

# Turning Pro Times Two

## J.J. Collier Masters Snowboards and Polo

*By Randy Johnson*



Over the years, J.J. Collier has been the subject of numerous photo shoots because of his snowboarding ability. This photo was taken in 1997 at Mt. Hood Meadows in Oregon during a catalog photo shoot. Photo by Steve Wanke



This is a landmark year for snow sports. Twenty years ago, snowboarding slid onto the scene with mass appeal. A new generation reinvigorated the industry with a multiplicity of ways to “slide” and “ride” and not just “ski.”

No one in the High Country has ever embodied the impact of that generation better than John “J.J.” Collier. Today Collier lives in Colorado, but he visited his real estate broker dad John in Banner Elk last month and still sees the High Country as home, especially when it comes to his career.

Collier was “into it first” as a 15-year-old Banner Elk boarder. One of the South’s true talents, he turned pro and competed at the top of the sport. Now as the design director for Polo Ralph Lauren’s RLX outerwear line, Collier symbolizes the importance of snowboarding in how we see outdoor sports and the clothing that makes it possible.

Noting snowboarding’s anniversary, I was flipping back through some files and found a *Charlotte Observer* article I wrote two decades ago about the sport’s sudden rise. It quoted the precocious 16-year-old Collier, saying, “Even if you’re over 30, but you used to surf, go for it. I’ll never ski again.”

“I can’t believe it’s been twenty years,” Collier said, “but November of 1986 is when my brother Dave and I got our first real snowboards. Snowboarding spoke to a younger demographic, just as skateboarding’s early ‘80s peak in popularity began to waiver. Boards and bindings had finally caught up with this collective desire to ride the slopes in a new way. My age group was just waiting for it—so ripe it wasn’t even funny.

“The hurdle was the number of mountains that allowed it,” he continued. “We were lucky in the High Country to have Beech Mountain and Hawksnest, with a kind of open-arms policy. I was eternally grateful for that. There it was. You could just drop in. Even Stratton Mountain in Vermont was requiring a proficiency test to make sure you weren’t a menace. But Beech made the difference. North Carolina was ahead of the curve. These slopes wanted the business and that’s what snowboarding has meant for resorts worldwide—a lot of new business.

“The following season we were riding at Hawksnest. After their first race, Dave and I went to the U.S. Open.”



Jon Reynolds, then owner of Hawksnest Ski Resort, and Carl Clawson, employee of Edge of the World Outfitters in Banner Elk and a big supporter of the emerging snowboard scene, presented J.J. Collier with the Burton snowboard he won in the first-ever snowboard race in the High Country in 1986. The very next day, J.J. left for the U.S. Open Snowboarding Championships in Stratton Mountain, Vt. where he won first place in the Junior Moguls competition.

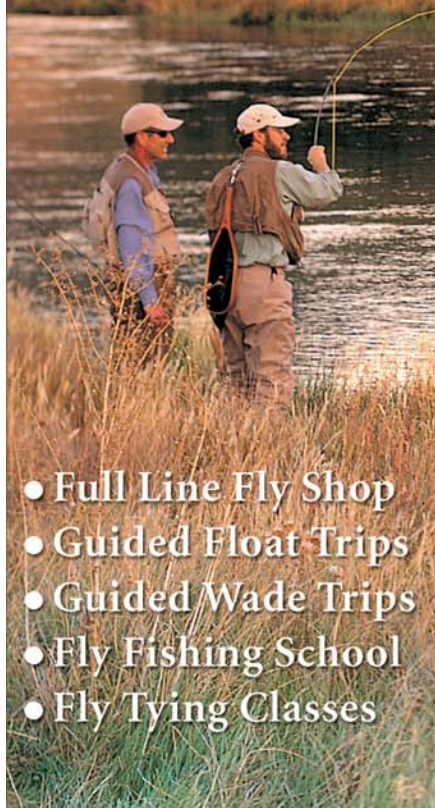
Today, J.J. is the technical outerwear design director for Ralph Lauren’s RLX line.





**ORVIS**  
SPORTING TRADITIONS  
Since 1856

# FOSCOE FISHING COMPANY & OUTFITTERS



- Full Line Fly Shop
- Guided Float Trips
- Guided Wade Trips
- Fly Fishing School
- Fly Tying Classes



9400 NC Hwy. 105 S.  
Between Boone & Banner Elk  
in Foscoe, NC  
828-963-6556



J.J. Collier referred to his training sessions as "just another day at the office." Here he demonstrates backside air out of a half pipe at Keystone Ski Resort in Colorado in 1997 as his friend Peter Orgna from Sweden looks on.

And that's where snowboarding in the High Country intersects with the national scene. As winter 1988 ended, the elder John Collier piled his snowboarding sons J.J. and Dave into the van for Stratton Mountain and the U.S. Open Snowboarding Championships.

