

A HISTORY OF SPLITBOARD HARDBOOTS

BY SCOTT YORKO

Early splitboard guides encountered their fair share of roadblocks while navigating unaccommodating certification curriculums, but clunky, resort-focused gear certainly didn't help them establish their legitimacy. Many individuals came from deep freestyle backgrounds, riding park with soft snowboard boots, before catching the wave of hardboots' re-emergence from the race board days of the early '90s. Then, in the mid 2000s, North America's alpine touring splitboard boot and binding innovation leveled up, thanks to a group of dedicated riders in Rogers Pass, British Columbia.

In 2005, aspiring splitboard guide Joey Vosburgh was on a trip to Japan when he bumped into Canadian splitboard pioneer John "Buff" Buffery, who was splitboarding in ski boots on a Frankenstein plate binding that sat several inches off his board and utilized Dynafit toeplates mounted for touring. The system looked janky, but it planted a seed in Vosburgh's head. That same season, Ty Mills—another Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) hopeful looking for an upgrade—heard a friend describe Buffery's setup and tried to recreate it using Scarpa T3 boots with a beveled toe. He asked Prior to make him a splitboard with metal plates in the top sheet for mounting Dynafit toeplates directly to the board.

"We all did burly stuff prior to hardboots, but I'd say our game stepped up big when we started using hardboots," Mills says. "We have big access places [around Rogers Pass], so [we needed] more efficient setups for going deep and big. We couldn't be using a shitty snowboard setup for any of that anymore."

In the U.S., meanwhile, Eric Layton was taking his first American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) course in 2006. He showed up with two other aspiring splitboard guides, only to be met by his instructor Vince Anderson's question: "Who the fuck let you in on those splitboards?" Anderson later suggested that Layton look into Voilé's hard-plate binding, which Layton did and continued to experiment with for several years.

In 2007, Vosburgh needed quick, efficient transitions to keep up with mega ski partners like David Sproule, Mark Hartley and Greg Hill while touring around Revelstoke, B.C. Hill bestowed his pair of Dynafit TLT5 boots upon Vosburgh, who modified the cuff so that it would offer a range of motion similar to that of a soft snowboard boot when locked.

"I was sold right away and knew it was going to be the way for me," he says. "No ratchets to break in the mountains, and I could ski out on



complex exits if I had to."

Like most early hardboot converts, Vosburgh felt a little embarrassed wearing ski boots around other longtime snowboarders who'd grown up on the counterculture side of the ski-versus-snowboard equation. But most hardboot-curious splitboarders found commonality on the early forum pages of splitboard.com. That's where Vosburgh noticed Colorado-based NASA rocket engineer John Keffler posting his own hardboot splitboard binding and AT boot modifications that looked exactly like his own. In 2012, Vosburgh began testing prototypes of Keffler's newly patented "Phantom" splitboard bindings and custom modifications to the Dynafit TLT5, moving the lower buckle into the cuff's pivot point, slotting out the locking mechanism for more forward flex and Dremeling some slits in the lower shell for more lateral movement. Back in B.C., other guides and splitboarders took note of Vosburgh's setup, along with similar modifications by Mills, whose friend Mark Hartley had turned him onto Phantom bindings.

Spark R&D released their own version of a hardboot binding compatible with their Tesla puck system in 2014. That was the same year John Keffler launched an official website for customers to buy his bindings, rather than the mail-in check system he'd been using. By 2015, Eric Layton's frequent guiding trips to B.C. had fully converted him to riding modified TLT6 boots, and he became the first splitboarder to achieve full AMGA guide certification. In 2018, Spark R&D collaborated with Phantom to make the first splitboard-specific tech toeplate, and 2020 saw Phantom's launch of the first-ever alpine touring splitboard boot, the Slipper—a modified and rebranded Atomic Backland.

"AT boots are so much better for being technical and moving through the mountains the way we want and need to," Vosburgh says. "It kind of blew me away at first to think that this could catch on, and it kind of did."

For Mills, he believes that fearless innovation has been the biggest driving force behind the hardboot resurgence over the last decade-plus. Says Mills, "Will [Ritter] from Spark collaborating on toeplates with John [Keffler] and working out of a garage—they're innovating because they're not afraid to."

Scott Yorko traveled around the world for seven weeks last season with three snowboards and a single hardboot/binding setup in one board bag. He did not incur any overweight baggage charges.