

Anderson in front of Villarica volcano between drops in Pucon, Chile.



Mr. Nice Guy

GORGE KAYAKING SCHOOL'S YOUNG OWNER IS GROWING HIS BUSINESS WITH A FOCUS ON FRIENDSHIP

By Joe Jackson

HALFWAY THROUGH ONE OF THE LAST DAYS IN NOVEMBER, Rush TV camera crews were filming Todd Anderson—the 23-year-old owner of Hood River, Oregon's Columbia Gorge Kayaking School—as he nervously peered down Middle Palguin Falls in Pucon, Chile. He had every right to be apprehensive; in minutes he planned to seal launch off the rock ledge perched above a small, tumultuous lead in to the 70-foot waterfall.

If you are one of the 150 or so students who will attend his kayaking school this year, you probably won't ever learn about this drop. In fact,

Anderson doesn't want you to. In the world of professional kayaking, where bragging rights and egos can make careers, the young entrepreneur has based his school's success around being humble, kind, and welcoming for the two years he has owned it.

In 2006, Anderson decided to buy Columbia Gorge Kayak School at the age of 21, after running it for a year as the top instructor. The Hood River local has since learned a lot about cutting-edge internet marketing, like search-engine optimization and website usability, but he maintains that his most effective business tool is cultivating a good personal rapport.

"A lot of success is based on the relationships I make," Anderson says. "It helps the business more than any other kind of marketing."

Photography by: Rodrigo Tuschner (above); Erik Boomer (right)

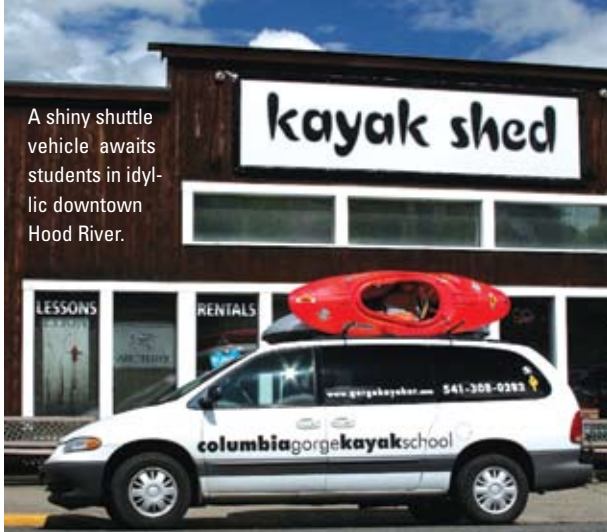
An important piece in the relationship maintenance is Anderson's pledge to remain modest about his other whitewater job and make sure that the instructors he hires do the same. It's Columbia Gorge Kayaking School's dirty little secret that its three top instructors—Anderson, Erik Boomer, and Christie Glissmeyer—are on the edge of extreme kayaking.

"He likes to keep attitudes out of it," says Boomer, who is also a sponsored kayaker and nursing student. While Boomer recently starred in the kayaking video *Pulse*, he is completely uninterested in sharing those experiences with students.

"These people are at peak adventure, so we don't want to scare them away," says Boomer. "We just like to share that [experience with them] as much as possible and help them with their skills."

Anderson is adamant that the focus remains on making students feel safe and relaxed rather than their instructors' whitewater prowess. "We are running big waterfalls and winning big races, but learning isn't about that," says Anderson. "We don't want people thinking that is what whitewater kayaking is; a majority of people want fun, recreational Class III. That's what we're trying to promote."

Anderson's kayak school curriculum, as well as the way he treats students, back up those words. His most popular, \$225 "Weekender" course offers students a half-day pool session to learn the rudimentary skills they will use during the second half of the day in the Class I rapids of the Hood River. Students spend the entire second day, Sunday, on the Class II section of the Klickitat River, enjoying and building on the skills



A shiny shuttle vehicle awaits students in idyllic downtown Hood River.

they learned on Saturday.

While this course is not revolutionary in how it is designed, Anderson seeks lasting friendships with his clients. This brings more students to the school through word-of-mouth referrals and also creates lasting devotees to the sport. Drew Baumchen, former district attorney for The Dalles, Oregon, is one of Anderson's success stories.

"We got off the water that [second] day and I was hooked," Baumchen says.

After taking any of Anderson's five course opportunities, students are strongly encouraged to attend "Wednesday Night Happy Hour," the free Class III paddling trips offered by the Kayak Shed, the local paddling shop downtown. Anderson takes time from training for extreme races to attend the Happy Hour and makes it a point to keep helping his past students.

"Even though it was not a formal get together, Todd was giving me pointers and advice," says Baumchen. "He is not getting any money out of it. He is genuinely concerned that I become a better boater."

Anderson does not try to sell more lessons at the Happy Hour; he just likes to see more kayakers on the water. "I wanna see people get into the sport for sure, [so] you can't charge people for every lesson. I think helping them get into that next step makes it much more possible."

Anderson's genuine kindness benefits his business in more ways than just attracting referred customers. Jon Hart, owner of Hood River's Kayak Shed, allows Anderson storage, office space, and a meeting place







A cart for every boat

and gear for every paddler.





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