

Roller skis rumble into workouts

They won't supplant roller skates. But they're winning over skiers.

By Hillary Chura
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MILFORD, N.H. — Len Johnson is bringing cross-country skiing to asphalt.

Johnson's 30-inch roller skis are too expensive to supplant in-line skating or bungee jumping as America's next fad, but he's winning over competitive skiers, who say the V2s mimic the exertion of cross-country skiing.

Roller skis, which roll up and down pavement and resemble small planks with wheels, have been around about 30 years. But Johnson, who has been in the business four years, created roller skis that come closest to real skiing and deliver the most demanding training, said Olympian Jim Galanes.

"He is doing research and development that is probably way ahead of what any other roller ski companies are doing. He cares about the sport and has been an outstanding innovator in the sport," Galanes said.

That's important to competitive cross-country skiers, who spend at least three months on roller skis, said Galanes, who skied on the U.S. Olympic cross-country team from 1974 to 1985 and coached Olympians from 1985 to 1992. He is the cross-country ski coach at Stratton Mountain School, a preparatory school in Stratton, Vt.

Olympians who train on V2s won 26 medals in the 1994 Winter Olympics — nine gold, nine silver and eight bronze, Johnson said.

Two-time Olympian Nina Kemppel has been using the V2 for four years and said they're the best on the mar-

ket. The 23-year-old Anchorage, Alaska, native roller-skis four or five times a week and credits them with improving her performance.

"With the V2, they grab the road real nicely. You give a strong kick, and it's just as if you're on snow," she said from training in Sognefjell, Norway.

At least one other U.S. company and 14 international companies make roller skis, but cross-country skiers say V2s are increasing in popularity. They are sold in about 250 stores in North America and are distributed in Europe, Australia and Japan.

Johnson's Jenex Inc. became profitable this year, in part because Johnson sells ski-related products as well. He expects next year's sales to be twice this year's. He said he sells thousands of V2s each year, but declined to be more specific.

He said sales have grown 60 percent since last year and estimates Jenex has a 70 percent North American market share.

Johnson, Jenex's 61-year-old president, is a retired mechanical engineer and longtime skier. He, his wife and three employees make V2s, some of which can reach speeds of 25 m.p.h. on flat ground. Testimonials from customers — famous and otherwise — dot the walls of their southern New Hampshire factory.

Roller ski events are becoming popular in Europe and the United States, but competitive skiers aren't the only people using roller skis, which are worn with ski boots. Johnson said physical therapists recommend roller skis because they are

good exercise, and don't damage knees as running can.

"We're seeing people who aren't even really skiers who want to roller ski. They're tired of training on Nordic Tracks," he said.

Speed reducers mean even novices can use V2s. But Johnson said \$450 for roller skis, boots and poles will keep them from sweeping the nation. A set of wheels that costs \$100 and needs to be replaced every two to three years almost guarantees roller skiing will not become a sport of the masses.

"It never will be a craze. It's much too complex for that," he said. "You can't do tricks on roller skis like you can with in-line skating, and you can't stop as quickly."

Torgney Mogren, gold medalist in the 1988 Calgary Olympics, has been using V2s for about a year. The 31-year-old Swede has been skiing since he was 3 and said he'll continue to use V2s because they have a better feel and give a better workout.

"They're a good product. They have a good build; the finish is good, and they look nice," he said.

Olympian Dick Taylor agrees V2s give a good workout because they're slow.

"What happened in years past when roller skis were faster is that skiers actually detrained. There wasn't enough resistance. We covered a lot of miles but lost fitness. That was a worldwide phenomenon," Taylor said.

Taylor was on the U.S. cross-country ski team from 1958 to 1964 and was in the 1964 Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria.