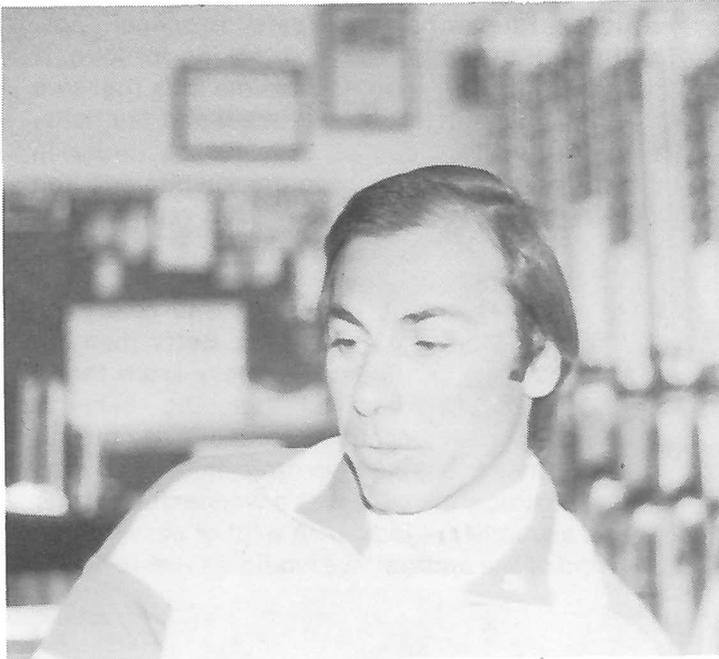


# Vern Grecco



**I am happily  
working  
in a business  
I love.**

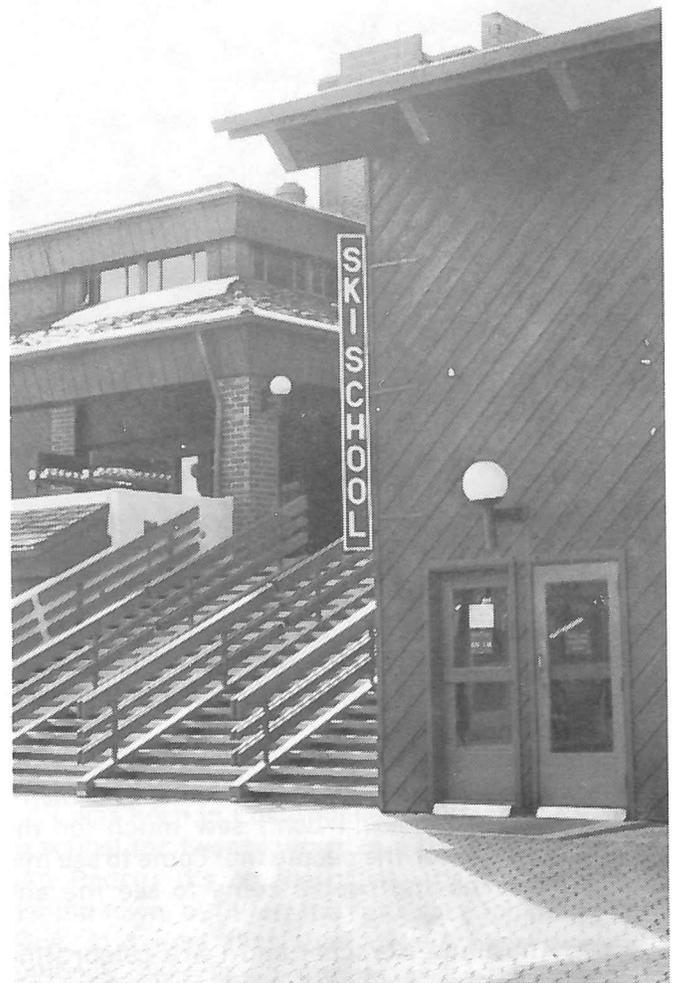
**By  
Chuck Heltzel  
and  
Danny Teuton**

When we (Danny and Chuck) interviewed Vern, he asked us to ski with him before we did the story, so we set up a time to meet. He bought us lunch at Toudan's, and we talked. Then we went skiing for a practice run down Vagabond. Vern taught us some ways to improve our skiing.

