

PAUL RAMER Crazy like a Fox

by Craig Dostie

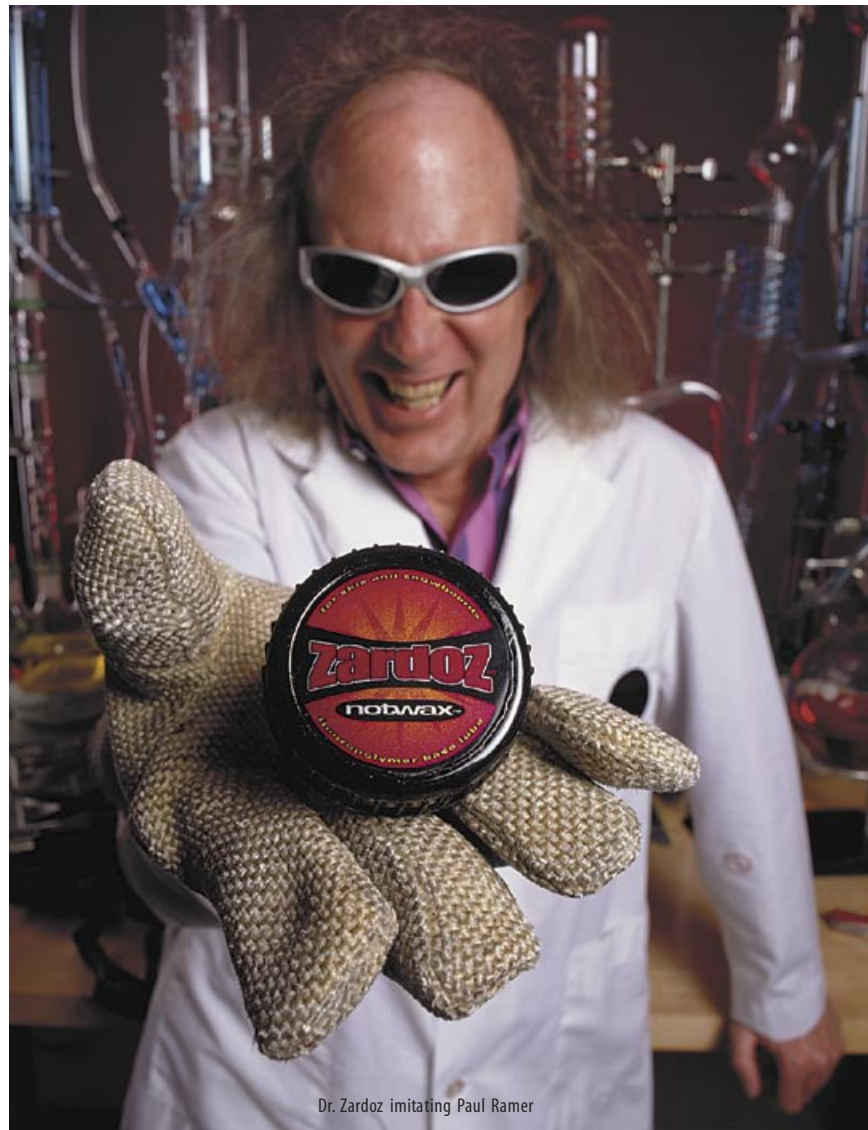
Perhaps the most common characteristic of a genius is being ahead of the times. If that's so, then Paul Ramer entered the new millennium long ago.

If there is one thing you can say about Paul it's that he isn't afraid to stand behind crazy ideas or products that no one had ever heard of before but that he's convinced people will appreciate. Paul's passion for the sport has fueled a genius for invention that spawned over a dozen patents for backcountry products that had never before been considered necessary. Some 20-plus years later, we consider many of these inventions standard equipment. Most notable among these is the heel elevator, an integral part of his most popular invention, the Ramer Classic binding.

The Classic had several versions, culminating in the MT-2000. Ahead of its time in the late '70s, production ceased on Ramer bindings in 1995. But key design elements live on. The MT-2000 heel mechanism can now be found in Fritchi's Diamir. The classic ball-and-socket retention system at the toe is now in the Dynafit binding system, only inverted.

Ramer Assault Snowshoes™, stamped from metal and patented in 1981, have emerged in a plastic version called Verts™. Like the original, they climb snow like crampons climb ice—fast! He developed a self-arrest grip, admittedly for the few, proud, or strange among us, which is now available on Life Link's Variant ski pole line. Ramer made poles too, only with a push-button adjustment. They whistled in the wind but were hell to break.

