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NewEnglandNews

Dec. 26, 2005 - Jan. 1, 2006

'A Fresh Look at Our Changing World'

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Maine Surfer Dudes Team Up to Produce Golden Grain Wooden Surfboards

YORK, Maine (AP) — When the surf's up, you can find Mike LaVecchia and Rich Blundell carving the waves at York Beach, even in winter.

Their surfboards, however, are nothing like the fiberglass-over-foam boards common at beaches around the country. They made wood boards for themselves that look like hand-crafted furniture with their smooth lines, wood grain and glossy finish.

LaVecchia and Blundell now operate a small business, Grain Surfboards, to make wooden surfboards for others.

Many surfers are turning to wood as part of the trend toward retro surfboards and the two men are applying the skills used in Maine's long tradition of wooden boat-building to help meet the demand.

"Look at that grain!" Blundell said, pointing to the whirls and swirls on the red cedar planks of one their boards. "It blows my mind. That's what it's all about."

Despite the recent comeback, wooden surfboards have been around for thousands of years.

Polynesians first harnessed the power of an ocean swell on solid wood boards several thousand years ago, and the art of surfing was perfected on wood in Hawaii, where tribal chiefs rode hardwood plank boards as long as 24 feet.

In the book "Roughing It," Mark Twain wrote about his experience on a wooden surfboard in Hawaii in 1866.

But in modern times, classic wooden boards fell by the wayside as less-expensive fiberglass, foam and composite materials came into vogue.

LaVecchia and Blundell, both 39 years old, set up a shop in their rented home across the street from a bluff overlooking the north end of York Beach. They say their work building surfboards brings together their knowledge of boats, wood and surfing.

LaVecchia once ran a charter sailboat company on Lake Champlain and later oversaw the construction of a full-scale replica of a 19th-century lake freighter when he worked at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in Vermont. Blundell has worked on commercial fishing boats, windjam-

mers and sailboats in New England, Florida and the Caribbean.

So far, the men have built 10 surfboards between 6 feet and 10 feet long, which sell for \$1,200-\$1,500 each. The men said they are confident the business will grow.

The two-week construction process involves building a frame—one that looks like a ribbed frame of an airplane wing—and attaching outer planks made of red or white cedar. They glue additional wooden strips to the side rails, shape it, sand it and apply six to eight coats of epoxy that protects the board and gives it its shine.

"It's alive," Blundell said of the final product, which is highly durable but light enough to pick up under one's arm. "It's like a green twig versus a Styrofoam box."

Wooden boards make up a minuscule portion of the surfboard sales worldwide. Most surfers shy away from them because of their higher price tags, said Ron Lees, owner of Northeast Surfing, an online Web company in Hull, Mass.

A 9-foot wooden board, for instance, might sell for \$1,500, while a comparable fiberglass board would cost \$300 to \$500 less.

Still, there are pockets of demand for wooden boards among collectors and surfers who buy them for their look and feel, said Chris Mauro, editor of Surfer magazine.

"There's always little niches where wooden surfboard builders can fill a void," Mauro said. "People love the look of wood."

Tom Wegener, a former world-class surfer who now makes surfboards in Australia, said wooden boards make up less than 1 percent of surfboard sales.

But interest is growing, so much so that he has given up making foam boards and has a year's backlog of orders for wood ones, he said.

"Five years ago there were very few and they were mostly wall hangers," he said. "Now I am one of many making wood surfboards to be ridden."

Some surfboard manufacturers have begun making foam boards with a thin layer of wood veneer, said Dave Cropper, owner of Cinnamon



UPPER LEFT: Rich Blundell (L) and Mike LaVecchia, co-founders of Grain Surfboards, demonstrate two of the different models they build—boards range in length from 5 feet 8 inches to 11 feet. They plan to make them available in a kit as well.

LOWER LEFT: Rich Blundell (L) and Mike LaVecchia inspect the planking process in the hollow wooden surfboards. This photo was taken outside the Grain Surfboards workshop in York, Maine.



UPPER RIGHT: Mike LaVecchia holds the backbone of a 9-foot longboard called the "Wing." The center timber is called the keel and the perpendicular pieces are frames or ribs. The construction process is documented on a DVD available this spring from www.grainsurfboards.com.

LOWER RIGHT: Rich Blundell finalizes a new 6-foot "Fish" surfboard with a layer of fiberglass, which provides a watertight seal around the board and a hard protective shell.

Rainbows Surf Co., a surfboard shop in Hampton Beach, N.H.

But LaVecchia and Blundell think discerning surfers will pay a premium once they ride double-overhead waves on an authentic wooden board.

"That board there is like a pillow," Blundell said, pointing to LaVecchia's personal surfboard.

For more information see: Grain Surfboards: www.grainsurfboards.com and Wegener Surfboards: www.tomwegenersurfboards.com

Ski Champ Miller Buys 630-Acre Farm, Will Go Organic

SUGAR HILL, N.H. (AP) — A foundation set up by world skiing champion Bode Miller has bought a 630-acre farm once owned by another skiing family, and will use it to promote organic farming.

The foundation, Turtle Ridge Farm LLC, is operated by members of Miller's family. It bought the Ski Hearth Farm last week, which includes working farmland, woods and frontage on the Gale River.

The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests holds a conservation easement on part of the property that protects it from development and limits its use to farming and forestry.

"It's going to stay the same. We're just going to promote organic farming," said Kyla Miller-White, the skier's sister and a member of Turtle Ridge's board. Bode Miller attended Carrabassett Valley Academy in Maine.

Miller-White said the family plans to expand farming operations and keep a seasonal farm stand open while working toward organic certification.

She said they hope Luther Kinney will stay on as farm manager. Kinney, who has managed the farm for the past four years, is president of Rasa Yoga, the farm's former owner.

Rasa Yoga bought the farm in 2002 for use as a yoga center. It made extensive renovations to the 1850s farmhouse and began the transition to organic farming.

Before that, Ski Hearth Farm was owned by Sel and Paulie Hannah, who bought it in 1938. They farmed it in summer and hosted lodgers who wanted to ski at nearby Cannon Mountain in the winter.

Sel Hannah, who died in 1991,



ORGANIC FARMER: World Champion U.S. Bode Miller is seen after the Alpine Skiing World Cup Combined race in Val d'Isere, France, on Dec. 11, 2005.

was a native of Berlin who made the Olympic Nordic ski team in 1940. He never got a chance to compete because the games were canceled due to World War II.

He went on to found Sno Engineering, a ski area development company that helped construct trails at Cannon Mountain and other ski areas in the region. He also was a member of the Cannon Mountain ski patrol.

One of the most challenging trails on Cannon Mountain is named "Paulie's Folly," after his wife.

Paulie Hannah, once one of the most competitive women skiers in the region, contracted polio in 1949, when she was 32. She remained devoted to the sport, however, doing fund-raising for the local Franconia Ski Club and the Eastern Division of the U.S. Ski Association.

Among her friends was Bode

Miller's grandmother, Peg Kenney. Paulie Hannah died in 2001.

Joan Hannah, the eldest of the Hannahs' four children, skied for the U.S. Olympic team in 1960 and 1964, and won a bronze medal in the giant slalom event at the 1962 World Championships.

After teaching skiing in Colorado for many years, she returned to New Hampshire after her father's death. She managed the farm until it was sold in 2002 and continued to work there through last summer.

Miller's family hasn't decided yet whether to change the name of the farm. When Miller-White found out it was for sale, her main concern was to keep it going so the community would have a source of fresh, locally grown produce.

"There's a lot of family history there," she said. "We all wanted it to stay the same."

Robot Floor Scrubber Cleans Up in the Home Chores Department

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — I'm lounging on the couch with my feet up, sipping a soda and watching the late-night sports recap. I reach over to playfully wrestle a squeaky toy from my dog's grip.

Believe it or not, I'm also busy mopping the kitchen floor. The latest wonder machine from Burlington, Mass.-based iRobot is whirring and slurping around my house.

The company that gave us the button-cute Roomba robotic floor vacuum has now unleashed Scooba (\$399), a smart mop that further shortens the list of domestic duties.

In one pass, Scooba can pick up loose dirt and debris, lay down a cleaning solution, scrub the floor and then squeegee it dry, according to iRobot. Most of that proved true in testing a loaner from the company. Not all, but most.

Scooba, like its older sibling Roomba, is a nicely designed unit. The pale blue, round chassis is about 3 inches high and 14 inches in diameter.

The top comes off easily, revealing the rechargeable battery in the base. The hood holds the cleaning solution and a receptacle for the dirty water that is sucked up by rubber tubing during scrubbing.

Scooba uses two ounces of a special, bleach-free Clorox cleaner with the rest of the tank

filled with water. If Scooba grows in popularity, expect to see this solution at a supermarket shelf near you.

Once I'd fully charged Scooba, it was only a two button process to get the little guy started. I pressed "power" to wake Scooba up and "clean" to make him start scrubbing. Scooba came to life, emitting a few tones of agreement to tell me he was on the job, and began his duties.

At first the unit spun around in a slowly widening spiral, but eventually it set out on a few straight paths across the sealed cement floor. As the unit reached table legs and chairs, it nudged them and redirected itself. Scooba has a very gentle touch in this respect and didn't leave and marks on the walls or topple my classical guitar resting in a corner. It simply made its rounds.

Scooba's little brain was quite impressive. A small fist-sized device that shoots a beam of light to create a virtual wall, it helped corral Scooba on the hard floor and away from a carpet.

Scooba also knew enough not to send itself toppling down a small flight of stairs.

The unit only got stuck once—between a wall and a bicycle tire. Try as it might, Scooba couldn't free itself and eventually gave up and

powered down until it was rescued.

After about 20 minutes of crawling around, Scooba had wiped the dining room spotless, even swallowing the brownie crumbs strategically tossed to test its thoroughness.

The self-cleaning only went so far. Scooba stopped about halfway through several tests with a small "check tank" display and a belly full of dirty water. The hood had to be removed and I dumped the waste water in the toilet before resuming.

When the cleaning was complete, Scooba needed a brush and belly scrubbing, meaning that when Scooba got dirty, I eventually got dirty.

And Scooba didn't exactly squeegee the floor dry, as advertised. Instead, it left a snail trail of cleaning solution. That dried quickly, however, leaving only a squeaky clean floor behind.

All told, Scooba still required far less manual labor than traditional floor cleaning.

I score this one a major victory for progress in task-oriented robotics. The price tag may scare away some potential buyers, but not having to scrub floors could make it well worth the price for many.

More information: www.irobot.com.