

Me and the Monoski

"Inside every skier there's a monoskier just itching to bust out."

The impracticality of the monoski is certainly an explanation for the lack of monoskiers. Teaching kids is tough because you can't pizza, you can't french-fry, and unless you are already a competent rider, you absolutely can't stop. Why would anyone ride such a thing? The answer lays in the 1970s at the prime of the monoski. The late Tom Wolfe marked the 70s as America's third great awakening, a time when individuality and an emphasis on the narcissistic "Me" became supreme. Fittingly, skiers put away their outdated two-plank skis and strapped into wider, powder-smashing-single-plank monoskis. While you'd be lucky to see even one monoski on the slopes today, its moment of glory in the mid 1970s is easily explained by the social-to-economic elements of the "Me" decade and America's third great awakening.

Section 1: The "Undecade"

The uncanny "Me" decade (hereafter, "undecade") of the 1970s indisputably had a particular weirdness in its form. This peculiar vibe is best exemplified, as described by Texas A&M University -San Antonio Professor Dolph Briscoe IV, Ph.D., by the "long hair and outrageous clothing [that] became the norm for Americans of all political and social backgrounds, while sexuality outside of traditional marriage became widely practiced and accepted, especially amongst the younger generation" (par. 3). Experimentation with style and form during the "Me" decade reached all aspects of American culture including the construction of ski equipment. Being the most eccentric of all ski equipment, the monoski (see fig. 1) made its debut in the early 1960s but did not see popular success until the mid 1970s. The monoski's odd design was the brain-child of Mike Doyle who, like everyone in the 70s, took inspiration from Southern California hippie surf culture. Doyle crafted his first monoski by binding two tapered pieces of surfboard foam with biaxial fiberglass and resin and subsequently mounting two ski bindings on top (James par. 3). The janky form of the monoski was appealing to "Me" decade actors who craved weirdness and aimed to differentiate their style from the previous traditionalist culture of skiing.



Fig 1. Monoski
Source: James, Lee. "Monoski History."
Spider, 30 Nov. 2011,
www.spiderti.com/mono_ski_hostory.htm. Accessed 7 Nov. 2021

Thanks to its outrageous form, the functionality of the "Me" decade weirdly satisfied a need for expression felt among all American youth. This generation of young people created, as American journalist Erik Davis puts it, "the notion of "the" counterculture [. . .] a useful way to characterize an essentially generational culture of rebellion, nonconformity, and creative

experimentation with both individual and social possibility" (par. 9). This attitude was critical in the creation of tangible change and its effects even reached the niche ski world. The monoski was simply one of the vehicles for this change. Before the advent of the snowboard, skiing had become soulless with a real need for new creative exploration. Enter the monoski. Avid skier Rob Story captures, in his article for *Ski Magazine*, how he "digs the mono turn [. . .] It's not just different, it feels groovy" (par. 14). This weirdly functional sense of funky 70s creativity is what appealed to so many young riders and was critical in the rise in monoski popularity.

Section 2: Do as You Please

In corroboration with its weirdness, the "Me" decade fostered a rejuvenated sense-of-self-importance. *Reason Magazine* editor Nick Gillespie lays out Tom Wolfe's argument that "Americans were done with building Maslow's pyramid of needs for other people, especially their social betters [. . .]. It was our time to shine, baby!" (par. 3). America's youth was ready to stick it to the man and live for themselves. They were even willing to do that if it meant angering the higher ups at the large ski resorts by shredding down the mountain on their monoskis. According to Kirsten Dobroth, when Jonathan Hritz first unveiled his monoski at Vail's Back bowls, he was welcome with anything but hospitality as Vail banned him from riding because they were "worried Hritz would push all the snow to the bottom of the mountain" (par. 3). The functional riding requirements, such as wide sweeping turns, of the monoski enact the sense of self-importance as riders must only take their own turns only into account instead of worrying about the lines of other skiers. The fact that monoskis are a singular plank instead of two distinct skis is almost symbolic of the individuality it characterizes.

Section 3: Discontinuous Innovation

More tangibly than the newfound sense-of-self-importance, the "Me" decade gave birth to necessary innovation. Several new technologies from the 1970s are regularly needed today; notably the Motorola cellphone which, according to the Nasdaq, made it so that "no longer would individuals be confined to their desks or homes in anticipation of an incoming call. Having access to a mobile telephone freed people by allowing them to communicate on-the-go" (par. 4). Americans were free to roam and many of them headed to the slopes. There, powder snow posed a real challenge for the long and thin skis that riders were using at the time. The monoski's wide base and shorter length allow it to seamlessly float over fresh powder and plane higher than any two-plank ski, while also preventing any sort of crossing tips at high speeds: thank God! (Levin par. 3). Any skier, with at least one day of experience on the slopes, will tell you that these are conveniences just too good to be true. Monoskis simply offered a level of necessary deep snow practicality that two-plank skis would not have for several years to come.

As with any amount of practical innovation, there will always be unnecessary innovation that, in the case of the "Me" decade, was truly a defining element. As the perfect exemplification of this, Rose Leadem lays out how the Rubik's Cube, originally intended to help professor Erno Rubik better teach his class spatial relationship, unintentionally became a staple 70s children's toy (Leadem par. 12). Who knew that Americans would be drawn to such a frustrating invention? In a similar vein, the monoski offered unintended changes to skiing style that, while unnecessary, were radically appealing. Doyle cherished the fact that monoskiing has a natural

emphasis on the esthetic form of turns that gave riders the sense of ultimate creativity and groovy style (Levin par. 4).



Fig 2: Monoski Esthetic Style

Source: "Throwback Thursday."

Pinterest, www.pinterest.com/pin/292100725803583215/

Cheesy as it may be, there's no better feeling than smashing some pow around the mountain in a neon-colored jumpsuit while rocking a 70s mullet. The notion that skiers in the future began to call the monoski unnecessarily fun is baffling, yet there it is.

Section 4: Commercialization of Fun

Allowing for innovation, necessity aside, the mass commercialization of seemingly everything during the "Me" decade was distinctly astonishing. In the fashion sector, Vidhi Rao recounts a major *Vogue* article in which they made apparent how "There are no rules in the fashion game now due to [. . .] new technologies which brought advances in production through mass production, higher efficiency, generating higher standards and uniformity" (par. 4). Thanks to 1970s boom in innovation, companies could pump out products live never before. The monoski is no exception to this shift. Monoski historian Lee James describes how after Rossignol Skis got wind of the monoski, they jumped into action and "introduced a new style of monoski to the market that had easier skiing characteristics that even novices could ski on easily [. . .] and increased orders for their products [. . .] and now made sales in the realm of 120,000 units" (par. 25). With the help of established ski brands, and their seemingly endless resources, the monoski was on its way to stardom. But, commercial success for the monoski was brief as the invention of the snowboard stole the show just about a decade later.

Section 5: All Good Things Come to an End

Thanks to "that" invention by Mr. Jake Burton himself, the monoskis' moment of glory was short lived. Nonetheless, the monoski should hold a special place in the heart of every skier. Could one even be considered a snow-sports enthusiast if they've never strapped into one? Perhaps the ski community needs another moment of "Me" decade charisma and bliss. There is some light at the end of the tunnel. Every year the 60 to 70 total American monoskiers congregate for Monopalooza where they all shred their single-plank blades together and reminisce in the nostalgia of the monoski. Onboard, learning might be difficult and falling might be common, but remember, if you're not falling, you're not learning.

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