



Howard Head

Howard Head, a pioneer in both skiing and tennis, revolutionized both sports. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 31, 1914 he was an alumnus of William Penn Charter and Harvard. Howard worked for the Glenn Martin airplane manufacturing company in Baltimore, Maryland during World War II.

One of the things that distinguished Howard Head was his approach to innovation. It was explicitly based on problem solving and the understanding that if he was having problems, then others were probably having problems as well. He was not one to pay too much attention to the mantra, "It is the poor carpenter who

blames his tools." As Gene Landrum says, "Head used his gift for vision to revolutionize two industries, not because he wanted to change the industries but because he wanted to improve his own ability. Head was inept at skiing and tennis. He blamed his incompetence on the equipment. He believed that if he had the problem others had the same problem.

Howard Head first started skiing in 1947. He loved it, but did not ski as well as he would have liked. He said later, "I didn't blame any lack of ability for my bad skiing, but rather blamed the skis." Since Head was skiing in 1947, he had a legitimate complaint.

When Head first went down the slope the skis were made of wood, so they lost their shape quickly, leaving the skier with little control. Because of this Head felt that a ski should be made of metal. His reasoning was that if wood was the best material they'd still be making airplanes out of wood.

So, Howard put his expertise as an aircraft engineer to work. He invested two hundred and fifty dollars in a band saw and spent his spare time designing skis. It took Howard six months to make his first ski. He took the ski to a Vermont ski instructor who skied on it and broke it within an hour. Howard recognized that he needed to find the solution to the problem. He persevered for two more winters through forty different designs

In 1951, Howard Head took \$6,000.00 in poker winnings and financed the equipment and the supplies required to start the Head Ski Company. He had created an aluminum ski with a plywood core for strength, steel edges for turning and a plastic running surface for smoother runs.

The ski instructors could not break this new ski that Howard Head called 'The Standard'. It sold for \$85.00, an exorbitant price at that time. This ski was lighter, stronger and more flexible than wooden skis and easier to turn; it earned the nickname 'cheaters' by the

industry. It became the benchmark for ski manufacturers everywhere. Skiing was now a sport anyone could enjoy.

The public was slow to accept Head's skis. In order to market them, he tried to get professional skiers to use them in competition. This was unsuccessful until in 1961 an unknown on the Swiss Ski team won an Olympic race on a pair of Head metal skis. With additional praises from racers worldwide, the Head Ski Company soon dominated the market.

The contribution of Howard Head is incalculable because he was the first: no one had substantially improved on a major component by using modern materials until Head did it. It took a man of vision, dedication and immense vitality, a man with an undying interest in the sport, who loved to ski, to make a breakthrough of this sort.

Not only had Head proved that there were potentially ways to improve ski equipment beyond the wildest imagining, but that there was a market for expensive ski equipment if the equipment delivered superior performance. And the Head ski did. It was easier to turn and it was a lot harder to destroy. The Head ski can be said to have played a major role in the rise of popularity of skiing after the Second World War, a time when skiing came into its own as a popular sport in the United States. It is an achievement of will and enthusiasm that ranks with the most important in the history of skiing.

Skis were not the only way that Howard Head revolutionized sports. In 1970, at age 60, Head sold his company and retired. He took up tennis, but like his skiing he was unhappy with his performance. Six years into his retirement, Head redesigned the tennis racket. He created one called the Prince Classic, an oversized racket with a large, sweet spot that gave more control and power. Just like his skis Howard Head's new tennis racket became the standard for the industry. So important were both these achievements that Head's first metal skis and his Prince classic tennis racket are now permanently displayed at the Smithsonian.

Howard Head was inducted into the National Ski Museum and Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, Michigan, in 1978, thirteen years prior to his death in 1991.