

GET OUT!

SOMETHING ABOUT LARRY

MONDAY, JAN. 19, 2004 • PAGE 6D

All forecasts and

Boulder Ski Deals boot fitter has 'cult following'

By Madeleine Berenson

For the Camera

Experts estimate that 75 percent of all skiers are in boots that don't fit properly — most often they're too big. A while back I was in this unfortunate majority and complained to friends about my bruised toenails and dampened enthusiasm for the sport.

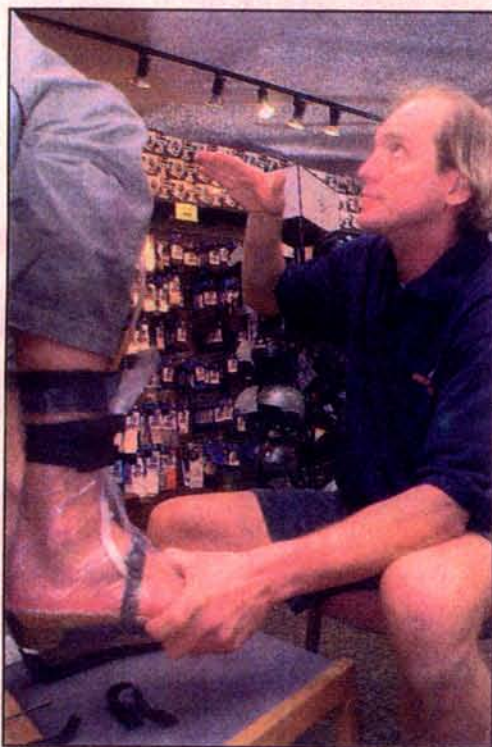
"Go see Larry," three different people told me. "He'll fix you up."

When I found that required making an appointment 10 days in advance, I wondered, why the big demand? There are plenty of good fitters around.

But Larry Houchen, who has been fitting more than 2,000 clients a year at Boulder Ski Deals for the past decade, is special.

"Everyone I know who knows Larry worships him," said Tim Troha, senior technician at The Sports Garage.

"He has a cult following," said Chuck Bird, boot fitter at Neptune Mountaineering. "He's one of the most prolific and reliable boot fitters on the Front Range. People come from all over the country to go to him."



JONATHAN CASTNER / For the Camera

Larry Houchen, Boulder Ski Deals' legendary boot fitter, fits inserts Sunday for Jason Markel of Boulder.

All expert fitters, in addition to years of experience, will have attended a masters mechanics workshop, where they learn to match your foot to its most compatible boot, as well as methods of customization.

Good fitters find out your age, weight, skiing ability, and where and how often you ski before selecting a boot for you to try on. They'll ask you to walk around in the boots long enough to gauge

whether you feel an appropriate amount of discomfort. Boots should feel small in the shop; after about four days of use they pack out, loosen and fit comfortably.

If you want special amenities like the thermal liners Houchen cooked up for me, good boot fitters will customize those for you. (My feet have never been happier.)

Tim Hilden, a physical therapist at the Boulder Center for

Sports Medicine who specializes in orthopedic injuries and gait analysis, regularly sends his clients to Houchen.

"There's definitely a skill involved in understanding that marriage between the foot and the boot, which Larry has, but he also understands how the boot affects the structural alignment of the body," he said. "He'll do whatever it takes to make it right: press it out, grind it down, modify a liner. And he's uniquely passionate."

His devoted customers couldn't agree more.

"Expertise is only part of it," said Ron LeMaster, skier, writer and father of Customer No. 6 in the "Larry Line" on a recent Thursday. "It also has to do with knowing how to relate to people."

"He's got charisma," said Customer No. 8, Salomon representative Rob McGregor. "Look at him. He never wears matching socks, he always wears shorts, and this is the most conservative haircut I've ever seen on him."

Which leaves one wondering: Why doesn't he wear matching socks?

"Doesn't that seem like a waste of time, looking for a matching pair?" Houchen replied.

He tends to answer questions with questions.

When I asked him

what he loved about his job, for example, his answer was, "What's not to love? I get to walk to work every morning and see the Flatirons at sunrise. I love the people I work with, and I love my customers. We have the most elite clientele, on every level: intelligent, athletic, artistic."

Does he have a favorite customer?

"Do you have favorite children?" came his gentle response. "Not that I see customers as children. But Dad was right: You should treat everyone the same. This job, in some ways, is like being a bartender, and if you're good at it, you don't have favorites."

But an hour-and-a-half wait, just to get your ski boots adjusted: Is it really worth it?

I posed that question to No. 4 in the Larry Line, physical therapist and Eldora Mountain Resort volunteer ski patroller Lisa VanLeuwen-Hall.

"Yep," she said. "I have chronic problems with my feet, and this is what it takes, so this is what I do. Larry is accommodating and nice to everyone. That's why they wait, and wait, and wait, and wait ..."

She looked up hopefully as Houchen strode past. "I always plan to be here for a while. Sometimes I bring him a sandwich."

BOULDER

Tuesday Wednesday



Mostly cloudy, chance for some snow

High 35
Low 14

Clouds then light sun

High
Low

Tranquil weather will continue persist for a time toward the increased chance of snow thru midweek with temperatures fr

COLORADO



Shown is today's forecast. Tr

Forecast	Hi	Lo	W	Sn	Resort
	17	4	st		Arapahoe Basin
	28	6	st		Aspen Mtn.
	19	6	st		Beaver Creek
	17	4	st		Breckenridge
	18	5	st		Copper Mtn.
	22	4	st		Crested Butte
	37	14	pc		Durango Mtn.
	38	13	pc		Eldora
	18	5	st		Keystone
	18	5	st		Loveland
	23	9	st		Steamboat
	32	10	c		Telluride
	19	6	st		Vail
	21	3	pc		Winter Park

NATIONAL

