



Super "Mario" Sartor for fine-tunes his art at Dynafit's Montebelluna factory. PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE GRAY FOR F&A

Super Mario

The legend of Montebelluna, the center of the ski-boot universe

BY SCOTT YORKO

IN MONTEBELLUNA, a 30,000-person town east of the Italian Alps, a brash and foul-mouthed craftsman who doesn't speak a lick of English strokes his bushy mustache and walks through the slapdash three-story boot museum, Fondazione Museo Dello Scarpone. His name is "Super Mario" Sartor. Like an old acquaintance, he admires the tall sealskin boots used on the first ascent of K2, in 1954. He briefly inspects the first-ever leather mountaineering shoes with a Vibram sole sewed on by his father, brushing past all five of his own game-changing ski boot designs honored in this shrine to innovative footwear.

Sartor, now 67, has been making shoes since age 11 and transitioned to ski boots in 1970—right around the dawn of plastic injection molding—when he worked with Garmont. He's now the technical footwear manager for Dynafit, in charge of their product development, and a legend in the industry.

"One month working with Mario was worth two years in school," says his new 26-year-old apprentice, Filippo Gallina. "He has the vision of the real life of a product."

Gallina is also from a long lineage of local shoemakers, as is every one else in town that, as one hotel concierge put it, "eats only bread and shoes." Even the cute young

blond who gave me directions while walking the cobblestones in fierce black pumps told me she's a shoe designer, and every living man in her family is a shoemaker. Well-kept secrets are scarce when old friends working for rival companies get together at the old Hotel Bellavista restaurant, spreading

All major boot companies have their research and development headquarters in Montebelluna.

rumors of questionable veracity. Almost all major boot companies, including Head, Tecnica, Salomon, Nordica, Atomic, Rossignol, Dalbello, and Lange, produce or develop their boots in the area. Even the machines that make the ski boots are built here. At Dynafit, workers halt forklifts to greet Sartor like a ski boot godfather. The men stand around talking shop, fondling small plastic granules while robotic machines

Super Mario

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inject 500 pressurized tons of hot green goo into molds that cost \$100,000 each.

Although it would be cheaper to make these boots in the cultured city of Bolzano two hours north—there are no tax incentives for production in Montebelluna—the shoe people and boot culture are here, along with centuries of

tradition cobbling shoes for local farmers and forest workers. Even Nike came to town looking to steal some of the world's finest footwear talent for their soccer line, but decided to set up shop here instead.

Aside from this rich heritage, the high-performance quality and innovation that ski athletes and consumers have come to demand can't be outsourced. "With technology changing every six months, manufacturing in China can't turn around that fast to explain a .001mm adjust-

ment," says Alberto Ferrin, the sales and marketing manager at Salewa, Dynafit's parent company.

And that bar continues to rise ever higher with the rapid progression of alpine-touring boots, which require lighter, stronger, and more flexible materials with meticulously engineered moving parts. It's the kind of new challenge that keeps guys like Mario in the yoke.

"Mario is a sculptor and truly an artist," says Dynafit athlete and well-documented tinkerer Eric Hjorleifson. "He is obsessed with ski-touring boots because of their complexity, and he considers them to be the pinnacle of his craft."

Sartor has been threatening to retire for 15 years, but keeps showing up to work. Dynafit is still grooming a team of technicians to replace him, but, aside from winemaking and gardening, Sartor can't think of other outlets for his creative energy. Ask him when he'll hang up the resin-stained apron, he shrugs his shoulders, looks around the workshop, and snaps in Italian, "What the fuck else would I do all day?"

THE FAMILY TRADE AT SCARPA



Just down valley from Montebelluna, in Asolo, a few other old timers are still shuffling across the floor of a company they've been with for decades—seven decades, actually. The Paricotto brothers grew up with seven siblings and a mother who made their farming shoes out of wood and canvas. They took early jobs at Scarpa and eventually bought the whole show, passing the operations down to their respective children, who now run all facets of the company.

Luigi, Francesco, and Nico are all creeping up on 90 years old, but you'll still find them in company aprons every day, inspecting shoes on the assembly line. Scarpa is remarkably self-sufficient, housing all their design, production, sales, distribution, and aftermarket service departments under one roof. That has its own advantages when it comes to quality control, innovation, and flexibility. As Luigi puts it, "You sleep less, but you sleep well"—S.Y.