

face



BY MARCUS WOOLF

WHILE LIVING IN LAKE TAHOE, I MET A GUY WHO MADE A LIVING BY REPAIRING and re-selling old Subaru station wagons. They weren't the hottest wheels around, but they hugged the snowy mountain roads, while sporty Jeep Cherokees—carting folks from the Bay Area—filled the ditches.

Even so, I imagine that SUVs continue to outnumber station wagons in the mountains. Function is important, but we should never underestimate the power of fashion. It's the same way with outdoor gear.

Consider what's happening with goggles. Thanks to new technologies, goggles work better than ever, but fashion trends have become just as important—if not more important—than technology.

Larger brands now devote more resources toward producing eye-catching products, while upstart companies have

said Price, "there was no paint."

Now, companies use computers and advanced machines to create frames with endless colors, textures and patterns.

Over the last year, Bolle Eyewear has experimented with paints that give frames a colored, yet clear "gummi bear" look. Meanwhile, the company is also investigating "chameleon" paints that reflect different colors in various light conditions, said Chris Farmer, product line manager for Bolle Eyewear. "Many of these things come from the sunglasses side of the business," he said. "We're

said Bolle's Farmer. The population of young snowboarders and skiers continues to grow, and goggle companies are working to capture those consumers.

COMPETITION HEATS UP

Eight years ago, Smith and Scott ruled the goggle market, said Mike Walker, a Smith rep. Then, Oakley joined them around five years ago. These remain the overall top brands. But the snowboarding market has sparked plenty of new competition. "In the last three years, we've seen several new brands begin to compete, like Spy, Electric, Version and Velvet," said Walker.

"The trend has been to cater to a younger market," said English of Any Mountain. "Companies like Spy and Version are really targeting younger people who look at goggles as eyewear [fashion] and want something that looks cool."

COMPETITION INCREASES FOR THE IMAGE-DRIVEN GOGGLE MARKET.

dropped into the market to grab younger, image-driven snowboarders and skiers. Thanks to fashion, competition has never been greater.

A NEW COAT OF PAINT

Within the outdoor industry, sunglasses have long been fashion pieces, but the phenomenon is new for goggles. Until about four years ago, most people preferred to shush around in a pair of shades. Then, goggle manufacturers not only improved the optical quality of their products, but also acquired technologies that allowed them to jazz up their designs.

Gradually, snowboarders and skiers began to wear goggles, rather than sunglasses, on the mountain, said Sean English, manager of Any Mountain, a snowsports specialty store in Corte Madera, Calif. "Glasses are après—for lunch time," said English. "Goggles are for when you're performing on the mountain."

Darryl Price, goggle product manager for Smith Sport Optic, said companies changed the face of the goggle market with new colorations and painting techniques. He said that until a few years ago companies had only one way to make colored frames—they just injected colored plastics into molds. "That was the way you did color development,"

even looking at 'soft touch' paints that feel like rubber—almost like neoprene."

As colorations grow more sophisticated, goggle designers seek new sources for design inspiration. "Now you're looking at the auto industry, and sunglasses and shoes—and any technology, like cell phones—for color trends and variations," said Price.

He added that fashion has also made its mark on goggle lenses, as customers can now choose from a wide range of tints. "One of the biggest trends right now is mirrored lenses," said Price, noting that Smith now offers three goggles with mirrored lenses—the Fuse, Triad and Anthem.

While technology has inspired goggle makers to broaden their palette, there is another factor motivating them—and that factor is snowboarding.

"People know there's tremendous growth in goggles, especially in the snowboard community,"

Some new companies, such as Iris, play solely in the snowboard specialty market. Launched in 1997, Iris designs its goggles for core snowboarders and stays on the leading edge of the sport's ever-changing style trends. "Every year we change up our line com-

PHOTO COURTESY OF FISCHER.



pletely," said Karl Fuhre of Iris.

While some new goggle companies are small mom and pop operations, others have deeper pockets, such as Anon, a goggle brand launched two years ago by Burton. David Driscoll of Anon said the brand first introduced two types of goggle frames, each available in six different colors. This year it will roll out four frames, each in six colors. The line features goggles with interchangeable lenses and most models retail from \$70 to \$100.

Two smaller brands getting plenty of buzz are Version and Velvet, both owned by V2 Optic. Launched in 1999, V2 Optic operates in 1,200 snowboard shops in the United States, as well as stores in 14 other countries.

Company founder Patrick Hussey said he launched the Velvet brand because few companies—if any—were making goggles for women snowboarders. Hussey said when it comes to colorations, tints and goggle strap designs, Velvet follows the fashion trends out of Italy and France. Beyond its sense of style, Velvet offers consumers innovative features. "This past year with lenses we were the first to use gradient colors on a goggle lens to give them a much more fashion-forward look," said Hussey. "Now we have computer-driven micro-sprayers to do different types of prints [on frames], like camouflage and snakeskin."

Hussey said V2 Optic's business will grow by 50 percent this year, and he's launching a new, edgier brand—Recon—for the core of the core riders. "The jibbing and rail sliding—the skate influence—is what the kids in the most influential markets are focused on. That's what's driving the core of snowboarding right now."

