

BOARD SILLY



IT'S RARE TO FIND A PRO SURFER ON A PRODUCTION BOARD. NOW KITERS ARE DISCOVERING
THE MAGIC OF A CUSTOM RIDE.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR



PHOTOS: LEE RUSHBY; (OPPOSITE PAGE) PETER LEWANDO (2)

TO WITNESS STEPHEN SCHANK BUILD ME A CUSTOM-DESIGNED, HANDMADE TWIN-TIP KITEBOARD IS LIKE WATCHING ONE OF THOSE ARTICULATED HIGH-SPEED ASSEMBLY LINE ROBOTS AT A MODERN AUTOMOTIVE PLANT.

Somewhere, embedded deep inside his brain, the neural equivalent to software code is dispatching parsed instructions to his body, which moves in sync to a silent beat. His actions are premeditated, precise and blindingly fast, conforming to a series of discrete steps he's honed over eight years of shaping. It takes Schank, who is 37, less than 20 minutes to cut, bevel and sand my board's core. It's carved from a single piece of very expensive and ultralight closed-cell foam endowed with unique flex and dampening properties.

While Schank is quick, he is by no means hasty. When I visit his tiny shop, located inside an aluminum Quonset hut in Buxton, North Carolina, he spends two hours interrogating me about what I hope to get from a handbuilt board. He makes notes in a leather-bound black notebook, punches figures into a calculator and finally announces a size: 132 centimeters by 40.5 centimeters. I had wanted something slightly longer,

but Schank, a former professional kiteboarder and windsurfer (he's also competed in mountain biking, skiing, ice climbing and hang gliding, among other sports), has a vision and won't budge. For my board, he selects every feasible feature — outline, tip flex, core materials, rail thickness — to accommodate my riding style. Schank orders fiberglass specially woven for him in different weights and weaves; for me, he chooses a combination to suit chop and surf, the conditions I kite in most often. He measures the width of my shoulders and hips to determine my optimal foot stance. He even tunes each fin individually (they're lettered for accurate placement) and sets them slightly inward because I expressed a pet peeve about face spray.

After spending a couple days with Schank building boards — his brand is Aggression Kiteboarding — it doesn't surprise me

to learn he was once an 80-hour-a-week mechanical engineer trained to troubleshoot high-speed automation production. "I was what they called a firefighter," he informs me, speaking in his usual warp-speed cadence. "I led a team of guys into a factory when something went wrong to solve an issue when nobody else could, and we would tear a plant apart, figure out who changed what, to find out what happened." Schank was part of quality control at Ford during the launch of the Escape Hybrid. He also managed a software system that tracked every critical bolt installed during the assembly of the F-150 pickup (the best-selling vehicle in the United States for a quarter-century). "We recorded the data to a microchip so we knew that all the bolts — about 500



Clockwise from far left: Stephen Schank lines up the top sheet. Pouring the magic ingredient. Schank in his factory with his custom kitesurf board and twin-tip. Opposite, from right: Hand-drilling the inserts. Schank puts his own custom board to the test.



of them — on every truck leaving the factory had been properly tightened," he says. Another job entailed analyzing incremental movements of line workers to determine where he might shave a few seconds to speed up production. Schank designed his Buxton shop around this latter premise: There are nine task-oriented benches (one for sanding, one for layup, one for shaping, etc.) positioned ergonomically to match his height and handedness (he's a righty). This lets him churn out about one board a day, sometimes two, without sacrificing quality.

Schank — who is better known by his nickname, GS, for Gorge Steve (he hailed from the Columbia River Gorge before relocating to Buxton) — produces some of the best boards in the industry. His craftsmanship has earned him a venerable reputation. But he's just one of a budding cadre of talented custom kiteboard builders redefining how and what we ride, and like Schank, bringing a menagerie of unique skills and varied backgrounds to the trade. They are most certainly making us better kites, and in the process, they're challenging a decade-old paradigm that had us buying mass-produced boards made overseas, stamped out by workers who, as one veteran shaper bemoaned, "probably have no idea what they are even making."

To be fair, there's a plethora of excellent, durable production models available, and for many kites, particularly beginners and intermediates, a custom ride is overkill. The charming subtleties would be wasted on inexperience. That said, demand for handmade, custom kiteboards — both twin-tips and directionals — is soaring. In anticipation of a lasting boom, Schank has designed a revolutionary pressing table that he says will let him build 1,000 custom boards a year. Meanwhile, an impromptu and unscientific poll (thanks Facebook) of this magazine's readers turned up

SCHANK PRODUCES SOME OF THE BEST BOARDS IN THE INDUSTRY. HIS CRAFTSMANSHIP HAS EARNED HIM A VENERABLE REPUTATION.



