

Jeannie Thoren

Champion of Women Skiers

Jeannie Thoren has come full circle. At age 6 she learned to ski at Ishpeming, Michigan, near the home of her grandparents. Last year, 62 years later, she was inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in that same town.

What this Minnesota native has done to deserve the highest honor in skiing is no less of a miracle, considering the opposition she's overcome. "I broke the arctic ice ceiling. Every time someone said I was crazy, I dug in my heels and stood my ground," Thoren says on becoming the Ralph Nader of women's ski equipment.

Her journey began when she was a ski racer, constantly being told by coaches to get forward on her skis, stop bending at the waist, and to lose her knock-kneed stance. Unable to do so, her growing frustration led to experimentation. Finally, she developed a system of modifying her equipment designed by men for men. It worked. Realizing she hit upon something that could be beneficial to other women, Thoren took her newfound knowledge to the road in a series of equipment clinics for women.

For 15 years, she criss-crossed the country with her husband Tom Haas driving their 28-foot trailer loaded with 100 pairs each of the latest models of boots and skis, often through scary weather over mountain passes.

"We were a mobile women's ski shop," recalls Thoren. "We also had poles, goggles, helmets and a lot of enthusiasm. Tom was in charge of fitting the gear, and I skied on the local hills with clients, matching each skier with skis and boots modified just for her."

Thoren developed a nation-wide following with her clinics and talk "Women Are Not Small Men," outlining the physical differences between the sexes that inhibit performance for women and also contribute to injuries. Most notable is the Q Angle, where the femur meets the knee. It is greater in women (15-17 degrees) than in men (8-10) due to a woman's wider pelvis. A sharper Q Angle creates an A-frame stance, making it difficult to edge skis, leading to lack of control.

In 1986, Thoren designed the first women's specific ski with a forward binding for Blizzard, setting a new paradigm in the industry. But that was not enough. The so-called women's boots are still made from a man's last.

Thoren learned that canting, either planing the boot soles or slipping a wedge under the binding, can make knock knees straight for better turn initiation and confident edging. Heel lifts move the body mass over the skis' sweet spot for better balance and control.

Seven years ago, with financial backing from the owners of Ohio's Buckeye Sports Jim and Cheryl Armington, Jeannie and Tom were able to quit the nomadic life and open a ski shop in Vail, calling it Jeannie Thoren's Women's Ski Center, the first of its kind in the world. It was an instant success.



"We knew we wanted Lionshead with Chair 8 and the gondola accessing the microcosm of beginner, intermediate and expert terrain for demos in a matter of minutes," said Thoren. "It was a dream come true."

Clients from around the country found her in Vail. "My clients trust us. They won't buy skis or boots unless we fit them. They come in just to have their boots tweaked."

Sadly, two years ago Tom developed Pulmonary Fibrosis and could no longer live at altitude. So after six very successful winters at the Ski Center, they sold the business to Outdoor Divas in Boulder. Jeannie returned to Vail this past season to help the transition and to keep The Thoren Theory alive.

Her work is not done.

This spring she is back at Ishpeming. "I want to establish a place in the hall dedicated solely to women."

She is ever the champion for women skiers.

Claudia Carbone is an award-winning journalist and author of the ground-breaking book WomenSki that supports Jeannie Thoren's work.

“Thoren developed a nation-wide following with her clinics and talk “Women Are Not Small Men,” outlining the physical differences between the sexes that inhibit performance for women and also contribute to injuries.”