Though he didn't invent it, Ramer developed the Echo-1, a cheap, effective (though crude by



Dr. Zardoz imitating Paul Ramer



Skier: Paul Rour
Photographer: Paul Ramer

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modern standards) avalanche beacon. He knew enough to develop a better beacon, but his much touted revision never made it to market.

In the '80s, Alpine Research catalogs were the update report on Ramer product revisions, plus all the widgets Paul thought you might need, from climbing skins to earplugs. His '86 catalog showed a Euro snowmobile for sale. At the time we all scoffed and thought Paul was off his rocker. But he realized that as more people went into the backcountry, some would opt to

use motors to extend the trailhead for deep, fast adventure skiing.

As a businessman, Ramer was quick to admit his failings. In the '80s he had good cash flow with a military contract to build an antiquated cable binding for the U.S. Army. It was the backing he needed to promote the sport he loved. Before anyone knew it, Ramer had managed to seed several thousand pairs of Ramer Classic bindings around the world. But when the military contract dried up, Alpine Research Inc. was forced to survive on

the niche backcountry ski market, where mistakes are difficult to recover from.

With a host of bad PR from the decline of his backcountry business, Paul formed a business partnership with his daughter, Kris, in 1996. Their new company, Zardoz NOTwax, LLC, sells his most recent patent, a revolutionary lubricant for skiing and snowboarding that he dubbed NOTwax™.

In 1993 I interviewed Paul Ramer. His insight hadn't lost its edge, and as you will see, time only proves his prophetic vision.

Couloir: *How did you get into skiing?*

Ramer: I never really learned to ski until I was in college (Swarthmore, PA) where we had a good outing club. We used to go up to the Adirondacks and up to Vermont for spring break.

When I came out to Colorado in 1970, I went on a snowshoeing trip. When I got to the top of the hill and looked down, I said, "This is really dumb. Now I gotta walk back down." And that was the last time I went snowshoeing. We started using our downhill skis for touring. There weren't any touring bindings available then, but there were a few Silvretta cable bindings floating around.

C: *How did you come up with the idea for a touring binding?*

R: Well, the main thing I hated about touring equipment was the boots. The binding came along because there weren't any bindings to work with a boot I developed from Scott™ boot parts. So I started playing around. I made bindings out of lots of different parts until I came up with what is now the Ramer Classic. Now, that's a pretty good example of an invention. The tuning fork design originally had these big aluminum bars on the side with a spring and a bolt on it so that the bars would spread and depress the spring. But what I discovered very quickly was the bars would flex before the spring. I wasn't intentionally looking for that effect.



Paul Ramer shows off the AvaLert.
Photo: Craig Dostie

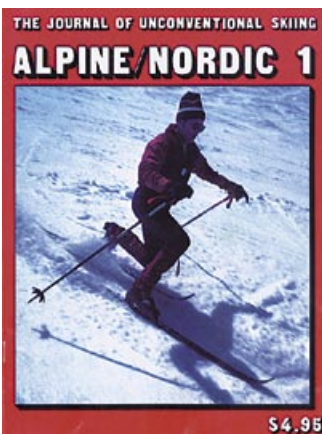
Then the same thing happened with the heel elevators. There were no heel elevators before the Model R. In fact, I used to get in these long arguments with Europeans who would say "What's the point of having a heel elevator? Skins won't climb any steeper than 20 degrees." Of course, the reason was because they didn't have a heel elevator. A few years later they realized that it was a nice thing to have, and now you can't buy an AT binding without one.

But that was also an inadvertent development. Originally it was an energy recovery device. It was a big coil spring and you'd walk on the coil spring as you were going uphill. Your weight would compress the spring, and when you went up you would kind of bounce off of it. The only problem was that there was only one speed and that was real, real fast. So it was real efficient and you could go like a bat out of hell uphill, but you wore out real quick too. Then I started putting a plug down inside the spring to see what that would do, and that's where the heel elevator came from.

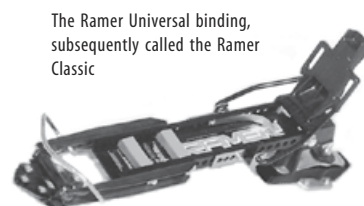
When I finally decided to get into it as a business, people were really interested in the binding, not the boot. It was just too bizarre. When the Ramer binding first came out, back in '74, that was the first alpine touring binding that had full release and a climbing peg. That was the aluminum binding, the old Model-R. At that time the Izer binding had just come out too.



