



Opposite: Inventor David Ollila with his latest creation, the Marquette Backcountry Ski. This page: Ollila developed the ski specifically for the steep, wooded terrain found near his hometown of Marquette.

OLLILA OFF-PISTE

HE'S DRIVEN. HE'S CANTANKEROUS. HE MADE A LOT OF DOUGH SELLING A VIDEO CAMERA YOU CAN STRAP TO YOUR HEAD. NOW DAVID OLLILA HAS SCHEMED UP A SCRAPPY NEW KIND OF SKI FOR THE BACKCOUNTRY REALM HE LOVES.

(TEXT AND PHOTOS BY AARON PETERSON)

Backcountry skiing in a sparsely inhabited rural region over ungrained and unmarked boundaries or in the backcountry, frequently amongst trees, usually in such fallen powder snow. Unlike groomed cross-country and alpine skiing, backcountry means of ascent such as ski lift, linculars, or trams are typically not available to gain initial altitude when available.

(A PREGNANT WINTER SKY IS SNAGGING ITS BELLY ON THE PINE-STUDDED GRANITE HIGHLANDS OF THE HURON MOUNTAINS AS INVENTOR AND SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR DAVID OLLILA SLIPS HIS HANDS FROM THE STRAPS ON HIS SKI POLES, PLANTS A POLE, PIVOTS HIS BODY AROUND IT AND DROPS OUT OF SIGHT OVER A 10-FOOT CLIFF.)

A few minutes ago Ollila taught me the trick about skiing sans pole straps. He says that in this terrain—steep rock bowls and ridges pierced with mature timber and deadfalls—it's better to lose a pole than a shoulder to a snagged basket. He's an aggressive, full-throttle skier. He sees a line where I see only broken ribs and pierced innards, but I follow anyway, trusting him and the skis he invented specifically for this terrain, the Marquette Backcountry Ski.

We're skiing down, and then back up, a series of snow-cloaked rocky spines behind his camp, a spartan two-story man-den on a rock knob overlooking the Dead River about 10 miles north-west of Marquette. The upstairs sports a wood stove, bunks and a small library peppered with bush-craft and military survival manuals. Downstairs is a workshop that's ground zero for the machinations of Ollila's imagination. The walls are tool-spangled pegboard. Power cords, tow straps and a chainsaw hang at the ready. It smells of pine, two-stroke and potential.

A few fat snowflakes are floundering earthward among the mature cedar and hemlock that Ollila, 41, has gladed out to create his personal ski sanctuary. We've been talking about skis, life and business. He speaks with authority and moves with a restless confidence. But he's also relentless, a trait he shares with the glaciers that ground a once formidable mountain range into the wooded, rolling rockscape we're skiing through today.

Ollila doesn't take no for an answer, and because of it, has altered the outdoor recreation industry with his products. He's best known for bringing point of view (POV) video cameras to the masses. The Marquette Backcountry Ski, like its inventor and the region that gave rise to it, is tough, practical, a little rough around the edges and unapologetic.

He markets the skis as "part snowshoe, part ski—all fun." The bottom of the ski is armed with toothy scales the size of a quarter so they can climb as well as descend. They're short, 140cm, for maneuverability in tight terrain. They're fat, 150mm at the aggressively upswept tip, 140mm at the stiff thick tail and still 130mm underfoot for excellent flotation in deep powder. One reviewer in Montana has lovingly dubbed them his clown shoes.

While the dimensions alone set them apart from traditional skis, it's the construction that has some traditionalists scratching (and shaking) their heads. Rather than cores of wood wrapped in pretty skins of aluminum, fiberglass or carbon fiber, Ollila's skis are hollow, blow-molded plastic made in a factory in Coldwater, Michigan. No waxable base. No steel edges. Available in any color you want, as long as it's black. As uncomplicated as a snowmobile ski.

Aloof guffaws went up in online ski forums when Ollila introduced his invention. Comments like "They're heavy, they're ugly;

they're not for serious skiing," snowballed across the Web. But then a few months later, the comments started to warm into praise like, "They're fun; they're different, they're great for my local terrain; they're affordable (\$189)." Detractors remain, but Ollila's cool with that. He didn't build these skis for them. He built them for himself.

