



A Candid Interview with:
John Springer-Miller
Chairman of KneeBinding, Inc.



KB: So – why KneeBinding?

JSM: That’s simple – they’re so much safer than ordinary bindings. My family has a long history in the ski industry, so I am always interested in new developments. The original inventor of the lateral heel release sought me out as an investor. It was a very simple idea for a device that would mitigate knee injuries without pre-release. Meanwhile, knee injuries had increased to become the #1 injury in skiing – topping the list by a large margin.

KB: You didn’t just invest – you bought a majority.

JSM: Well, this very simple invention had the potential to become a game-changing product. “Big Problem” plus “Clear Solution” equals “Good Business.” Plus, this was a chance to make a significant contribution to the ski industry.

KB: You’ve been on the market for two seasons now. How is it going?

JSM: Very well. We’ve gone from 10 shops to 85, to 200, and we expect to have over 300 next season. I can’t think of any other new company in our industry that has had such rapid expansion. It hasn’t been without bumps in the road, though. Launching a new, American ski binding company would be a huge challenge in the best of times. In the current environment, it is even more difficult. But everyone has been just great – all our vendors and partners - especially the shops and the consumers – they’ve all been very supportive, and I can’t thank them enough for helping us out so much.

KB: How have consumers responded?

JSM: Consumers love them – not only because they’re safer, but because they perform so much better than ordinary bindings. They’ve been going to ski shops specifically to seek out these bindings. And once they are skiing on KneeBindings, they are generally delighted with the way they feel. This is a high-performance binding, and it out-competes ordinary bindings feature for feature. People look for it because it is so much safer than ordinary bindings – but it would do well even without the unique knee protection it offers.

KB: Any problems with the product?

JSM: There was a significant issue at the very beginning, back in 2008. The original design called for Teflon AFDs to be secured to the binding with two-sided tape, and they had to be installed by the ski shops. This design was just not reliable enough. The issue was reported by fewer than a dozen skiers world-wide, and we corrected it very quickly. But we would rather have corrected it before our initial shipments.

KB: That doesn't sound like a big problem.

JSM: It wasn't big in numbers – but that isn't the point. We are acutely aware that we need to do everything really well, so even the smallest issue seems big. We want every detail - the design, development, manufacturing, customer service – we want it all to be just right. We're very proud of what we're doing. We test everything as many ways as we can, and we make the best decisions toward the overall goal that we can. This binding offers the first major safety innovation in ski bindings in 30 years. There are a lot of people rooting for us, but there are certainly some people wishing we wouldn't upset their cart. It would be a shame if anything – even a small problem – could be used as an excuse to slow the adoption of this technology.

KB: Why is it so important?

JSM: Because so many people are getting hurt without them! World-wide, 70,000 skiers injure their ACLs each year. 70,000! During ski season, that's an average of over 500 per day. The medical cost alone is over a billion dollars per year, not to mention the broader damage to the industry. If the ski industry is flat, it's probably because out of five skiers who injure their ACLs never skis again. Consider how many families stop skiing altogether because one family member gets hurt. Think about how many people decide never to try skiing because of the guy who comes into the office, day after day - for months - talking about how painful the physical therapy is. 70,000 injuries each year! It's unbelievable. KneeBinding directly targets nearly three fourths of these injuries. Just imagine what a difference that will make.

KB: What proof do you have that your binding will actually help?

JSM: You mean how many people WON'T get hurt because of KneeBinding? Prove the absence of something? That's like asking how many injuries helmets prevent. No one really knows – but - you wouldn't let your kids ski without one. We can't prevent ALL knee injuries, and we can't know exactly how many knees we'll save. But it will be a lot. It's sort of like when airbags came out in cars. Ordinary bindings are like cars with seat belts, but the KneeBinding “car” has seat belts AND air bags. You may have never seen an airbag – and don't want to – but you wouldn't ever buy a car without them. To continue the analogy, airbags don't prevent car accidents, and KneeBindings can't make the mountain safer. But if you hit a telephone pole, you will sure be happy to have that airbag between you and the steering wheel. And if you catch an inside edge with your hips and knees bent, you're sure going to be happy to have a PureLateral heel release. Everyone intuitively understands that airbags and KneeBindings are a lot safer. We expect KneeBinding technology to become as universal as airbags.

KB: Today, many bindings are sold as part of ski systems. How can you compete with that?

JSM: Three years ago in North America, about 50% of alpine bindings were sold as part of systems. This is a lot fewer than many people believed, and “system” sales have been rapidly declining in North America since then. This year, some estimates are that the “flat” ski market will be over 60% of the business. This is great for KneeBinding, but it is also great for the industry. Over the past decade, bindings became a commodity - an afterthought. Since ordinary bindings all do the same thing, and they all do it basically the same way, there’s no compelling reason to pick one binding over another. As customer interest declined, so did prices, margins, and quality. Manufacturers tried to lock people in with “proprietary” binding systems as a way to try to hold on to margin. But proprietary systems are no longer acceptable in our world. Imagine if an HP printer only worked with an HP computer! No one would stand for that, and consumers aren’t willing to stand for it in skiing either. The marketplace, quite rightly, is demanding an “open” system – where any binding can be mounted on any ski. Now - KneeBinding is giving consumers a really good reason to buy bindings – a reason far more important and more visceral than styling or color. People now go to a ski shop specifically to buy KneeBindings because they want to keep their knees safer - and you can bet they will buy a lot of new skis to go with their new bindings. That’s good for everyone.

KB: You’re doing your own distribution. That must be challenging.

JSM: Well, it ain’t easy! But ski shops don’t like injuries any more than we do. We offer something customers already know is important, and that no other binding offers. The more sophisticated ski shops have already been moving smoothly into the safer (and more profitable) world of KneeBinding. Ski shops generally know their stuff. Most of these folks have been around a long time, and they’ve seen it all. They certainly know how to recognize a product that’s good for the industry, good for skiers, and also good for their shops.

KB: For many years, other binding manufacturers have carefully warned skiers that no binding can mitigate knee injuries. And here you come, telling them you can. Who’s right?

JSM: Well - they’re right – none of them can mitigate knee injuries. But we’re right – because we can! So – I think they will now have to stop saying that.

KB: Would you work with any of the large ski companies?

JSM: Of course. If one of the big four combined our product with its established distribution network, they would gain a huge and immediate advantage over the other three. That would shift the market entirely in no time at all. Our goal is to save as many knees as possible, and we’re willing to explore any relationship that would move the industry in a safer direction. Meanwhile, we’re satisfied to be developing and selling the safest bindings in the world.