Paul Ramer cruising down the Grenzgletscher on Monte Rosa, Switzerland.
Photo by Steve Pomerance

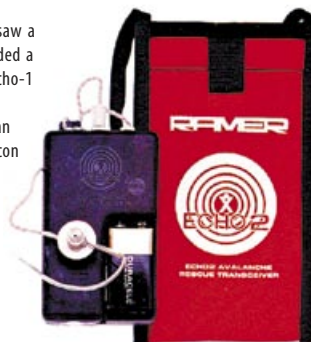


Ramer's most expansive catalog ever. Two-thirds of the book was devoted to equipment advice and stories of classic tours around the world. The other third, upside down, was devoted to backcountry (Ramer) products for sale.



The Ramer Universal binding, subsequently called the Ramer Classic

Where Ramer saw a need, he provided a product. The Echo-1 was as simple and cheap as an avalanche beacon has ever been.



The final evolution of the Ramer Classic was the MT-2000.

RAMER



The Ramer Assault Snowshoe was a stamped plate of aluminum. A pair weighed in at only 1-1/2 lbs. Ramer poles use push-button adjustment, often sporting Self-Arrest grips and Claw baskets.



The Ramer Classic in action

The Motive-Aider allowed you to use any boot you wanted, since control came from the cuff being integrated with the binding plate. Notice the patented shock absorber on the back!



C: *Any more comments on your bindings?*

R: Well, the whole purpose of developing this kind of equipment is access. It is not to have something new and really not equipment-oriented at all. Equipment is supposed to be invisible. It is purely utilitarian. It sounds silly to talk that way, but then, why are ski bindings not considered utilitarian? Because ski companies are trying to come up with reasons to convince people to consume more of their product, and the only way they can do that is to make it different somehow—make it sexier, make it more faddish—and that's the basis of consumption. I've just never ascribed to consumption theory.

C: *Would you consider yourself an inventor or a skier that tinkers with stuff?*

R: I'm primarily an inventor, secondarily a product developer, and finally a business person. Of course, that's one of the reasons why I keep running into so many problems with the business—'cause I really have less desire to deal with the business than I do to promote the fun aspects of the sport.

C: *When did you go into business for yourself?*

R: Well, Alpine Research Inc. began in 1974 and we got serious in 1975.

C: *Were you working a second job at the time?*

R: Yeah, I was a senior research engineer in Rocky Flats making robots with Dow. They lost their contract, Rockwell came in, and the local engineers

I used to get in these long arguments with Europeans who would say, "what's the point of having a heel elevator? Skins won't climb any steeper than 20 degrees." Of course, the reason was because they didn't have a heel elevator.

got laid off. So I had five months' severance pay and figured it might be fun to try and run my own business. I've been trying ever since.

C: *Where do you see adventure skiing headed?*

R: Downhill skiers in the U.S. are going to become more and more dissatisfied with the lack of wilderness experience they get at the big ski circuses. They're going to start getting hungry for something a little more interesting, but they want to do it on downhill gear. They don't want to learn a new sport, they want to take what they know and feel comfortable with and expand on it.

C: *What will it take for this sport to grow?*

R: The sport will require a shift of attitude from being some kind of extreme, yahoo, wild thing for extreme skiers to this is a fun thing to do for

anybody. There are always people who are going to do extreme skiing and stuff like that, but the emphasis needs to be more on the satisfaction of just being in the mountains. For me, the most powerful part of it is being free to do whatever you want to do.

C: *What do you want to be remembered for?*

R: I'm afraid I'm stuck with being remembered for all the gear I've put together. Now, if you consider that a person is actually constituted of the conversations that they're associated with, then I'm going to live a lot longer than I will in reality, whether I like it or not.

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Although Paul's gear legacy is already cast, the shadow of Paul's spirit is at the root of the current renaissance in adventure skiing. Russell Rainey, inventor the SuperLoop binding, says of Ramer, "The biggest contribution Paul made to backcountry skiing was his promotion of the sport. Second, of course, was all the stuff that he developed."

At the time this was written, Paul had been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, a degenerative disease of the brain. It took him from us in March, 2000. He was only 56.