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Sport: Survival of the Fastest

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While the assembly lines at the ski making industry's Big Three—America's K2, France's Rossignol, and Germany's Adidas-Salomon—together churn out millions of skis a year, the production pace is decidedly slower in a small, single-story factory in Malers, Switzerland. Here, Stöckli's four dozen employees gather each morning to assemble skis by hand, deferring to automated machinery only when necessary. In the afternoons, they test their creations on the nearby mountains. In Switzerland, a country where the sport is considered the national pastime, Stöckli, which was founded in 1946, is the last remaining ski maker.

At one time decades ago, skiers regularly shredded Alpine pistes with Swiss-made skis built by companies such as Schwendener, Authier, and Attenhofer, until all of the country's manufacturers eventually closed their doors or were acquired by larger rivals. Stöckli was the exception, although its future seemed tenuous in the 1960s. Then in 1967 the company began a turnaround by first reducing its production volume and concentrating its efforts on building a smaller number of high-end, high-priced skis. Stöckli also opened several stores in Switzerland, thereby allowing customers to purchase skis and other equipment directly from the company. Stöckli now produces annually 45,000 pairs of skis; each pair requires as many as 10 days to complete and sells for up to \$1,000.

Stöckli caters to experienced skiers—including members of Switzerland's World Cup team—who enjoy high-speed runs, either in deep powder or on glassy slopes. The company offers a children's line, but its most popular models are the Spirit for advanced skiers and the Laser for racers. Nicholas Sprung, Stöckli USA president, explains that all of the Stöckli models feature a sandwich configuration, with wood cores surrounded by two layers of metal. This design, which, Sprung notes, is unique to handmade skis, prevents the Stöcklis from twisting at high speeds. And because of the strength and shape of the tails, the skis turn and accelerate out of curves without skidding.

"They give you a crisp turn and holding power on ice that no other ski can give you," Sprung says. "The strong skier has the ability to lay the ski over on its edge and power the ski at the right time during a turn. These give you a very stable feeling going through a turn. A good, aggressive skier carves the ski through a turn, and that's the difference."

Stöckli Ski USA, 303.220.9737, www.stockli.com

— Eric Tegler

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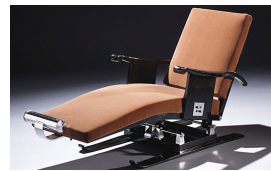
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