

# arches

## alumni profile

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**FATHERS OF INVENTION** The guys who dreamed up FlyLow Gear: Greg Steen '00, Ethan Valenstein '00, Scott Steen (not a Logger, poor fellow), Dan Abrams '00, and Braden Masselink '00.

## Climb high, fly low

*What's a skier to do when he can't find equipment that holds up in the backcountry? Start a company and make your own*

*by Rebecca L. Olgeirson*

As a teenager growing up in Colorado, Dan Abrams '00 had a problem with his pants. Weekends spent telemark skiing at Vail were destroying his favorite pair of Patagonia ski pants. It seemed his quad-crunching knee bends were to blame. "I kept blowing the knees out," said Dan. "It was ridiculous." But Patagonia stood by its product line. Every time Dan returned his beloved (and well-used) pants, the company replaced them with an updated version. Dan saw the evolution of skiwear—and he didn't like it.

"The pants were getting tighter and lighter," he said. "That meant they were colder and actually ripped more easily."

After graduation, Dan and 11 other UPS alumni moved to Jackson, Wyoming, where they skied eight months a year, often on terrain outside resort boundaries. The more Dan skied in remote areas, the more gear complaints he heard. The industry simply wasn't making clothes for the backcountry skier.

Because tele-skiers often hike to the top of their favorite mountain before skiing down, the clothing needs to be lightweight and flexible for the trip up but warm enough to handle a sudden drop in body temperature on the ride down. For Dan and his crew, that meant choosing mountaineering gear over traditional skiwear. Unfortunately a jacket designed for climbing Rainier isn't necessarily good for making turns on the backside

of Crystal.

Ultimately, when Dan couldn't find what he needed, he decided to create it. His first product was—you guessed it—the perfect pair of pants. With those pants Dan and his partner, Greg Steen '99, officially launched FlyLow Gear in 2000. Next the partners enlisted another UPS alum, Jared Hankins '97, to design their ideal jacket. The team envisioned long zippers to vent on the sweaty hike uphill and a hood big enough to cover the requisite helmet. All their gear was created with a proprietary, waterproof fabric exclusive to FlyLow.

Today a cadre of fellow Loggers help power the company: Steen is still the product developer; Hankins oversees graphic design; B.J. Hansen '98 manages Web design, and Liz Hutchins '00 handles public relations. Hankins designed the company logo, while the name comes from a friend who, after watching Dan and his friends ski, observed, "You don't ski fast, you fly low."

As for a business plan, Dan chose to fly low onto the marketplace. Rather than take on big loans, the company was financed with credit cards and sweat. Instead of targeting major national retailers, FlyLow works with small boutiques that cater to outdoor lifestyles. (The full line is also available online at [www.FlyLowGear.com](http://www.FlyLowGear.com))

With two types of pants, two jackets, and various T-shirts and sweatshirts in stores, Dan hopes to hit \$120,000 in revenue for the 2006–07 season. It's a benchmark that would double last year's sales.

Identifying their niche and sponsoring the world's best telemark skiers has helped FlyLow reach its customer base—the serious skier looking for function over fashion. Theirs is the customer who'll first notice the guy making the best turns on the hill and then wonder who made his jacket.

Of course as the brand grows, Dan notices more FlyLow gear on the mountain and around town. He's getting used to the feeling, but the first time he saw one of his jackets on the slopes, FlyLow's president was stunned.

"I skied right up to see if it was someone I knew,"

Dan said. "I got an immense sense of satisfaction when I didn't recognize the guy at all."