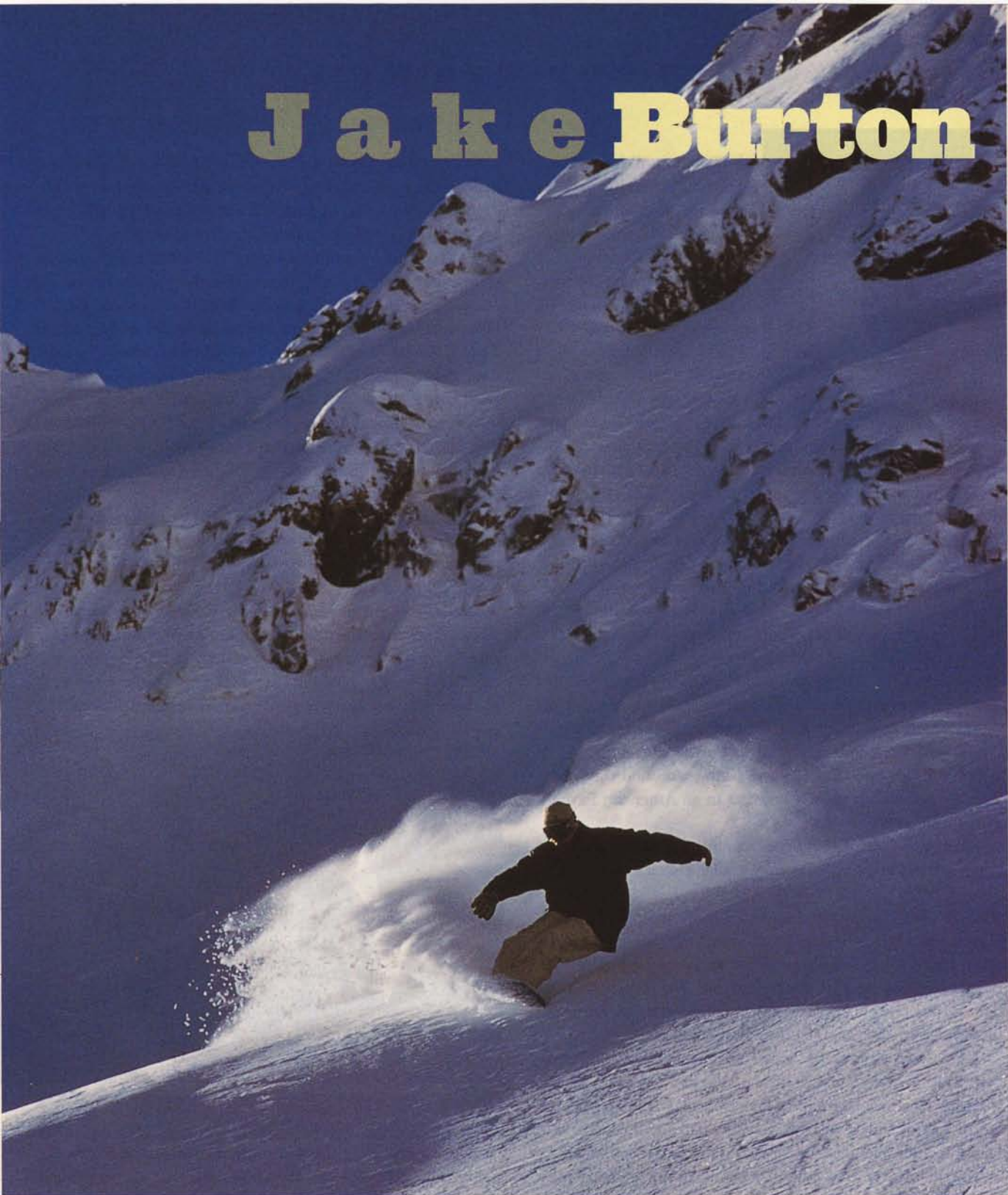


# J a k e B u r t o n



## **K I N G O F T H E H I L L**

In just two decades, Jake Burton has gone from snowboard inventor to traveling salesman to lobbyist to head of a multi-million-dollar corporation. Today, he is simply one of the most powerful people in snow sports. By Reade Bailey

## KING OF THE HILL



Jake Burton will have mixed emotions when he watches snowboarding make its debut at the Nagano Winter Games. The Olympics may give snowboarding the ultimate stamp of mainstream approval, but at what price? "I think the Olympics will be cool, and it will be a great opportunity for the athletes," says 43-year-old Burton, the

snowboarding pioneer and owner of the sport's most prominent company. "But it's kind of like when I heard that Dan Quayle had gone snowboarding. I thought, 'What have they done with my sport?'"

