

Snurfer Success

On Christmas morning, 1965, an invention was born that would inspire an entire generation of snow sports enthusiasts. Sherman Poppen, a businessman who owned stores which supplied industrial gas to the west coast of Michigan, wanted to entertain his children that holiday. Unable to sled on the shores of Lake Michigan due to huge snow dunes, Poppen strapped two skis together and began to slide down the dune sideways. "It dawned on me that if this were water, we could ride this all day," recalls Poppen.

Poppen's wife dreamed up the name "Snurfer," a mix of the words "snow" and "surf," which is exactly what riders were doing: surfing the snow. Of course, his children loved the new toy – as did the neighboring kids – and soon Poppen was clearing out all available old skis at local Goodwill stores to fabricate more Snurfers.

This was purely a "kid thing" though; something Poppen "saw as a replacement for the sled." With a rope off the front of the board to steer and brake, the Snurfer was "the first good tool for sliding downhill besides skis." Armed with a patent and trademark, Poppen sold the Snurfer on a royalty basis to Brunswick Corporation until 1972, and then to Jem Corporation.

Of course, with any sport come competitions. Poppen organized many, including the first World Snurfing Championship, held in 1979 at Pando Ski Lodge near Grand Rapids, Mich. Jake Burton and some friends arrived with homemade, longer boards – complete with bindings. Competing in a separate division for a non-Snurfer board, Jake took first place as a solo contestant.

As seen at the Snurfer competition, a generation of kids who grew up with Snurfers had ideas to improve the snow riding experience. Unable to call them "Snurfboards," since the word had been patented by Poppen, Jake instead began calling his equipment "snowboards."

From 1966 to 1968, Poppen "rode all the time," but with dimensions of 7" x 42", the Snurfer was kid-sized. Over half a million Snurfers were sold during the 1960s and 1970s under Brunswick, and another 250,000 under Jem Corporation, which marketed the product well, by producing Snurfer carrying bags, patches, and wax. After Jem Corporation dissolved in the early 1980s, that was the end of the Snurfer. As an industrial gas businessman, Poppen didn't have time to pursue further Snurfer development. At that point, many of the early snowboarding pioneers, including Jake Burton, Tom Sims and Dimitrije Milovich, were already making their own snowboards and improving features.

By the early- to mid-1980s, the Snurfer had been phased out, in favor of wider, longer boards with more developed bindings, no steering rope, and metal edges. Yet the Snurfer had an incalculable influence on the first generation of snowboard pioneers, inspiring them improve upon a board used in snow and produce the sport of snowboarding as we know it today.

Sources:

<http://www.surfarama.com/snowboarding/>

Phone interview with Sherman Poppen.

"Sherman Poppen: Snowboarding's Godfather," by Charles J. MacArthur, Skiing Heritage Journal, June 2008.