

Klaus Obermeyer Skier

In 1947, a young German immigrant named Klaus Obermeyer founded Sport Obermeyer in Aspen to manufacture ski gear for the new snow sports industry. This month, he'll celebrate his 90th birthday on Aspen Mountain's peak. Here, he talks with *5280* about skiing's early days, designing clothes, and his love of mountains.

When I was a kid, I loved skiing because it gave me a sense of freedom. You chose which mountain to climb and ski down. We would go to the most beautiful landscape, while everyone else was sitting on a stove bench in the house and trying to stay warm.

My first set of skis? Well, my dad used to buy oranges from Italy by the crate, and the crates were made from thin chestnut boards. I took two of my boots and strapped them to the skis when I was about three years old. When I would bend forward, I would somersault!

When I was a young man, I saw the movie *Sun Valley Serenade* in Munich, with Sonja Henie the ice skater as the star. It showed Sun Valley resort in Idaho, and they had chairlifts! There were no chairlifts at the time in Europe, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, that's terrific!" When the war was over, it felt great to get the hell out of Germany.

I was an aeronautical engineer, but when I came to the United States in 1947, the war was over and the building of airplanes had come to a halt. So I started teaching skiing.

When I first moved to Aspen, there were more dogs than people living in the town. At the time, you could buy a Victorian house on a corner lot for \$400 to \$600 in back taxes!

Back then, people would make a vacation reservation for 14 days, but they would get so cold



or sunburned that they would leave after a day or two.

We only got paid when we had class, so we wanted to keep the vacationers there for the whole trip and come back the next year. We tried to make skiing more fun for people.

The best ski clothing back then was a Norwegian anorak, which was unlined—it was just a shell.

You'd wear a sweater under it, but it was still really cold. I brought in the first turtleneck, and then started making better ski sweaters.

I also made a down parka out of a comforter that my mother sent with me when I left Germany. She said, "It's called North America, it must be cold there!" That first down parka looked like hell—I looked like

the Michelin Man. And I had feathers in my cereal for three weeks from cutting it up in my room.

I had a friend who owned a bedding factory in Munich, so I went over to visit to see if he'd make parkas for me. He said, "I only make comforters and pillows!" So I took him to a beer hall and got him drunk, and he agreed to make them. I brought the first 75 back to Aspen, and they sold out right away.

We also made the first quilted parka—we went around the factory and swept up all the little bits of cloth, and put them into a jacket as insulation. It all fell to the bottom, so we had to spread it out and stitch lines across it to keep it insulated.

Looks were secondary—the primary objective was always functionality.

Philosophically, we've always wanted to make it better for people to ski and have more fun. It wasn't easy to ski back then.

Skiing is so fun now, especially with the sharp shaped skis. And most of the mountain is groomed now, so it's like a dance floor.

Skiing is a natural high. When you get to the bottom, it's like you're a little drunk because it's so much fun coming down.

I still ski every day. The days you don't ski don't come back.

—INTERVIEW BY PATRICK DOYLE