His sport—the one that Burton virtually invented 20 years ago this winter when he first fashioned crude snowboards in a Vermont woodshop—has exploded. There are more than 8 million snowboarders worldwide, including some 4 million in the U.S. They're expected to account for about 25 percent of ski-area visits this season in the U.S.

Burton's company, Burton Snowboards, dominates the industry. Although the company doesn't release sales figures, industry observers estimate its annual sales at well over \$150 million. About 500 employees work at Burton's headquarters in Burlington, Vt., and in offices and factories around the world. Burton himself is currently starring in an American Express card TV commercial.

All of which leads to a delicious musing: Perhaps the most powerful man in skiing is not even a skier. He's a snowboarder.

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It's 7:30 am at the Burton household in Vermont and, at first glance, chaos seems to rule. Seven-month-old Tim is in a high-chair, tossing pieces of his breakfast at the graying golden retriever sleeping nearby. Three-year-old Taylor plays on the floor with a pile of toys. Seven-year-old George appears in the kitchen, groggy and rubbing sleep from his eyes.

Jake bustles around the kitchen, making breakfast and chatting while keeping one eye on the kids and the other on the Weather Channel. Jake's mental clock is also ticking—George has to be at school in nearby Stowe by 8:15 am. It's a trip that takes precisely 5 minutes by car or 17 minutes by snowmobile.

On this March day, Jake has opted to make the trip by snowmobile. While Jake brings the snowmobiles to the front door, Donna Burton and I bundle up George and Taylor in their snow gear. At exactly 7:58 am, we roar away, George riding on my machine and Taylor with Jake. Right on schedule.

I follow Jake as we ride through woods along narrow, twisting trails. When we reach an open meadow, I pull up alongside Jake, who has stopped. "Go really fast across this field," he says, with a big grin. I gradually give my snowmobile gas and we rocket across the meadow. "Faster!" screams little George, who has his arms wrapped tightly around my waist. "Faster!" All I can think is, "Oh my God, I'm going to kill Jake Burton's son."

A few minutes later, we ride across a baseball diamond and deposit George—unharmful—in a schoolyard filled with children. Less than a minute later, the bell rings and the kids begin filing into the school. We made it, with time to spare.

For Jake, business often imitates life. Burton Snowboards is an uncanny reflection of his being. On the surface, he and his company are casual, almost to the point of sloppiness. There's Jake, with his shaggy hair and ubiquitous uniform of jeans and T-shirt. And the company's Burlington headquarters is so laid-back that employees' dogs are allowed to roam the building freely. But look beneath the veneer and you'll find a buttoned-down, professional organization. And you'll find an inspirational leader who started two decades ago with little more than a burning passion and wound up building a sport and—almost incidentally—a small personal fortune.

"We always focused on the sport and everything else took care of itself," says Jake. "In the early days, there were plenty of tough times when I felt like bailing out. But my love for the sport kept me going."

It is still the simple pleasure of sliding down a snow-covered mountain that drives him. "I'm riding more now than I ever have," says Jake, who will snowboard about 100 days this season. "I feel like I've gone full circle and gotten back to my roots as a rider. The last few years I've had reinvigorated passion."



Jake is a familiar figure on the factory floor.

Jake's passion is the pure, unadulterated sort usually reserved for children—not for a man with graying temples and an industrial-strength bottle of ibuprofen within easy reach on the dashboard. His child-like qualities are enviable: a sense of adventure, spiced with optimism and self-confidence.

"Jake is a 10 year old trapped in the body of a 43 year old," says Dennis Jenson, Burton's senior vice president. "He's like a kid who's living his ultimate dream. He's the soul of this company, the soul of snowboarding."

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Right now, the soul of snowboarding looks more like your typical dirtbag hitchhiker. Jake stands along the Stowe ski-area access road and sticks out his thumb. John "J.G." Gerndt and I

## KING OF THE HILL

hide in the trees because a car is more likely to pick up one person. Sure enough, within a couple of moments, a car pulls over and Jake hops in.

Jake is hitchhiking back up to Stowe—and then returning with his Suburban—because the three of us have just snowboarded down a backcountry trail that deposited us on the access road, miles away from the ski area. We're drenched in sweat (at least I am) after alternately skating and hiking the final leg of the trip. The first few thousand feet of vertical, when we sliced through a half-foot of fresh snow in the trees, made the adventure worth it.

