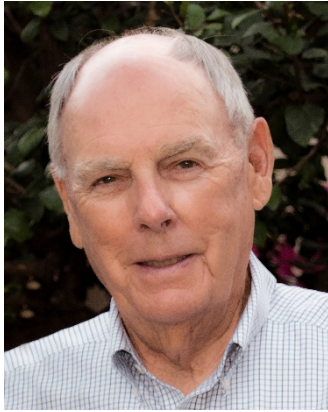


NSSRA Interview: Ned Hamilton



Through 57 years in business, Ned Hamilton is well recognized as the epitome of the specialty retailer in the winter sports business. He has weathered not only the many challenges of business, but also those that are beyond anyone's control. Through fire, hurricanes and economic downturns, Ned met the challenges head on and is revered for his honesty, integrity and clear thinking.

Known primarily as the prominent retailer, first in New England and then the southeastern United States with his Peter Glenn shops, Ned has also experienced the supplier and resort sides of the industry. He was a manufacturer's representative and distributor and a partner in Bolton Valley Ski Resort (VT). In addition, he headed up a large group of ski retailers throughout the country to partner with The Sports Authority and run seasonal leased ski/snowboard departments within their stores.

But it is the retail operation in Florida that has brought Ned national acclaim. Many questioned his decision when in 1975 he moved to Florida and started opening Peter Glenn shops there. With the help of family, loyal employees, and strong relationships with his vendor partners, his business thrived with eventual expansion into Georgia and Virginia, S. Carolina, Arizona, California and Alaska.

Ned has graciously volunteered his time to various boards and associations. He served as President (now known as Chairman) of the National Sporting Goods Association Board of Directors in 1974. Peter Glenn has won numerous accolades as a Gold Shop (voted by readers of SKI Magazine, 2004) and several Retailer of the Year honors by SIA (1963, 1993, 2007, 2008, 2012). He was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by SIA in 2012.

Ned is a humble man and gives much credit to his success to his two children, Peter and Lori, who grew up with the same passion for skiing and the business. Lori's husband, Martin, joined the team in 1992 and brought a strong business background to round out the family team. Ned credits his wife, Carolyn, for being a pillar of support and an incredible partner.

Q. How did you decide to go into retailing?

A. I had no intention of ending up in retailing, which I did for the past 57 years. After graduating from college with a BS in business management, I was hired by New England Life as a group pension representative and assigned to the Atlanta, GA regional office covering the eight southeastern states. This was a shock to the system of a Vermonter who had grown up in the Green Mountains and had a passion of being on ski slopes whenever there was snow coverage. After a year there, I negotiated a deal with the company to transfer back to their Vermont General Agency as an agent specializing in group benefits. While we were living in Atlanta, we were blessed with the birth of our son, who we named Peter Glenn Hamilton.

After the move to Vermont, I was asked to head up the ski instructional program for the students at Vermont College in Montpelier. At about the same time, I was convinced by an attorney friend to buy a men's clothing store that had opened in 1900, which still had the original fixtures and sales staff. I thought both should be replaced, but then decided to leave things alone, update the inventory selection, let the staff continue, and get back to selling insurance and teaching skiing.

As the new students arrived and tried to buy their gear, they found much frustration in finding a selection of ski equipment and clothing in the local sporting goods store. I approached the store owner and offered to help him get the right products into the store, but he informed me that the ski business was just a fad and he had no intention of investing in something that ridiculous. It was then that I decided to open up the basement of The Oxford Shop, line the walls with old barn board, head to Hanover, NH to meet the folks who distributed Kastle and Fischer skis, and Rieker boots. I made a special trip to purchase skis from Howard Head and within a month we hung up a sign that said Peter Glenn Ski Shop downstairs.

Q. What was the snow sports industry like at that time? Regional, National, etc.?

A. The snow sports industry was very local and somewhat regional. Today we call it the snow sports industry but then it was the ski industry, because we had not heard the word snowboard. In northern New England most every town had a specialty ski shop, and we all tended to be friendly competitors who formed a bond to help each other swap inventory and any creative ideas to help grow our individual business and the industry in general.

