

## MEET THE LOCALS



### The Centennial State's Homegrown Shred Brands

By Michael Sudmeier

Colorado has a reputation for changing lives. Each year, riders escape America's flatlands for the kickers of Summit County, the atmosphere of Aspen, or the steep slopes of the San Juans. For many of these riders, a season in the mountains soon becomes a lifetime. Yet the state inspires more than dirtbag dreams and John Denver lyrics; it also provides a backdrop for a bumper crop of shred brands. Whether making boards or crocheting beanies, these companies are proud to call Colorado home.

From its workshop in Silverton, Venture Snowboards crafts freeride decks and splitboards. "For a snowboard manufacturer there is no greater benefit than being located right in the mountains," Venture Co-founder Lisa Branner explains. "There's no disconnect from the environment our products are designed for, and we have an ideal testing laboratory right out our front door. That really makes a difference in the quality and performance of our boards." A number of other Colorado snowboard manufacturers, such as Unity, Oz, Nightmare, and Never Summer, reap similar benefits. "We are in one of the best areas in the world to R and D and produce snowboards," Never Summer Snow Sales Manager Mike Gagliardi offers. "With the factory in Denver, we can come up with an idea on Monday, have a prototype built, and ride it by Thursday or Friday. The conditions and consistency of accessible snow here—even in a thin season like last year—is a huge advantage for us."

Yet for Colorado brands, the benefits of their location transcend research and development. At Never Summer, "It's our heritage," Gagliardi explains. "The principles of the company and much of our staff spent their youth riding places like Berthoud and Loveland Pass before we were welcome on lifts." For the founders of MHM, a Denver-based backpack company, there's no place like the Centennial State. "For us, it's all we know. We were born in Colorado, went to college in Colorado, and do not plan on leaving," MHM Vice President and Brand Manager Casey Lorenzen says. "We have traveled all over the world, and there is nothing like coming home to the best state in the Union."



CandyGrind Founder Austin Paik shares an innovative strain of Colorado-bred design at his company's Denver headquarters. PHOTO: LEWIS

Fortunately for brands based in Colorado, many riders share this sentiment.

The abundance of resorts and riders in the state ensures companies are "able to promote our product without flooding one mountain," FireHouse

Product and Team Manager Ian Winters notes. The Dillon-based brand offers both cut-and-sew apparel and a collection of beanies crocheted by hand. One of FireHouse's best selling items is a crocheted beanie that proudly rocks the Colorado flag. Like FireHouse, a number of Colorado companies showcase the flag in their branding and on their products. These goods tend to find a warm reception throughout the state.

Colorado's concentration of dedicated riders also provides brands with significant support—both in their backyard and beyond. It's tough to travel far in the state without seeing an array of stickers from homegrown brands like Never Summer and CandyGrind. By sponsoring park crews, music events, and a slew of local riders, CandyGrind has developed a loyal following throughout the state for its clothing and accessories. According to co-founder Austin Paik, the Denver-based company "started by building products for ourselves and our like-minded friends." Paik explains that the local support and enthusiasm for CandyGrind "further strengthened our confidence in sharing our products."

Brands often find that their Colorado roots provide credibility and aid in expanding beyond the state. CandyGrind, for example, now has more than 250 retailers scattered across the globe. According to Gagliardi, Never Summer is "lucky to have an amazingly strong and dedicated following out here, but the kicker is so many people come from across the country and the world to ride the mountains of Colorado." By focusing on its backyard, Never Summer ensures that visitors to the state encounter the company at demos and "witness the locals' strong dedication to the brand." Often, these visitors head home and share their enthusiasm for the company. Venture also credits much of its success to riders throughout the state. "The word of mouth that's grown out of our Colorado following is incredible," Branner offers. "Those riders are the foundation on which Venture is built and are responsible for fueling much of our growth in other parts of the country and world."

Unity Founder Pete Wurster also notes that a thirst for American-made products has helped Colorado companies like his. Plain and simple, Wurster offers, "Building boards in Colorado helps us with our international business."

Doing business within the Centennial State is not without its challenges. For Venture, powder days are a mixed blessing, as the passes into and out of Silverton occasionally close during the winter. For CandyGrind, logistics stemming from imports can be challenging in a landlocked state. According to Paik, however, "We use it to our advantage in planning and running things ahead of the game."

Nonetheless, brands view Colorado as the perfect place for building a business. "We have found the business climate to be very supportive, and there are lots of resources available to help small businesses and entrepreneurs grow and thrive," Branner states. Lorenzen adds, "There is a great community feel where companies want to see other local companies succeed. We wouldn't want to do this anywhere else." And although the sense of community is enticing, Colorado brands have another thing going for them. As Lorenzen reveals, "There is nothing better than being able to dip out of work on pow days."