

Paddling Pioneers: How ERA and Wave Sport Conquered New Frontiers in Whitewater Kayaking

For many new boaters, having a good time on Class II or III whitewater like the Nantahala is as good as it gets. You catch eddies, surf fun waves, maybe even jump in a big bubbly hole. You cheer on your friends or give them pointers on how to stay on longer, complete a flat spin, or get through a rapid more gracefully. At the end of a great day on the water, you hit the pub with your buddies, sharing food and drink and a river tale or two. You feel happy having enjoyed the great outdoors with good company in a tiny plastic boat. But you might not realize that the sport you enjoy so much looked a lot different not very long ago.

Breaking from Tradition

The year was 1993. Colorado-based kayak manufacturer Wave Sport, in business just six years, was exploring the marketplace east of the Mississippi. At the same time a small kayaking school called Endless River Adventures was being built high on a hill in the Nantahala Gorge.

Chan Zwanzig founded Wave Sport with the idea that it was time to break from tradition. "Prior to the mid 90s," explains Chan, "slalom was considered the pinnacle of athletic performance in whitewater kayaking." Although plastic boats had been introduced in the mid 70s many recreational whitewater kayaks were still made of fiberglass. Racing regulations dictated that slalom boats be 13 feet 2 inches long, and many recreational boats were only slightly shorter. A proud tradition in Europe, whitewater slalom emphasized precision and technical ability. The goal was to move a long, fragile boat through whitewater without touching any rocks or gates. In Chan's view, this had limited appeal in the United States. Something needed to change and, according to Chan, it was boat design.

When Chan met Endless River Adventures' cofounders Ken and Juliet Kastorff, Wave Sport had just four boat designs. Two were designed for larger boaters and two for smaller boaters, a novel concept at the time. They were plastic. At just over 11 feet long, the Wave Sport Lazer was a minor break from tradition but still strongly resembled a slalom boat, "because everything was based on slalom at the time," remembers Chan. "It took us a while to break the mold and make shorter boats. It wasn't a blinding revelation that we could do anything we wanted."

"I actually moved to the Nantahala Gorge with a Wave Sport Lazer," recalls Juliet. Told by southeastern boaters that the boat's raised seat, fashioned after racing kayaks, made it unstable, Juliet attempted to sell her Lazer at an end-of-the-year sale held at the Nantahala Outdoor Center. "My Lazer was one of only two boats that didn't sell by the end of the sale." On a later trip to Colorado, Juliet sold the boat for more than she paid for it.

Chan cites the 1993 Freestyle World Championships (the second such competition ever) as the true game changer in whitewater kayaking. Held on the Ocoee, the event featured cutting-edge moves like the cartwheel and really opened people's eyes to playboating.

A Partnership Emerges

Kayaking instruction was the main focus of Endless River Adventures at its inception. Neither Ken nor Juliet had any retail background. And they had major competition less than a mile down the road. The Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) was the largest whitewater outfitter in the country at the time. "As if it was not enough that we set up kayak instruction, here we were opening up a retail store, all a mile upstream of one of the largest. It didn't take long to find out about proprietary agreements with specialty retail items," explains Juliet. "We had no clue that if there is a store selling a brand, another

store couldn't open up down the street and sell the same one." NOC was selling Perception and Dagger—the two dominant brands of kayaks in the southeast—so those boats were off limits.

On past trips to Colorado, Ken and Juliet encountered Wave Sport boats and heard that people out west liked them. They told Chan that next time he came east they wanted to do business with him. He showed up at their doorstep with an initial lineup of designs that the two thought might not sell well east of the Mississippi. "But the designs were still cutting edge, and we saw a guy who believed in quality and innovation," recalls Juliet. Chan had done some business in the past with NOC but a relationship never developed. The small owner-operated Endless River Adventures seemed to offer the opportunity for collaboration that would enhance both parties and kayaking as a sport. "I was happy to work with somebody who had such a focus on customer service," remembers Chan.