This day has been both epic and a blur. I've been trying to stay on the heels of Jake, who is incredibly quick from edge to edge, and J.G., Burton's testing coordinator, who rides 180 days a year. We ride through the tight glades on the front side of Stowe, darting through tiny openings. My heart is in my throat—but my faith is in Jake—as I fight to keep up.

Snow is falling heavily as we flash through the trees on run after run. Jake knows every chute, every line. He also seems to know just about everyone on the mountain, or at least they know him. "Hey Jake, how's it going?" they ask. He always responds with a friendly greeting, though usually without attaching a name. "For a while I used to think I had Alzheimer's or something because I couldn't remember people's names," he confides. "But then I realized that a lot more people know who I am than I know who they are."

In addition to J.G., we see about a dozen other Burton employees on the hill, even though it's a Friday. "As long as they get their work done, I don't care how much they ride," says Jake, who buys all of his employees Stowe season passes. "I love being on the hill and seeing my employees. No one has ever lost his job because he rode too much."

The conditions keep getting better as the snow piles up. Even after the express quad has closed because of high winds, Jake and I ride the slower double chair and keep making laps. Then, as the day winds down, I find myself literally in his

shoes—or at least in his snowboard boots. Jake wants me to try his board and binding setup. So I slip on his still-warm Burton boots and he squeezes into my K2 Clicker-compatible Yeti boots. Then he gets down on his knees and uses a screwdriver to adjust our bindings.

When Jake compliments my riding, I feel blessed. And maybe it's corny, but whenever I'm snowboarding during the rest of the season, I think of Jake in my equipment and it inspires me to ride better.

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As a child growing up in Cedarhurst, N.Y., a small Long Island town near JFK Airport, there was little to indicate that Jake Burton Carpenter would go on to inspire millions of people. (He dropped the name Carpenter in the Eighties to avoid confusion in business.) Jake spent summer days boogie boarding in the ocean and winter weekends skiing at Bromley, Vt.

His teenage years, however, were marred by tragedy. Jake's older brother, George, was killed in Vietnam when Jake was 12, and their mother, Katherine, died of leukemia five years later. "The losses forced me to become very independent and have an ability to persevere," says Jake. He was also booted from a private school after being caught with all-access keys handed down by an upperclassman. But Jake settled down at a second private school in Cornwall, Conn., began earning good grades and became the school's top ski racer.

In the late Sixties, when he was 14, Jake bought a Snurfer and unknowingly began a course that would change the future of winter sports. The Snurfer, which had been invented in the mid-Sixties by Michigan businessman Sherman Poppen, was little more than a fat wooden ski. Young Jake grabbed the reins (a rope tied to the Snurfer's nose) and just tried to hang on. "I always had an affinity for the Snurfer," remembers Jake. "It was a toy, but it was always edgy—sort of a little cult thing. My friends and I always talked about how someone should make a better Snurfer. I knew there was an opportunity there."

That "opportunity" lingered in the back of Jake's mind as he meandered through college in Colorado and New York, eventually earning a degree in economics from New York University. After just a year of working for a business brokerage firm on Park Avenue, Jake headed to Stratton, Vt., in December

Proud papa. From garage pipe dream to lord of boards, Jake sits before various incarnations of Burton boards.





At the core of it, Jake has a simple philosophy: "We always focused on the sport and everything else took care of itself."

of 1977 with a small inheritance and a vague plan to make and sell a better Snurfer. "No one could understand what I wanted to do," remembers Jake. "They thought it was suicidal."

At night, Jake tended bar at the Birkenhaus. By day, he cobbled together snowboards in the woodshop of Emo Henrich, owner of the Birkenhaus and Stratton's ski school director. "I had been a loser in high school shop class," says Jake. "But I had no choice other than to do things myself. I tried everything—solid ash, marine plywood, fiberglass—and made 100 board prototypes that first winter. It was trial and error."

By fall of 1978, he had hit on a successful recipe (horizontally laminated wood) and made 300 boards. They sold for \$88 each. "A perfect complement or alternative to a sled" was how the company's simple black-and-white brochure described them. "I was a traveling salesman," says Jake. "I'd load up boards in a station wagon and drive around the East Coast." The next year, he produced and sold 700 boards.

In 1980, he and his future wife, Donna, bought a house and barn near Manchester, Vt. "The barn was the factory and the business consumed the whole house," remembers Jake. "We had a toll-free number that rang in our bedroom and kids in California would call at 2 am our time. It was a zoo." As the company grew, the operation moved into a larger building in 1985 and then eventually to Burlington in 1992.

"In the early days, we didn't even have a name for the sport—we called it snow surfing," says Jake. "None of the ski areas would allow us on, and I thought it was more of a back hill kind of thing anyway. Riding at ski areas wasn't my idea. It was the kids working for me who started hiking up Bromley in the middle of the night."