Ollila (Oh-lil-ah), or Dave O, as he's known among the outdoorsy crowd in his hometown of Marquette, has been ripping the rugged, rolling terrain of the U.P. on bikes and skis since he was a kid in the late 70's. Marquette is a harbor town pinched between the frigid expanse of Lake Superior to the east and the remnants of the Huron Mountains to the south, west and north. To a kid with a BMX bike and a downer home life, the hills around town were a refuge, a place to build the skills and confidence that would fuel him for the rest of his life.

"I put my first bike on layaway and visited it every week until it was mine," Ollila recalls. "Outdoor recreation was probably the most defining aspect of my life. It's not something I aspired to do, it's something I just did naturally."

As a teenager Ollila moved with his large family to California during tough economic times. The economy, the culture shock of the move, disinterest in school and dysfunction in his family forced him to be independent early and develop a thick skin.

"I learned that stable jobs don't exist. Stable families don't exist. Do we aspire to those things? Absolutely. Do they actually happen all that often? They're actually quite rare."

School was a problem. He knew he was smart, but just wasn't engaged. Math was especially hard.

"I really didn't start getting comfortable with numbers until I started putting dollar signs in front of them," he says.

He made his way back to Marquette in the early 1990's to attend Northern Michigan University, studying Outdoor Recreation and Marketing off and on. College was a flop, but the mountain biking scene was ramping up across the country, and Ollila was all in. College friends describe him leading epic sufferfest last-man-standing rides through the most extreme terrain they could find. They watched in awe as he did things like jump a picnic table on his bike.

"I've always been drawn to balance, gravity and individual, independent sports," Ollila says. "I'm not much of a team player, and I don't apologize for that. I think people have to concentrate their efforts on where they can have the biggest impact."

In 1996 outdoor recreation and entrepreneurship came together for Ollila in the form of *U.P. Mountain Biking Magazine*. Ollila could feel the gears of change shifting as outdoor sports became more popular, and he hoped the mag would draw tourism to the U.P. Within a few years he and his wife Meredith, then an editor



at a local monthly newspaper, followed up with *Active Magazine* to cover other forms of outdoor recreation in the region.

Ollila was still riding, skiing and thinking. The Internet was gaining ground. Video cameras were becoming more commonplace. He wanted to film his riding and skiing from a first person perspective, but the technology didn't exist. The solution came in the form of a repurposed security camera hooked to a camcorder in his backpack.

"The first ones were Chinese security cameras with some wiring and battery adaptations done with materials available at Radio Shack," Ollila says.

He launched Viosport, a website where outdoors athletes could post and share videos in 2000—five years before www.youtube.com was even registered. The site was drawing 100,000 unique visitors a month, but not selling enough ads. The Internet was still too slow, the videos were too small, but the bizarre camera he wore on his helmet while skiing and biking was getting attention. People had never seen one before and wanted it.

Ollila sold his first camera right off his helmet at Deer Valley and realized it was time to turn his floundering media company into a consumer electronics pioneer. Point of view video on a consumer scale was born kicking and screaming in Marquette in 2000. Viosport, later renamed V.I.O., Inc. would grow to \$5.7 million in sales under his watch and product development.

[Noteworthy aside: Ollila's most audacious application of the V.I.O. camera happened in June 2007 when he was stuck on a grounded jet at John F. Kennedy International Airport. The 50 passengers spent over five hours on the tarmac without air conditioning. People were vomiting, it was a mess, so Ollila pulled out his V.I.O. camera and interviewed the pilot—which was considered a disturbance that led to evacuation of the plane, and questioning by officers of the Transportation Security Administration. But liberation achieved—and free publicity too as the incident, and camera, got a write up in a *New York Times* aviation business article. "I don't have much respect for arbitrary authority," Ollila concedes. "That can be good and bad."]