PHOTOS: PETER LEWANDO (3); (OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT) PETER LEWANDO; LEE RUSHBY



Clockwise from top left: John Doyle uses a CNC machine to build his custom boards. Doyle designs on CAD. Though it's rare to find customs in a shop, Doyle has a few on display in Oregon Surf Shop displays a few Doyle's custom boards.

PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) ADAM KOCH (2); BEN COLLANDER, (OPPOSITE PAGE) BEN COLLANDER

GO CUSTOM: A RESOURCE GUIDE TO KITEBOARD SHAPERS

3B
3bkiteboarding.com

Aggression Kiteboarding
aggressionkiteboarding.com

Alex Aguera Shape Design
alexaguera.com

Amundson Customs
amundsoncustoms.com

Anton Customboards
anton-kiteboards.de

Blackboards
blackboards.net.au

Carved
carved.de

Cascade Performance Fiberglass
cascadepformancefiberglass.com

CKB
customkiteboard.com

Custom Concept Lynx
cclynx.blogspot.com

DC Boardz
dcboardz.com

DeCosse Customs
decossecustoms.com

Doyle Custom Kiteboarding
doylesports.com

Dynamit
dynamit-franz.blogspot.com

EH Kiteboarding
ehkiteboarding.com

Jellyfish Boards
jellyfishboards.com

Kazuma
kazumasurf.com

Kiteboards Cabarete
kiteboardscabarete.com

Nordstrom Custom Made Kiteboards
nordstromkiteboarding.com

Rogue Wave Custom Boards
roguewaveboards.com

Stretch Boards
stretchboards.com

Victory Boards
victoryboards.com

Vision
visionsurfco.com



"I'M DOING EVERYTHING MYSELF. I'M REALLY BUSY, DOING OVER 100 BOARDS A YEAR. MY BUSINESS IS GROWING, AND I THINK WE'RE JUST AT THE BEGINNING OF THAT GROWTH."

nearly two dozen kiteboard shapers around the world, and their businesses are thriving.

So what's driving the trend? Because the sport has been around for more than a decade, the population of expert kites is larger than ever — and it's these riders who are searching for something that will take them to the next level. "Kites have become more sophisticated," says John Doyle, 54, a legendary shaper who started building boards in 1999 while he was learning to kite in Hood River, Oregon. A year later he took a job with Slingshot, became its chief board designer and, in doing so, helped pioneer the industry. "I left Slingshot in the spring and now I'm doing everything myself," says Doyle. "I'm really busy, doing over 100 boards a year. My business is growing, and I think we're just at the beginning of that growth."

Doyle also sports a multifarious résumé. He raced motocross, worked at a hydraulics lab for Learjet, built swimming pools, shaped windsurf boards, designed mountain bikes and kayaks and is a licensed electrician. To his career as a kiteboard shaper

he brings inventiveness and innovation. He's a guy whose default creative mode is way outside the box. "Production [board manufacturers] stay pretty conservative," Doyle points out. "They don't want to make major changes from year to year."

But can tweaking a few specs and components dramatically alter your ride? And is a custom board — which costs at least \$100 to \$200 more than a typical production model — really worth the extra money? With so many different production boards on the market, kites aren't lacking for choices. And a savvy rider who demos lots of boards before settling on one isn't going to be disappointed. Yet custom shapers invariably insist they have something better to offer.

"There is a big difference in materials and quality," says John Amundson, 41, who for the past nine years has been a lead board designer at North Kiteboarding while also running his own custom shaping business. Let's start with the core. The majority of production boards use wood. Paulownia is a popular variety because it's relatively light, but more importantly, it's cheap and native

Clockwise from top left: Every step has a personal touch. John Amundson in his shaping room. Amundson bonds with his custom board on the North Shore of Oahu.



SHAPERS INVARIABLY USE **HIGHER-QUALITY MATERIALS** TO MAKE THEIR BOARDS EXTREMELY DURABLE.

to Asia, where most production boards are manufactured. “But with wood cores, there is no shock absorption built in,” explains Lee Brittain, a 58-year-old custom shaper in Wasaga Beach, Ontario. His company, Rogue Wave Custom Boards, has garnered a devoted following of kites.