Vern Grecco, a professional skier, has been skiing 15 years. He taught us how to carve a turn and then showed us how to ski bumps on Concentration. He also took us to the racing course and showed us how to ski gates accurately. After we skied the race course, he had to return to work, so we skied the rest of the day by ourselves. That day with Vern, we learned a lot, and it was very exciting. He taught us many things that we didn't know, and some better ways to improve our skiing technique.

Vern told us of his past briefly and launched into his oratory on skiing. "I grew up in Denver, no actually I didn't grow up, I just got bigger and older in the suburbs of Denver. I am 30 and happily working in a business I love. I started teaching skiing when I went to college at Western State, then I was drafted into the military and spent time in Europe teaching skiing. I was in the recreation division. I did teach skiing to military dependents and members of the State Department at a recreation area in Garmisch, West Germany.

"I love my job; I tell you, the only way to teach skiing for any length of time is to love to ski. There's not as much fun or glamour as it would seem to some people; you have to like it to teach



it. I don't ski as much as I'd like to nor do most ski instructors. Most of the skiing I do is with the other ski instructors, V.I.P.'s or guests or past clients who come to town. I try to get out and ski often, but not as much as I'd like to.

"I am pretty active in the training program or clinics for other instructors. I am involved in the Rocky Mountain Division of Professional Ski Instructors, and a clinic leader for that division, so I travel around to other ski areas and train instructors. Last spring at Arapahoe Basin and Keystone I was a clinic leader, and we just had a PSIA clinic here several weeks ago. The PSIA is the National Professional Ski Instructors Association for ski instructors, just like the American Medical Association or the American Bar Association for the legal professions."

We asked Vern to tell us about qualifications for certification to teach skiing. "An instructor has to have taught skiing for a minimum of two years before he can apply. Not everybody passes certification; it's not an automatic pass situation, and once you become "associate certified" you have to teach one more full season before the full level exam. Most people teach for at least two more full seasons before they go to the full level of certification. Generally speaking, most people teach skiing for four years, full time, before they are ever fully certified, and that's if they are good and manage to get through as quickly as possible.

"There is a written test which examines the skier's knowledge on the theory of skiing. The test also includes some biomechanics, learning styles and how people teach. A ski instructor is an educator just like you have educators at school. There is obviously some physical skiing which must meet minimum standards. Each has to demonstrate that he knows how to teach out on the snow. And must put together exercises and progressions that will lead people to the proper way of skiing.

"The actual exam costs \$125; that's just the payment for the test. Most of the instructors probably spend over \$1000 in preparation. They go to training sessions at different ski areas; they spend the money to stay overnight at the training session, plus food costs. We run training sessions here every day for our instructors, not just to get them ready for certification, but to make them better skiers and better teachers.

"Right now we have 160 full time instructors. Ski instructor salaries vary. A first year instructor can make as little as \$5.50 per hour. A really good instructor who has been with the company for a while can earn as much as twelve to thirteen dollars an hour. Ski instructors are provided with uniforms. This year we have new uniforms which we expect to last three years. Each instructor must spend a great deal of



## **"A ski instructor is an educator."**

money on skis, equipment and clothing. Glasses or goggles are a small item, but they are a must, as it is really dangerous not to wear anything on your eyes.

"The amount of people we teach in a day varies with the season. We teach as many as 1500 people on a peak day. I think at Christmas time this year, we had at least that many people in ski school. The cost of a lesson varies from as little as \$17.00 for a 2 hour group lesson to as much as \$230.00 for an all day private lesson. We like to offer instruction for all levels of skiers. We offer a two hour group line up and then we teach accordingly. If you want to ski bumps, we'll teach you to ski bumps or we will offer you any instruction you want.