Q. Can you trace the growth of your business, including expansion into the Internet?

A. The first additional shop for us was like the first one in that it was not planned. I had been a member of the ski patrol at my favorite ski area, Mad River Glen, which was built and developed by Roland Palmedo, who was one of the original investors in Stowe. One day he called me out of the cold and asked me if we would take over the ski retail operation at Mad River Glen. I was very flattered that he would ask me and of course I immediately accepted. He wrote me a short letter of welcome, and told me that I could consider that as our lease. That was the only document that we ever had in over 15 years at Mad River.

Two years later we received a call from Damon Gadd who built Sugarbush. He asked if we would consider taking over retail and rental there. That was a great shop for us and we enjoyed many years there. Soon after, we were approached by the new Glen Ellen ski area, and we signed a deal with them which upset Damon, because he didn't like the idea of our opening a Peter Glenn at his arch enemy ski area. He was agreeable to our opening under a different name so we formed a new company called Inverness Ski Shop, and everything was fine. We then opened several smaller area ski shops at Norwich University, Skyline, Burke Mountain, and on the mountain road in Stowe.

At the end of each season of working seven day weeks, we would pile the kids into our little airplane and fly to Florida for a couple of weeks of sun and fun. On every trip I would look for ski shops and never found any. I just could not understand that so in 1976 I decided to take a chance, against the advice of my bank, and open a small shop in Boca Raton. It did just fair, but in doing it we got involved with the startup of the Miami Ski Club, who convinced me to take one more shot at Florida and open one in Miami. That one worked better, and with son Peter graduating from UVM, we convinced him to move to Florida and help run the shops with his name on them. Then came Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach, Tampa, Orlando and Atlanta. When daughter Lori followed Peter in graduating from UVM, she joined the team and headed south. My wife, Carolyn, was extremely happy to have her aboard, as she had been burdened with all the buying along with overseeing the administration of our operations. Lori moved to Atlanta to oversee our stores there, where she met and married her husband, Martin Underwood. She took time away from work to have two children. Peter then moved to Atlanta to manage the shops there and do all hard goods buying.

About that time we received a call from Jack Smith who had just opened his first Sports Authority. He wanted me to meet with him to discuss his idea to do a leased department called The Ski Authority in his stores. I was apprehensive, but Jack is a very convincing and personable man, and he made me a believer. The idea was to give the big box type retailer the right labels but doing it with discretion, so it respects the integrity of the brand and the local snow sports specialist. At the time I had no idea that it would grow like it did. We did not want to operate in locations where we did not have shops, so we agreed with TSA that we would subrogate our agreement to a local specialty operator in each location. We formed our own buying group call CBA, to buy products that would be the same in all locations for national advertising. Lori and her husband moved back to Florida and both came aboard our team. We had a great run and developed some long lasting relationships with many people at TSA and our operating partners around the country, until TSA decided to operate the ski department on their own.

We are now several years into the internet and it has become a very important segment of our business.

Q. What unique issues do snow sports retailers face (beyond weather), and do you see any solutions?

A. If there is one unique issue that we face as retailers is that our suppliers, in many cases, are becoming our toughest competition. Go to your favorite supplier's website and see if you are competitive with your selection and depth of product.

Q. Prior to the creation of NSSRA where did snow sports retailers go for support, business services and advocacy? With your experience as Chairman of the National Sporting Goods Association Board of Directors in the 1970s, can you offer any suggestions to retailers about becoming involved in industry activities?

A. Prior to NSSRA there was no ski retail group to look to for information or assistance unless you were a member of NSGA or a buying group that could possibly offer help in some instances. In some situations you could look to a local or regional chamber of commerce or retail association but I would encourage any snow sports retailer to join NSSRA and make a special effort to attend the annual meeting at the SIA show.