



Thought you'd like to know...

Behind the scenes with Cooper Tire



We had the good fortune to be able to try out Cooper's new winter tires back in January. The ride and drive took place on a frozen racetrack a few hours north of Montreal.

In the following interview you'll get a taste of the background story on these new lines. I wanted to know more about how the tires were developed and tested. Plus I can never get enough of the age-old battle - 'studdable vs. studless.'

Joining us are Cooper's Jenny Paige and Dan Walker. Jenny holds degrees in Mechanical Engineering and has been with Cooper for 13 years. Her current title is Category Manager where she oversees winter tires, ultra high performance, and specialty light truck tires. Dan is also a Mechanical Engineer and has logged 19 years with Cooper. Dan's title is Tire Test Engineering Manager and that means he supervises Cooper's global testing by establishing metrics, goals, and objectives for that testing.

JS: Welcome Jenny and Dan. Thanks for sitting down with us. I enjoy hearing the story from the engineers that brought the new tires to market, instead of just hearing it from the sales side. What are you seeing with winter tire volume trends?

JP: Thanks for giving us the opportunity to tell our story. We believe the market for winter tires is strong. Our data is predicting a passenger winter increase of 8 to 9% through 2021, while pure light truck winter tire sales will be declining slightly, partly due to new 3 Peak Mountain Snowflake all-terrain tires coming onstream.

JS: How was the decision made to invest in new tires?

JP: Voice of consumer research. We've made it a priority to speak with dealers and consumers to find out their wants and needs.

DW: Technology has changed so much since early 2000 when the Weather Master ST came out. Customers want better options and we knew we could deliver. It's also part of Cooper's push to keep their tire designs fresh.

JS: Any data on the likelihood of CUV and SUV owners with all/4 wheel drive buying winter tires?

JP: The more winter weather you have in your area, the more likely consumers are to buy winter tires. All wheel drive will not stop your car any quicker. We're confident consumers still want superior traction and only true winter tires can provide it when the temps dip down.

JS: My line is, "All wheel drive will get you to the wreck faster." When did the project start?

JP: We got our green light in March of 2015.

JS: Dan, I know we were joking about you being the "Snow Hunter" up in Canada. You've traveled a great deal following snowy conditions. Where exactly did you test?

DW: Yes, we can't just test during the North American snow season. Development would drag on too long. We have to go to where the snow is. When it's summer in Ohio, it's winter in New Zealand. We pack up tires and gear and travel down there. Here's a quick rundown: We tested on 3 continents and used 9 facilities in 6 countries - Canada, New Zealand, US, Finland, Sweden, and Germany.

JS: Wow. Sounds like a massive undertaking. I'm sure some people think you just draw up a new design and start carving molds... When it comes to winter tires. What is more important, tread pattern or compound?

DW: Compound wins. You need flexibility in the cold to get grip, and that comes from the compound - especially on ice. The tread pattern is still very important in channeling water, we prefer a snow groove for maximum snow on snow contact, biting edges, and slush traction.

JS: We hear from some people that if a tire does not have stud holes, it's not a 'real' winter tire. Why did you make your new Discoverer True North studless? Is it because it's slotted in as a premium product like a Blizzak or Michelin X-Ice and that's what the cool kids are doing?

JP: Nooo! The True North is intended to do a different job. It's meant for consumers that are primarily driving on plowed roads that still have snow on them, slush, cold rain, and lower temperatures that are not as safe to transit with all-season tires. For those that drive in deep snow we have our new studdable Evolution Winter.

JS: Why not just put stud holes in your premium product? Wouldn't that make everyone happy?

JP: The compound is too soft for proper stud retention, but also, if we add stud pin holes, we remove sipes. The sipes provide biting edges and improve tire performance. So for people who are not actually going to put metal studs in the tire, it is better to not include the stud pin holes and give an increased number of biting edges/sipes. In essence, if you're not using the stud holes, there are more effective ways to use that space on the tread surface.

DW: Studdable tires definitely have their place and we want your dealers selling ours. From a manufacturer's point of view they are lower-tech. They are less costly to manufacture. The traction is bolstered by the stud. Not some trick compounding and special siping.

JS: For the first time you now have an entry level snow tire with the new Starfire Winter. Why is this studless?

JP: This tire line was originally built for the Asian market where studless tires are perceived to be more innovative. We ended up trying it in Canada where it really took off and sold well, so we decided to bring it into the States for this upcoming season.

JS: What's next in winter tires?

JP: We're shooting for a Discoverer M+S replacement for the 2020 winter season.

JS: Thank you both for sitting down and shedding light on your process. Is there anything you'd like to say directly to our dealers?

JP: We've created new Cooper products for two separate customer groups. The Evolution Winter for extreme snow conditions and the Discoverer True North for everyday drivers that experience snow, ice, slush, and lower temps in their daily lives going about their business.

DW: My team circled the globe, working in tough conditions developing these new tires and they are ready to impress.

Think Snow!

Jeff Short
VP of Sales
K&W Tire Company