"A beginner can learn surprisingly quick, because modern equipment is so easy to ski and because of learning techniques. I would say in most cases a person who comes here for a week, if he/she is generally physically fit and wants to learn how to ski, he can learn surprisingly fast.

"The instructors may get raises. Most of the time, it depends on the business climate or the philosophy of the company they work for. They are treated the same as everyone else in the company. Most of the substantial pay raises come from progression through the certification program. Most major ski areas base their pay

scales on certification status. An instructor who is fully certified and one who has been her for five years and has been to the National Academy of Ski Instructors held at Snowbird, Utah every spring will make considerably more money than a first year instructor who comes here and has never taught skiing. A person doesn't have to have a certificate to instruct. Some instructors who aren't certified show good potential as skiers, and better potential as teachers. We look for people who have potential as skiers and have 'people skills', being able to deal with people and make them happy. Patience is one of those skills. Obviously we prefer people who are certified because it shows a good level of interest and some desire on their part.

"We teach all levels of skiing, and we basically teach the American method. It's called ATM Skiers all over the world know what ATM is, it stands for the American Teaching Method. It is the name of a text book for our professional organization. However, we modify that a little bit for our own uses here. When Loris Werner was running the ski school, he developed his own teaching method and it worked very well. It was close to ATM. Now we use a compromise between the two that seems to work really well for us.



"Level one people have never skied, never been on skis. Level two skiers may have been out for one day or had one lesson, so they can stand up on their skis and maybe slow down or brake a little, but they probably can't turn very well. They may be able to turn one direction but not the other. Level three skiers are people who can turn both directions; they can ride the chairlifts and ski the beginner's terrain and most of the green trails. A level four skier is a pretty good intermediate skier, maybe matching his skis a little bit and skidding them together at some part of the turn. Then the level five skier is a parallel skier, a person who is a pretty good skier.

"One thing we dwell on the most with the students we instruct is trying to make them comfortable on their skis. We don't try to teach anything magic, no 'voodoo', no lights or mirrors, we try and teach where the middle of the skis are and how to be really comfortable. We try to let the students know what is going to happen to them if they lean too far forward or too far back. We really try to teach neutral and natural body positions. In the past, ski instruction had many positions because of all the international influence, like the French techniques. We've gotten away from that, and it's basically just natural body positions. We want people to have fun, but we want them to be safe and to be really comfortable, so we might do any number of things.

"Manufacturers are making good skis for every level skier. Without talking about specific manufacturers, I would say if you want racing skis, you want the top of the line ski. The manufacturer makes a slalom or a G.S. (giant slalom) ski. Most really good skiers on this mountain, even if they're not racing, are skiing on racing cut skis. That's the highest performance ski that the manufacturer makes. They think it works well in almost all conditions. Even the bump skiers are now skiing on racing cut and full length skis. They might go down 5cm (centimeters) from a racing length ski. A slalom skier, racer, a guy my size, would probably use a 205cm racing ski and a good bump skier would probably use a 200-205cm racing ski.

"Now for someone who is not a really good skier or someone who is only skiing fifty days a year but is an excellent skier, the manufacturers are making good high performance recreational skis. Manufacturers have spent a lot of money, and they're finally at the point that they are good enough skis for people in all kinds of conditions. It used to be manufacturers spent all their money and time on research and development of racing skis, and they made a fairly inexpensive model that looked similar to that for the recreational skiers. That's not the case anymore. The consumers are more sophisticated, and they know what they want now.