Bolle's Farmer agrees that the surf and skate markets are influencing snowboarding culture heavily, and goggle manufacturers have followed suit with edgy designs. "They're going for a look—mirrored coatings on lenses, cooler frame treatments, metallic looks mixed with flexible polyurethane materials on the frames," said Farmer.

Retailers seem willing to bring in the smaller brands to shake things up. Hans Schneider, manager of Paragon Ski and Sport in Telluride, Colo., said he brought in a dozen styles of Spy goggles to serve younger clientele. "They're also attracting young freeskiers. Free-skiing is cool again, and that's changed everything," he said.

In Big Sky, Mont., Gallatin Alpine Sports has carried snowboards for seven

years. "We brought in Dragon goggles to try something new," said Floor Manager Russell Skiver. "We also brought in Anon, because we recently picked up Burton." But he's not certain that his snowboarding customers will choose snowboard-specific brands over Smith and Scott.

Still, the large manufacturers are feeling the heat. "We have felt some pressure from the competition," said Mark Sullivan, marketing director for Oakley. "We're getting more involved in the snowboard market than ever before. We're upgrading the look and feel of the brand to be more progressive, and we've brought in people deeply rooted in snowboarding."

THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

Oakley, Smith and other major brands realize that if they want to compete for snowboard customers they must do more than jazz up the look of their goggles. They have to adopt snowboard-industry marketing strategies—this means assembling a team of riders. Sullivan points out that snowboard brands rely on popular riders to sell product. "Companies get certain athletes or opinion leaders in the sport to endorse their products, and sell their products


based on that association," he said.

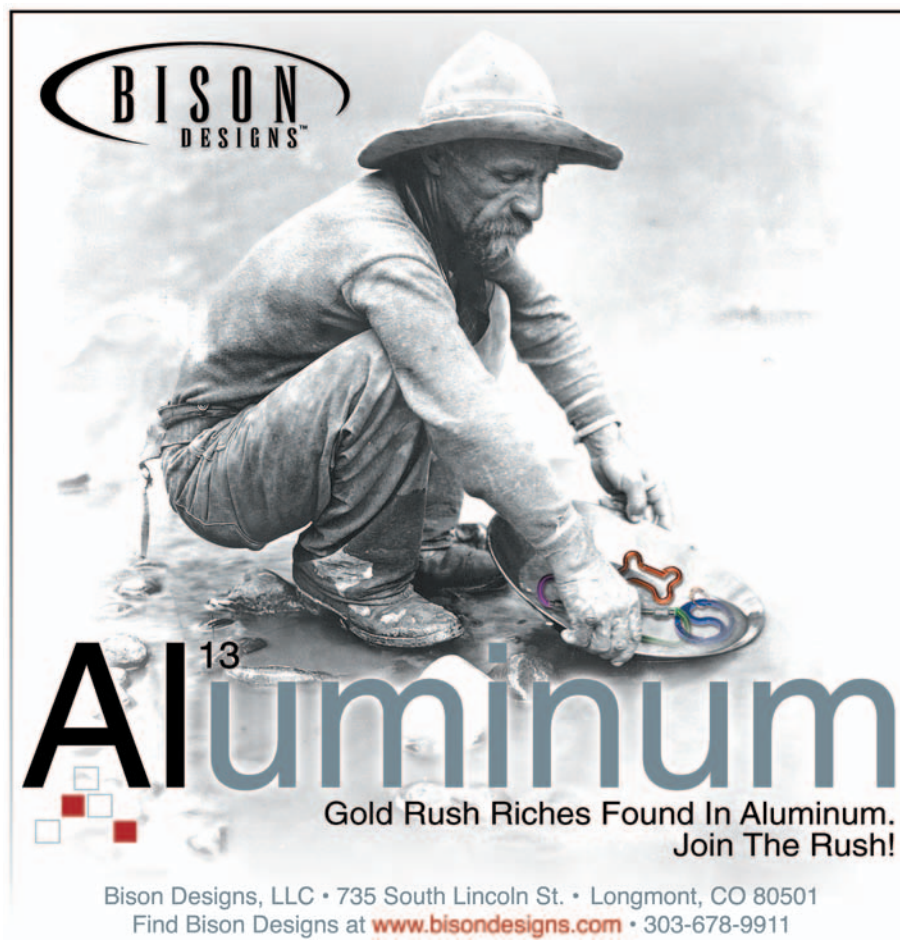
"We had a difficult time getting into snowboard specialty, but it's getting easier for us," said Price of Smith. "We have addressed our snowboard team, which is a huge part of what drives sales."

Of course, riders do more than endorse products, Driscoll said that Anon employs five global team riders and 10 rookie riders who heavily influence the design of Anon product. It's evidence of Jake Burton's central business philosophy that team riders should play a significant role in product design.

Still, it does come back to image. Kids pay close attention to the photos in magazines, and seek out the gear and fashions of prominent riders. Fuhre of Iris said the company relies on the idea that kids will recognize that Iris is owned by well-known rider Devun Walsh.

In the end, though, image goes only so far. "Athlete endorsements sell product at a certain level. But it's not as influential [on people with] three to five years of experience in the sport," said Sullivan. "Function will prove to be the ultimate fashion."

Down the road, the goggles that perform in the mountains will hang around. And those that don't will end up in the ditch. 



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