Incredibly, J.J. took first place in the Junior Moguls, defeating 67 riders from around the nation. "Jake" Burton Carpenter, owner of Burton Snowboards, was shocked. Collier won on a 1989 model board unavailable at the time. "Where did you get the board, J.J.?" the company owner asked. Collier said he'd won it in Banner Elk, just days before in the South's first snowboard race.

Burton thought the North Carolina snowboard scene would be worthy of encouragement, so he'd shipped the board South a week earlier. Now it was back. J.J. was offered a Burton sponsorship be-

fore leaving Stratton. It was a dream come true.

The sport evolved from traditional freestyle skiing events like moguls and returned to its roots by focusing on the transitions found in a wave or on a ramp. The half pipe and other skateboard influences ruled the freestyle snowboarding scene all through the '90s. With the arrival in '93 of the Pipe Dragon, a grooming device that created perfectly round half pipe walls, the stage was set for freestyle snowboarding as we know it today.

J.J. kept on riding. Through the '90s he rose to the national ranks and rode for 12 consecutive years at the U.S. Open, earning third and fourth place finishes in half pipe in 1995 and 1996. He was second overall half pipe champion on the U.S. Pro Snowboard Tour in 1997 and 1998.

But things were changing for J.J. He was supplementing his snowboard win-





J.J. Collier performs during a photo shoot in Breckinridge, Colorado in 1990. Photo by John Bing





nings as a tech rep for snowboard and outdoor brands in the Southeast and was seeing the sports clothing sales scene from the inside.

During pre-Olympic preparations in fall 1997—the 1998 Nagano Games were snowboarding’s first appearance in the Olympics—Collier took action for his future. “I’d been giving feedback on my snowboard clothing for years, but never designed it. Beyond my snowboard gear, it was streetwear and fashion that really inspired me. I began to follow my inclination towards design and even bought a sewing machine. Shannon [now his wife] thought I was crazy.”

Collier explained, “I’d always flipped through my mom’s fashion mags and read *GQ* for years. I’d enjoyed drawing my whole life, but fashion shaped my taste and I learned what kind of looks

I liked. It took me years to believe that apparel design was something I could pursue professionally.”

Back in Charlotte and engaged to Shannon, he was casting around for his next move and was considering finishing college. “Here I was, this ex-pro snowboarder, without a college degree, and I really needed to get some things figured out. I hadn’t worked a retail job since my days at Edge of the World Outfitters in Banner Elk and here I was, many years later, old at 28, working retail.”

Then Collier took a class at UNC-Charlotte called Garments as Art. The final project required creating a complete outfit from offbeat materials, and “I did,” he said, “a knit shirt and skirt finished off with a cape made out of this carpet-like material and it all worked.” But while taking another course, Collier realized, “I had to find another way of doing this. I already had the ideas.”

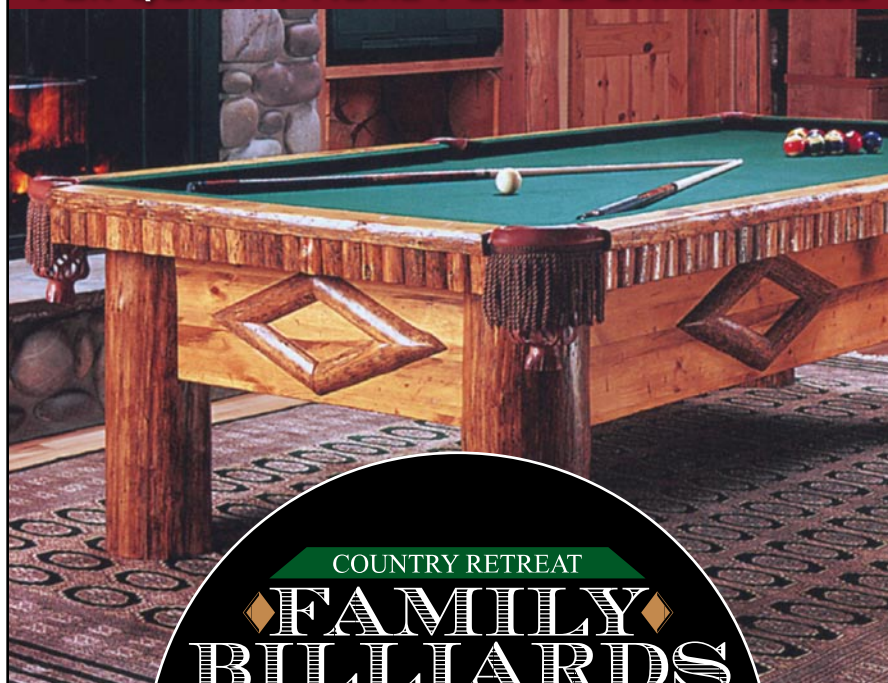


By the time these pictures were taken in 1990, J.J. Collier was a force on the U.S. snowboard scene. He rose to the national ranks and rode for years at the U.S. Open, earning third and fourth place finishes in half pipe in 1995 and 1996. He was second overall half pipe champion on the U.S. Pro Snowboard Tour in 1997 and 1998. Photos by John Bing