"Ski manufacturers are using sophisticated and hard-to-get materials now, like Kevlar and graphite. Almost every manufacturer is using some exotic material or product in their skis which considerably boosts the high cost of ski equipment. All the manufacturers are now making a good high quality ski other than the racing skis. The same change has taken place in boots. Manufacturers thought that racing boots had to be stiff and high, but skis are so performance-oriented and so easy to turn, one doesn't need that big high stiff boot. Boots are getting generally softer, even for the racer



## **"A skier can learn surprisingly quick."**

because they don't have to have the stiffness to turn. We went from leather to knee high boots with plastic materials; now they are pretty much moderated at mid-calf and are fairly soft with a flex adjustment, so that a skier can adjust that boot for his own personal preference.

"Equipment does not make the technique; it's the carpenter not the tool. The use of sophisticated material helps but is not all inclusive. Manufacturers send pro skiers like myself equipment to be tested, then we send it back to tell them what we liked or didn't like. They take a consensus from a hundred skiers around the country to research the development.

"The ski school here has established a tradition with lessons for locals. When I first came here it was called GLM, then the Locals Clinics, and this year they've mostly been called monthly specials because we offer them to everybody, and we advertise in our brochure. It's still basically designed for the person who lives here in town. The lessons are at all levels Monday through Friday, about an hour-and-a-half each day. We offer telemark lessons, lessons for racing groups and bump lessons. We get a good response from the community, and we teach all kinds of skiing.

"We get a lot of demand for bump lessons from the general local skiing population. It's probably the most requested thing. Most intermediate skiers want to learn to ski bumps or to race. We offer both, and it's really no different than teaching anyone to ski at any level. The skills are all the same; it's just that they're all more critical. At that upper level, we have to be a whole lot more careful about how we teach. When we do a racing lesson, we section the race course. We ski three or four gates at a time to let the skier get used to skiing gates. Then we keep on adding gates.

"We also take the video equipment to film the skier, then they look at the film with the instructor present. The skier can see what he/she is doing wrong. If I take someone out to ski bumps, I don't take them to the top of White Out and say, 'Let's go!' I start at the bottom until the skier realizes he can ski bumps. We'll teach skiers to traverse across the bumps and keep the skis on the snow, so they learn ski/snow contact, and they learn to use their legs as shock absorbers. Teaching bumps and racing is really no different than anything else. The most important thing to do is make the person comfortable so he can learn.

"No one learns anything is he is uncomfortable. We've all been scared at one time or another, and you know when you are scared you are not learning. If you are scared all you can try to do is survive. You know when you are skiing poorly, when you are off balance or whatever, you go back to an old survival method. It's the same with teaching skiing, we try to make people really comfortable, so they can learn bits and pieces at a time.

"I think the best thing a ski instructor can do for someone who is trying to ski bumps or race is help him believe in himself and make him believe he can do it. That's the most important thing. I don't care whether it's bumps or racing, the first wedge turn or the first parallel turn, one has to believe in himself. I have been skiing for a long time and at a lot of different places. Skiing has become a way of life, more than just a sport or a way of making a living. The game of skiing means a lot to me, and I like sharing that with other people. I think that skiing is more important than just a game or recreation. In skiing we teach people that they can actually do things they never thought possible. I think one of the things I enjoy most is when I hear someone say, 'I never thought I could do that!' That is a pretty significant statement for anyone to make.

"Skiing fast, in general, is part of the challenge of skiing. However, skiing has become closely combined with big business, and there is an element of safety and risk which everyone has to recognize. I have mixed emotions about the crowds and speed control in skiing. I love to ski

**"In skiing we teach people that they can actually do things they never thought possible."**

fast. I think it's my favorite part, but I have to be concerned about other people too.

"You know what I'd like you guys to do? I would like you to come up and spend a couple of hours skiing with me. I think then you would have a much better feel for the article, and how I feel about skiing and how much more fun I have."

