, trimming or completely reworking a portion of a hard plastic boot shell is not uncommon, either. He has a tool room in the back of the store that would make a carpenter, mechanic or surgeon green with envy.

He even has built a boot insert for a ski instructor who lost half of a foot in an accident.

"I think in a former life I must have done torture sessions on people," said the 48-year-old Houchen, who has earned a reputation from Olympic athletes and national ski publications *SKI*, *Skiing* and *Ski Racing* as being one of the best in the business. "So now I have to pay it back by making people comfortable in their boots."

Many Colorado ski and snowboard shops offer some type of boot-fitting service or after-market foot beds and liners. But full-time boot-fitting gurus such as Houchen and Denver's Lee Kinney, who recently opened The Custom Foot in Englewood, are a rare breed in the metro area. Each has been fitting boots almost solely for the past 25 years in Colorado.

Kinney used to rent space in other area shops to ply his trade. But he has been so busy this fall in his new storefront location that he's only working by appointment as of late.

"It dumbfounds me that people just accept foot pain in their ski boots and associate the two together," said Kinney, 60, who formerly worked at Loveland Ski Area. "It's so solvable. With a little bit of time and not much money, you can have comfortable feet. They're never going to be slippers, but it doesn't have to be painful."

When diagnosing a problem or sizing up for an initial fit, Houchen peppers his customers with questions to try to get as much information about their snowriding habits. How often does that person ski or snowboard? What kind of terrain are they on the most? How aggressive do they ski or ride? In what other sports do they participate?

Houchen's goal is to help get a boot to more closely match the shape, size and volume of a foot, and he uses that information when dialing in the fit.

Many skiers and snowboarders don't realize that boots can get a half-size larger as they get cold and packed out after a few uses, Houchen says. But wearing thicker socks or tightening down buckles as much as possible is not a good option, because it can cut off circulation and lead to cold or numb feet.

"Unless you get pregnant or your foot gets crushed by a car, you're not going to get bigger feet," Houchen told Wilcken. "But ski boots will never be as small as they are in the store."

Houchen estimates 60 percent of his business comes from tweaking the fit of customers' existing boots, while 40 percent is in new boot sales.

Lately, he has been working on about 35 pairs of boots every day and is booked out a few days in advance. While major boot overhauls can cost in the \$100 to \$150 range, he charges \$30 or less for most of the minor adjustments he makes.

Although he picked up a few tricks from others, Houchen is a self-made wizard who refined his craft with techniques he developed. As a 23-year-old fresh out of college, he took a job at the now-defunct Aspen Leaf ski and tennis shop in Cherry Creek. It was a high-end joint, but the ski department was in the basement.

"They were having a preseason ski sale and we were short on staff, so the manager asked if one of us would spend the day putting boots on people," he recalled. "And I said, 'Sure. I'll do that.' That's how I got started."

Since that job, he worked at numerous retail shops, including an 11-year stint at Boulder Ski Deals, before opening his own business in 2004.

"Everyone says he's the best," said Peter Gaston, 19, a sophomore at the University of Colorado who skied 90 days last winter. "That's why I came to see him."



Using a Superfeet machine, Houchen constructs a new foot bed for Trevor Dean's ski boots. Houchen asks an abundance of questions of customers in order to obtain as much information as possible to properly fit boots.

## Boot-fitting tips

? Boot-fitting sessions take 90 minutes to 2 hours, so plan accordingly. There are 26 bones, 36 muscles, 56 ligaments and 10,000 nerve endings in your feet that need to be accommodated.

? Because foot length can increase by as much as a full size when arches collapse under body weight, a trained fitter measures your feet when you're seated and when you're standing. He'll then select a few models that work for your foot shape.

? Take the liner out of the boot and step into the shell. You want about five-eighths to three-quarters of an inch of space behind your heel when your toes just touch the front. That way, when the liner packs out, the shell still will support your foot.

? Put a different boot model on each foot and plan to spend at least 15 minutes in them. The ball of your foot should sit flat and snug. Same with your heel. As your foot warms up the boot, the liner will begin to mold to your foot. The boots should feel better after this time, not worse.

? New boots should feel snug - not painful or so restrictive as to cut off circulation - but uniformly snug with no severe pressure points. Your toes should touch the end of the boot when you stand up straight, but when you stand up, your toes should pull back slightly.

? If the boot is fine everywhere except for one place, like the ball of your foot or the bottom of your calf, a fitter can tweak the fit by grinding, stretching or cutting the shell.

? Unfortunately, there's no industry norm when it comes to boot flex, so a 120-flex Lange doesn't bend like a 120-flex Salomon. To make matters worse, boots are about 20 percent softer in a warm store, so it's hard to get a feel for how they'll ski. Your best bet? Buy stiff boots and soften them if you must by having your boot fitter cut the lower cuff. It's easy to soften a stiff boot, but it's tough to stiffen a soft boot.

? An alignment - in simple terms, adjusting the boot to better line up the ankles with the knees and hipbones for a natural athletic stance - could be the final step in any comprehensive boot fit. But don't even think of tweaking the canting or upper cuff without heat-molded custom insoles.

## Get fit

Custom ski and snowboard boot-fitting services can range from small tweaks or complete reconstruction of a boot's shell to new, semicustom or fully custom boot insoles or liners. Prices range from \$30 to \$400, depending on your needs. Here is a sampling of shops that offer custom boot-fitting services in the metro area:

? Boulder Ski Deals, Boulder, 303-938-8799

? Christy Sports, Boulder, Denver, 303-321-3885

? Colorado Ski & Golf, Arvada, Aurora, Littleton, 303-337-1734

? Larry's Boot Fitting, Boulder, 303-402-6733

? The Custom Foot, Englewood, 303-761-4002

Copyright 2006, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.