

# There's Something about Wood

SAWYER COMBINES INNOVATION WITH TRADITION

By Joe Jackson

## BE IT THE WAY IT STAYS WARM

in your hands, the manner in which it interacts with the water, or the dynamic shapes that wood grain makes on a paddle or oar—wood feels more traditional. There's the obvious factor that all of the original paddles were made out of wood. There's also the intangible fact that wood seems to have more soul than plastic.

Bruce Bergstrom, owner of Sawyer Paddles—the main manufacturer of oars in the United States—is keenly aware of the intricacies of the tradition.

He is reminded of it on a regular basis when asked to refurbish paddles that were created by Ralph Sawyer, the originator of the company, more than 30 years ago. “They want their old paddle refurbished

and do not even want to consider replacing it with a newer one,” says Bergstrom. “The memories of all the trips they have done together becomes a bond or tradition that they do not want to break.”

A company in the paddlesports industry cannot rely solely on tradition. The evolutionary nature of paddlesports maintains a necessity for change. Bergstrom meets this necessity by constantly innovating while not losing focus on Sawyer's rich history of producing wooden oars.

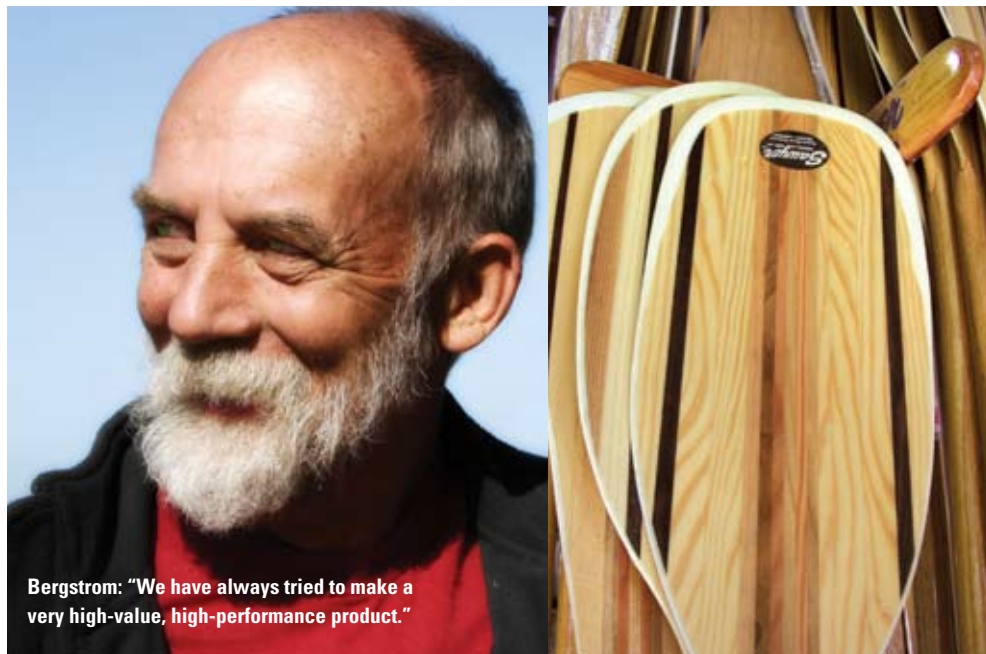
Sawyer remains traditional in its sales techniques, too. It has always had low-key marketing practices and owes much of its business to word-of-mouth buzz generated from positive experiences customers have had with their products.

“We have always tried to make a very high value, high performance product that we can be proud of,” says Bergstrom. “Thankfully we have a lot of customers that feel the same way.”

Ryan Allred, owner of Adventure Whitewater—a rafting outfitter in Ashland, Oregon—is one of the customers that Bergstrom refers to.

“I use Sawyer Paddles religiously,” says Allred. “Having a wooden blade that flexes properly feels great. It is less jarring on your body. Especially if you are paddling all day.”