Many custom shapers will vehemently argue in favor of wood, and they’ll tell you foam can’t even come close to the pop of a well-made wood core. Even so, wood cores are generally stiffer and not as good at absorbing sudden jolts. Whack a wood core with a hammer and guess what happens? The hammer bounces, recoiling like a shotgun. When Schank demonstrates on one of his foam blanks, the hammer strikes with a dull thud. No recoil. Foam can instantly devour several hundred pounds of kinetic force. It’s true that you might sacrifice some pop with foam, but Schank still believes “wood simply doesn’t belong in a kiteboard. It’s dead weight.” Nevertheless, wood cores remain ubiquitous. “Foam is harder to work with and a lot more expensive,” notes Doyle.

Because custom shapers aren’t as limited by price, they invariably use higher-quality (read: more expensive) materials to make their boards extremely durable. Schank spent years testing and tweaking various epoxy blends to reach an ideal strength-to-weight ratio. His inserts are coated with a corrosive-resistant

material originally developed for nuclear submarines. He’s refined his top and bottom sheets to the point where they can withstand years of abuse from rocks and coral. As I watch him layer fiberglass and epoxy onto my core, he warns, “Land hard enough and your leg will break before this board will.” Doyle is confident that his directional boards “won’t snap in half, won’t heel dent and will last for years. And with the materials I use, you can tell immediately that it’s smoother through the water and has a lot of speed and acceleration.”

Of course, putting heaps of “spendy” technology into a custom ride isn’t a guarantee that it’ll rip. A handmade board is only as good as its shaper. The world’s top shapers are keen detectives; they ask lots of questions and then listen intimately to determine what combination of outline, materials, flex and stiffness will prove best for a particular rider. “To a certain degree, I guide them through the process,” says Amundson. “Not everyone has Maui, or San Diego, winds. Everybody has specific needs. Finding a board to match their conditions is key. I have to understand all types of riders. I have some who are in the 200-plus pound range and cannot find any other board for their size.” Brittain frequently meets kites who are resistant to go custom because they aren’t sure what to ask for. “Some [people] don’t have a clue what they

should get,” he says, “in which case I walk them through it, finding out their weight, ability and needs.”

On my fourth day in North Carolina’s Outer Banks, Schank sends me a text message: “Your board is done and ready to ride.” Nice timing. The southwest winds are heading for the teens. I decide to test my first custom on the classic flat-water down-winder in Pamlico Sound known as Planet of the Apes. The eight-mile ride cuts through grassy wetland channels where narrow waterways create mirror-pond slicks. When I dive my kite off the beach, the board starts planing so effortlessly it nearly catapults me onto my face. Then it begins to accelerate. It hardly matters that the wind is barely topping 15 knots and I’m on a 10-meter kite. This board is fast — really, really fast. I glance down at my heelside rail, baffled at how well it edges without skipping. Then I load it up for a basic back roll, and it pops with an explosion of raw energy so powerful it sends me around twice. Whoa. Next, I boost a few jumps and its flex cushions my crappy landings but still grabs aggressively without fishtailing. Two days later, I ride on the Atlantic Ocean near the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse at a spot called The Cove. My new board passed its flat-water test with high marks, but riding in head-high surf in gusty 25-knot winds will require a command performance. Sure enough, it blazes

over chop and rollers like a monster truck at a Hot Wheels rally. Though I expect it to pearl, it handily executes clean top and bottom turns on the waves.

Yet what’s really exceptional about my new custom is something more cerebral and intangible. It seems to anticipate my intentions and then compensate for mistakes before I make them. The board does double-duty, seamlessly shifting between an intrinsic extension of my body and an autonomous water warrior determined to tame the sea. I remember Brittain telling me about a customer who’d gone through six production boards in a year and, unsatisfied, finally opted for a Rogue Wave custom. He was so thrilled with the results he posted a gushing review on an Internet kite forum. I read the post and dismissed it as fanciful. Now, having experienced a custom ride, I finally understand. “Try a custom board and you’ll never go back to production again,” claims Brittain. “They feel better on the water, perform better, last longer and you have something that was built for you, by hand, by somebody you know.”

Indeed, going custom is like becoming a member of a secret brotherhood that outsiders disparage and doubt until they’re invited into the inner circle. Just know this: Once you join the custom club, you’ll be a member for life. ●



Clockwise from top left: Lee Brittain draws the outline template for a twin-tip. Rogue Wave team rider David Drinkwater. Brittain airbrushes his custom board before the clear coat.



PHOTOS: RANITA AMUNDSON (3); (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR RIGHT) BRENDAN SCHUIJR; COURTESY BRITAIN (2)