In 1983, Stratton became the first major area to allow snowboarders. "I felt like I had my hands in the cookie jar riding at Stratton for the first time," remembers Jake. "I didn't want to screw it up." Over the next decade, Jake and his company invested considerable time and money lobbying ski areas. "First there was the big battle to get in—I remember being kicked off of Killington and feeling like a second-class citizen," says Jake. "Then we had the battle over behavioral issues with teenage

snowboarders. We had to educate the areas and the public about snowboarding."

One by one, Burton convinced ski areas to allow snowboarding. Paul Alden, who worked at Burton from 1984 to 1990, remembers traveling to more than 300 resorts around the world during one three-year stretch. "We would do a demonstration for the management at every resort," says Alden, now the category manager for Airwalk snowboards. "Jake spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to put this sport on the map."

The sport—and Burton Snowboards—kept growing. Gradually at first and then explosively. Burton opened offices in Japan and Europe during the mid-Eighties, introducing the sport to the world. When they opened the office in Austria, Jake and Donna immersed themselves in intensive German-language instruction and then lived in Austria for six months, working to open the European market.

Others in the snowboard industry thought Jake was "nuts for going to Europe," remembers Brad Steward, project manager for Salomon snowboards. "I was working at Sims snowboards at the time, and when Jake moved to Europe, it was inconceivable to us," says Steward. "But we were looking at snowboarding as a regional thing. Jake was looking at the much bigger picture. He's always had vision."

Steward isn't jealous of the success that Jake and Burton have enjoyed, but some in the ski and snowboard industry are. Burton senior VP Jensen says that's natural. "It's human nature for people to be jealous of us being No. 1," he explains. "Yeah, we've pissed some people off along the way. But we've always tried to be honest and treat people fairly."

Jake has been known to take swipes at the skiing establishment and calls the few resorts that still don't allow snowboarding "close-minded in the worst sense of the word." But he has mellowed. "I don't like ski equipment or the sensation," he says. "But I do respect skiing and great skiers."

Perhaps some of that mellowness has also affected his personal relationships. Alden, who admits that his relationship with Jake was "strained" by the time he left Burton in 1990, says they have both matured and since resolved their differences. "Jake is brilliant and he's single-minded about snowboarding," says Alden. "I think sometimes he comes across as aloof, but that's really just his intensity."

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urton's headquarters is in a nondescript one-story industrial building on the outskirts of Burlington. Except for the half-dozen old lift towers that decorate the parking lot, nothing from the outside suggests that this is the nerve center of the snowboard industry. But walk through the front door and you start to understand why as many as 100 snow-

*Continued on page 126*

## Jake Burton

*Continued from page 67*

boarders a day make the pilgrimage. The lobby is a shrine to the sport, filled with two decades of Burton boards, catalogs and photos. There's also a comfortable couch, foosball table, pin-ball machine and six TV sets playing snowboard videos. A floor-to-ceiling window looks out onto the factory floor, where workers are building next year's models. The adjoining retail store is open 8 am to 8 pm seven days a week and sells everything Burton makes.

Jake's home, a 45-minute drive away, is also unassuming on the outside. The basement has a pool table, Ping-Pong table and a 16-by-32-foot indoor soccer arena with artificial turf and two goals. In case you forget your sneakers, nearby shelves hold 15 pairs of indoor soccer shoes, the sizes written neatly on the heels, bowling-shoe style. His huge home office has every board and clothing item in the Burton line so Jake can test-ride a new outfit and board every day.

Next to the house is what appears to be an old Vermont barn, but is actually a guest house made from salvaged barn wood. The garage level of the guest house and the main house's basement are connected by a 50-yard-long tunnel. But why walk when you can ride? Jake keeps several skateboards handy and rides them through the tunnel.

It is here, in the tunnel, that I see yet another example of Jake's fascination with simple, child-like pleasures. His 3-year-old, Taylor, loves kneeling on one of the skateboards and riding through the tunnel like a surfer paddling out to catch a wave. Jake and I sit on a couch tucked into an alcove about halfway down the tunnel. Because of an S-curve in the tunnel, we can't see Taylor but we can hear the whirring sound of the skateboard wheels.

Suddenly, Taylor comes rolling into view, leaning his weight into the turn, a blissful grin on his little face. He whizzes by us and then rolls out of sight around the next corner. Jake Burton, the guy who has shared his simple vision of sliding sideways on snow with millions of people, turns to me and says, "Now that's cool." ♦