Ollila left V.I.O. in November 2009, summing up the departure as, "I'm a startup person, not an operational person. It was time for me to move on." For 15 years he'd been puzzling over how to best extract powdered pleasure from the limitless backcountry in the U.P. Now with V.I.O. in the rear view he could concentrate on developing the missing link between ski and snowshoe that he'd been seeking.

His new business venture is called Snapperhead Inventions, after a college nickname earned from the habit of losing his temper. Ollila says the name is a reminder to not get into situations where he gives up so much control that he can't influence the outcome, and thus lose his cool. He keeps the business stripped down to the basic necessities. There are no business cards. No decals. No T-shirts. Just a simple website, a home office in the basement and his testing lab out at camp. ▶

Opposite and above: Ollila's spartan skis are easily maintained with a razor blade and heat. Bottom: The new boards are short, fat and stiff for quick maneuvering and good flotation. They're best mated with telemark bindings and boots but skied with alpine technique.





BOOT UP

Try the Marquette Backcountry Ski

Where to get your hands on some of Ollila's skis, temporary or permanent.

BORROW/RENT

Midwest Telefest, Feb. 10–12, Porcupine Mountains Ski Area, Silver City. midwesttelefest.com

Switchback Gear Exchange in Marquette rents the skis and a limited number/sizes of boots. goswitchback.com

The Outfitter in Harbor Springs has demo models; outfitterharborsprings.com

BUY

Right from Dave: marquette-backcountry.com

Switchback Gear Exchange, Marquette. goswitchback.com

Down Wind Sports, Marquette; downwindsports.com

Sports Rack, Marquette; skiguys.com

The Outfitter, Harbor Springs; outfitterharborsprings.com

In 2009 Dave Ollila set out with three key goals for his Marquette Backcountry Ski: bring it to market within a year; keep initial investment to less than \$100,000 (half of it with his own cash); and make the ski completely in Michigan. He hit those marks, but not without a struggle. The economic crash essentially killed commercial lending, even for a proven entrepreneur, and Michigan Economic Development Corporation funding didn't pan out either. "I've got a chip on my shoulder with Michigan," Ollila says. "I just don't think that Michigan has it together from an economic development standpoint.

"Everyone gets so enamored by the Googles and the YouTubes and the giant, giant big-winning companies, but when the state sets aside venture capital money, and the people that are managing these funds only have eyes for the \$100 million stories, then we're betting our whole pot, we're all-in. We would be far better off with 20 \$5 million companies than one \$100 million company."

Back on the hill behind the Ollila R&D headquarters I'm dropping through terrain that would normally freak me out. The skis are threaded to accept a three-pin telemark binding and best skied with a plastic two- or three-buckle boot. I've tele-skied for years but have never been confident off-piste. Today is different though, everything is in slow motion. It's like I'm tree skiing with training wheels. Ollila on the other hand, is hammering the terrain, popping off snowcapped boulders and shooting through tight mini couloirs. We chat at the bottom of runs, he gives me tips without condescension. You get the feeling he's used to skiing with people that aren't as good

as him. Then we tromp back up the slope, forcing the ski's beastly teeth into the snow.

"I innovate products not just because I think they are going to be commercially successful, but because they are products I want that aren't in the marketplace. Having money is a nice way to keep score, I guess, but it's not the sole motivation for doing something. If I have a need for a product, chances are someone else has a need for that product too," he says.

It's beginning to look like his intuition proved right with the Marquette Backcountry Ski. With almost no paid advertising, Ollila moved 320 pairs in the three months of winter they were in production last year. That's a little under his initial goal, but he still considers it a strong validation for the first year. So far Vermont is his biggest market, followed by Northern Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, Utah and the Pacific Northwest. There's a dealer in Japan and interest is growing in Europe for the coming season.

Ollila calls his work and lifestyle "playing make believe." His day starts with taking his two daughters to school and goes from there.

"My business is my life. I don't have regular hours, I work 24 hours a day. The ideas are always going in the background," Ollila says. "In the afternoons I go skiing on my new skis. That's who I am, that's why I invented them. I'm going to keep pushing; that's just my nature. I don't play the lottery, not because I don't think you could win, but because I want to earn my money, not win it." ■

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