Sawyer Paddles is a company built by resourceful people. Ralph Sawyer went into business in 1967 in Rogue River, Oregon. He created his paddles and oars from thin pieces of wood, which he purchased from local sawmills, along with fiberglass and resin to make them more durable. Sawyer's oars lent themselves to whitewater rafting because of



Bergstrom: “We have always tried to make a very high-value, high-performance product.”

their toughness, so the business blossomed along with the whitewater industry in southern Oregon.

Bergstrom discovered his capacity to build at a young age. He built his own kayak when he was just 12 and paddled it in southern Oregon's famous whitewater for a year and a half before he found someone to teach him how to roll. So in 1999, when Sawyer Paddles' main oarlock manufacturer told them they could no longer make them, Bergstrom decided it was time that Sawyer started making its own.

“We can't be the premier oar manufacturer and not have oarlocks,” says Bergstrom.

The result of that decision came three months later. The employees at Sawyer poured their experience manufacturing oars into developing new locks and came up with a revolutionary design. The design had wider sides than any other oarlock. The sides looked like a cobra head, so they named them Cobra Oar Locks. They dispersed the point load that oars put on locks, which made them quieter to operate and offered 15 to 20 degrees more range of motion for the oars.

There was one problem: the cost to manufacture these oarlocks was considerably higher than previous ones. “I figured no one would buy them because they were too expensive,” says Bergstrom, “but we put them on the market and they turned out to be huge sellers. We haven't looked back. Everyone realized that the real value is there.”

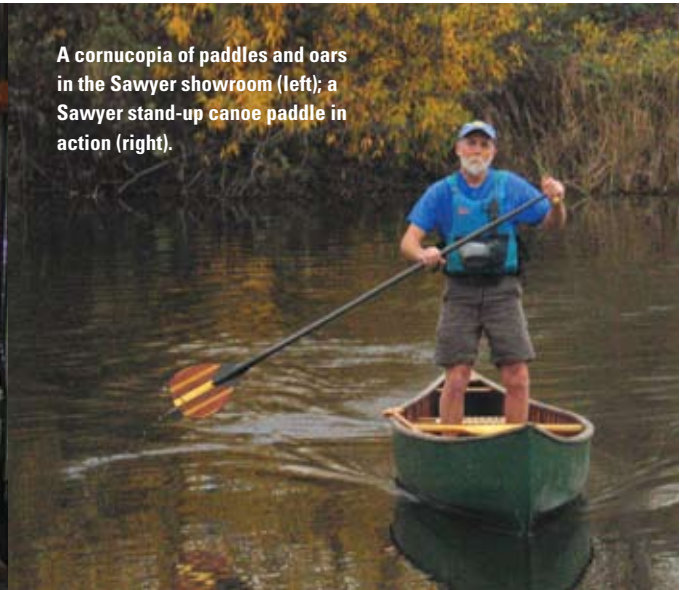
Cobra Oar Locks have since become an industry standard.

The base of Sawyer's progression in technology is Bergstrom's genuine

Photography Courtesy of Sawyer



A cornucopia of paddles and oars in the Sawyer showroom (left); a Sawyer stand-up canoe paddle in action (right).



love of the craft. He cannot hide his excitement while explaining—at length—the difference between a shoal-cut blade and a regular oar, or the point load an oar places on a lock. He is also an accomplished boater who tests his new products himself.

“Every spring I can expect to see him charging the (Class IV-V) Upper Scott (River),” says Allred.

“That (product testing) is why we do these trips!” says Bergstrom.

He describes a trip on the Owyhee River where he spent hours rowing with a shoal-cut oar in one hand and a regular one in the other so he could clearly feel the difference.

Bergstrom understands paddlers’ deep-rooted relationship with wood. He enjoys speaking about it but shares the problem of describing it. “I am afraid people will tune me out when I get started on wood,” says Bergstrom.

Beyond the tradition that wood represents, the comfort of the paddles, and the innovations in design, he understands that there is an intangible that draws paddlers to his product.

“They (wooden paddles and oars) almost seem at times to take on a life of their own,” says Bergstrom. “There is something about wood that stays alive.”



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