**THE HIGH COUNTRY'S EXCLUSIVE DEALER  
FOR QUALITY HOME POOL & GAME TABLES**



COUNTRY RETREAT  
**FAMILY  
BILLIARDS**

HIGHWAY 105 SOUTH  
FOSCOE, NC  
BETWEEN BOONE & BANNER ELK

**828-963-6260**

So Collier planned and designed his own collection of handmade clothing and staged a fall 1998 fashion show at a Charlotte club called Mythos. "The show went off without a hitch. It was a life-changing 15 minutes," he said.

Collier started getting calls for clothes from fashionable Charlotteans. Then Michelle Warner, Miss North Carolina 1997, engaged him for a special-event gown and the effort ended up in *The Charlotte Observer*. That sparked more business and an awareness of his own aesthetic. He hatched a plan to take his clothing line to New York.

Then Salomon called, the global ski gear company. Collier was "doing all this cool streety stuff," he said, but Salomon was about to launch a line of winter wear. "Unbeknownst to me, industry friends had told them that an ex-pro snowboarder was designing fashion street wear and maybe the two worlds could collide. 'You ought to talk to him,' they said. I flew to Boulder with sketches of progressive skiwear that I designed specifically for the interview. My ideas fueled some concepts that they had already been discussing and I was offered the job. It was one of the first big steps to where I am now—aside from the crazy idea of inviting a bunch of people to watch a runway fashion show in Charlotte of clothes I made myself. Those original Salomon folks are all still close friends."

In fall 1999, Collier moved to Boulder, Colo. to become a Salomon product designer and "work with the first creative director I'd ever had." They devised the aesthetic and functional elements of what would make Salomon apparel "worthy of the name Salomon." Along the way, Collier came up with several apparel features now patented by Salomon. He was promoted to senior product designer and moved to the Salomon Design Center in Annecy, France between July 2002 and February 2004.

Banner Elk's best-known snowboarder wasn't just drawing garments. His was an all-encompassing effort to successfully conceive and then launch an entire multi-season clothing brand in the marketplace. That task included fabric selection, color palette creation, design of apparel features, production of technical specifications and daily collaboration with development and marketing teams. In 2003, Collier was the designer for the entire fall and winter men's and women's Salomon apparel line, not to mention consulting on the company's surf line and collaborating with Arc'Teryx on some designs.



During that time, Collier got another call. "An HR person at Ralph Lauren called and said they were familiar with my work and they'd like to talk to me about working on RLX." That's Ralph Lauren's range of outdoorsy options or "technical product," as RLX includes ski, tennis, golf, nautical, outdoor and technical/lifestyle gear.

"I was psyched. Over the years I'd always been a fan of Ralph Lauren, the military cues, the cars, the taste level. His classical menswear always appealed to me, as well as the mixing in of cool, textural stories like Western. When RLX launched in 1999, I could already see the potential for a top-tier technical-meets-lifestyle brand," Collier said.

Off Collier went to work for Polo in New York as design director for technical outerwear of the RLX line. Once again, the entire range of duties was involved, including "presentation of designs and concepts to senior directors, vice presidents of design and Mr. Lauren."

Just over a year later, Collier moved back to Boulder to a "source inspiration location," but taking his pivotal New York position with him. Relocating, in other words, to a place where the designs flow from the environment where the product is used. Not a bad gig if you can get it!

That location seems to be a perfect fit for Collier—the design lead for the proposed design, color and fabric featured in new gear created under Lauren's official arrangement as outfitter for the world-class Aspen/Snowmass resorts.

"I needed to get back to the source of my inspiration, and as the head of outerwear for RLX, I thought that made perfect sense, particularly with my background. It was an opportunity to get back in synch with the athletes and even wear-test the gear. Ideally, it broadens our scope as a brand to have a key person in Colorado in addition to a dedicated RLX team in New York City," Collier said.

Other than the tendency to quibble with people who have the best of both worlds, how can you argue with that logic?

Reminded of his childlike newspaper opinion that even people over 30 can learn to snowboard, he said with a laugh, "Ah, to be 16 again. I'm 35 now, way over the hill, but as sports go, snowboarding is still easily my favorite thing to do."

*Randy Johnson's expanded and updated second edition of Hiking North Carolina will be published in early 2007.*

## QUALITY TIME.



**SKISUGAR.COM ~ 828-898-4521**  
**1009 Sugar Mountain Drive ~ Sugar Mountain, NC 28604**