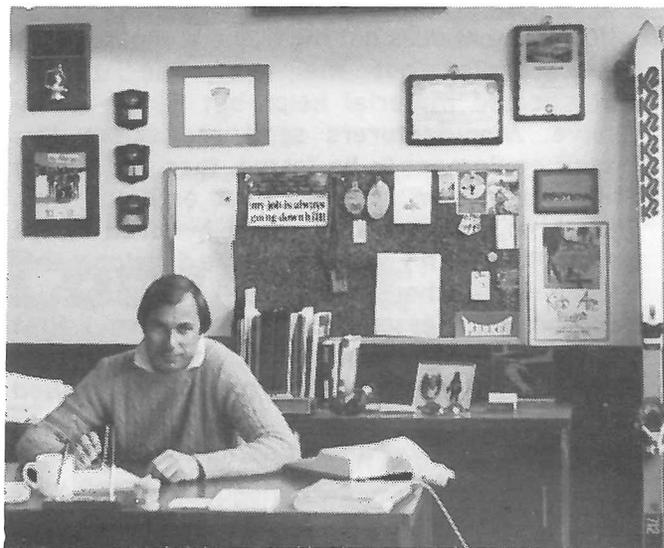
As we concluded the interview, we asked Vern if he would like to include anything in particular in the article — "One thing I would like for you guys to express in this article is how strongly I feel about something I don't think anyone else has picked up on except for one or two close friends. I am the first person outside the Werner family to ever direct the ski school. Skeeter Werner was the first ski school director here, then Loris Werner. This world class ski school has always been in the control of the Werner family, so when I was offered this job, I think probably the thing that struck me the most was that I was going to be the first person outside the Werner family to direct the ski school. My feelings about this are a real paradox. It's tough to follow in their footsteps and the tradition and yet, with the standards they have set, it makes my job easier.

"One thing I have started here is the Mt. Werner Challenge Series. It's a brand new ski school program this year. We are really excited about it, and it's been very popular and successful. It's designed for good skiers, advanced and expert. The emphasis changes from just instruction to 'camaraderie'. The instructor and students plan their days as a group, and it's a full two day program. The instructor and students ski a little of everything. They ski trees, bumps, and, if the weather and snow conditions are right, they ski powder. They ski steep terrain like the chutes. They ski Twilight, the Shadows, and other places that people would not normally get to on their own.

"The people who go through the Mt. Werner Challenge Series get the advantage of drawing from all the knowledge of the instructor. They learn the 'stash' on the mountain that they would never find on their own. They run through some gates, and if they make it through the whole two days, the instructor gives them a Mt. Werner Challenge Series pin and a nice certificate of completion. It has been a really good program because people who are good skiers don't normally participate in ski school. In any

ski school in the country, they just don't teach the advanced skiers, so we decided that we wanted some good skiers to come to ski school. We wanted to ski and have fun with them. That's what the whole program is about, having fun with the good skiers, and it's really working out well. The instructors love working it because they get to spend two days roaming around with the really dynamic skiers. The skiers like it because they get to determine what they are going to ski. And I like it because I like to get out with the groups whenever I can and spend some time. I think they like getting to ski with me, and I like getting exposed to them. It's a fun program for everybody. It's really challenging for the instructor too; it's a lot harder to be productive with an advanced skier than someone who is weak. It's easy to tell what kind of help a weak skier needs and get them to work on their weakness, but when someone is a better skier, we have to have a good eye to be able to help that person.

"I don't teach skiing for a living anymore; I manage 160 other ski instructors. I think I'm a good ski instructor, and I have a really good feel of how one can learn to ski from someone else. You have had teachers throughout your life who for one reason or another just clicked with you, and it was fun. You progressed and learned a lot and you can look back and say 'That was good.' I bet if you went out and spent just two hours skiing with me it wouldn't seem like a ski lesson. I'll bet you could look back and say, 'That was good.' Just like coaching baseball or football, it's neat to be able to help other people. It's a combination of biomechanics, sport psychology, skill, and a whole lot of the right kind of 'stuff' in your heart. It's fun to be good at what you do!"



**"No one learns anything if they are uncomfortable."**