



## Mountain

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Featuring: Mike Pfotenhauer

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# the Agony of Details

**Mike Pfotenhauer** made his first backpack out of wood and cord—an uncomfortable scouting project. The pack he carried on summer trips in the Canadian backcountry with his dad and two brothers didn't feel much better. Back home in Oregon, he asked his mom for sewing lessons. Then Pfotenhauer started cutting gear from whole cloth, stitching up sleeping bags, rainwear, down jackets, and one-off packs. He did this because it was fun. "A lot of the enjoyment in using something is making it," he says.

In 1974, Pfotenhauer founded Osprey in Santa Cruz, California. He built custom backpacks out of a rented house, garnering new business as word spread. Today, Osprey is headquartered in Cortez, Colorado and it sells product on six continents. Pfotenhauer remains the owner and chief designer. He—and by extension Osprey—is famous for unflinching attention to detail. "I'm extremely meticulous," he says. "Sometimes I get into trouble because I push it too far." Years ago, he and a design associate struggled with pre-production samples of a pack. Techs at the factory kept changing Pfotenhauer's patterns, unclear about his intentions. Dialogue hit a wall, and the factory said no more pattern fixes. "So we slipped in one night after closing time, tip-toed into the

## Unbridled invention at Osprey Packs.

by Jeff Burke

pattern room, and made our corrections," Pfotenhauer says. "A few days later the factory techs proudly showed us how the samples with their patterning worked better than ours."

That type of tenacity spurs Osprey product development. One early innovation involved tape binding die-cut shoulder straps, a development that delivered huge savings in time and cost. Then came breathable mesh panels and vertically adjustable sternum straps—all Osprey designs that are now industry standard features in high-end packs. Osprey's heat-moldable hip belt technology hit the market in 2005. More recently, Osprey has pushed the development of hydration reservoirs with plastic framesheets and 3D anatomic contouring. Meaning you can shove the bladder into a pack full of gear and it will fit naturally against your body.

It would be easy to say all the credit rests with that kid who improved his own pack 45 years ago in Oregon. But Pfotenhauer defers to the long-term employees he works with. "People get better and better at the jobs they do," says Pfotenhauer. "They become more valuable to the company as a whole, and we do everything we can to foster that."