"The raised seat of Chan's boats was a big issue because it raised a boater's center of gravity, making them less-stable. We told Chan he had to drop the seat because stability was a big sell in the shallower water of the southeast," remembers Juliet. "He listened and soon after came out with a modified drop seat option for us." This was the start of a unique decades-long relationship between outfitter and boat manufacturer.

It's Alive! The Frankenstein

The first boat born of this partnership was the appropriately named Frankenstein. At 9 feet 9 inches long, this "short" boat was recommended for rodeo, the original term for freestyle. The lowered seat gave it added stability for the shallower water of the east, but the boat didn't get the reception that Ken, Juliet, and Chan had hoped for. Dagger and Perception had a lot of industry loyalty, and it was hard to introduce a new product to the market. Even ERA at the time was instructing out of Dagger and Perception boats because they were the more recognized brands.

About two or three years into the relationship, a real transformation began to take place. Chan remembers, "ERA was so good about providing us feedback on what was making their customers happy and what wasn't. We had to recognize that kayaking wasn't about what we at Wave Sport thought it was about." Up until this time, Wave Sport's tag line had been "The proof is in the performance." Based on feedback coming from ERA, Chan discovered what to him was a new goal of kayaking: fun. "Ken and Juliet are really responsible for putting the fun in our sport. Up until that point it was all about technical performance and how well you could handle yourself going down river. Their students wanted to catch an eddy, ferry out, and surf a wave. They just wanted it to feel good."

Wave Sport next released the Kinetic and the Godzilla, two options that moved even further from the traditional slalom design. Then everything changed. Wave Sport came out with the X, a market-changer that had a flat planing hull, edges, and uneven distribution at the ends. "People started paying attention," remembers Juliet. It wasn't long before NOC approached Chan with an offer to start selling his boats. He declined out of loyalty to ERA.

Emphasis on Innovation

Wave Sport continued to innovate, releasing two new boat designs each year. "We sold a boat, improved it, and came out with another," explains Chan. "We spent a lot of money on research and development. Molds quickly became obsolete. It wasn't the most profitable, but I was still making some money and things were getting better every day for kayaking."

Around this time, Wave Sport also engaged in some pretty cutting-edge marketing efforts and began to build a culture around this new style of boating. Chan created a team of pro boaters to represent Wave Sport across the country. "We had seven men and seven women out there ripping it," he remembers. "We were dropping kegs in parking lots and partying on the weekends." Team Wave Sport attended festivals, socialized with other boaters, and even converted skateboarders into paddlers.

"They developed this really cool tribe around Wave Sport, and it was all positive," remembers Juliet. "They were really good boaters and good ambassadors. He even had females who rocked." At a time when boating was dominated by young males, a team of seven men and seven women really turned heads. Among their ranks was boater Eric Jackson, who would later found Jackson Kayaks.

The relationship between ERA and Wave Sport flourished. People were now asking for Wave Sport by name. "We started building boats that were more fun, and ERA started being able to sell boats better than the competition," says Chan. "We were even selling boats to guides who worked for the competition," recalls Chan. Juliet adds, "The introduction of the EZ series to this day still stands out in my mind: We got the EZs in the last weekend of October—no one had ever seen the boat on the water. People were lining up to buy them before we could even get them unloaded and the plastic off! Our business is based off word-of-mouth, and there was no more telling example of that than with the EZ." Endless River Adventures was quickly becoming one of the largest Wave Sport dealers in the world.

People and Paddling Trump Profit

"It was a huge gamble on our part to commit to one single kayak manufacturer," acknowledges Juliet. "Everyone warned us that if Wave Sport had a bad year or made a bad design, we'd be out of luck. But in 20 years, we've never had a bad year selling Wave Sport boats. The same was true for Chan; sticking with ERA was a huge gamble when he could have had the exposure of NOC."

But for Chan it wasn't about the profit. It was about paddling. "If I was having fun, I wanted everyone to have fun," he explains. "It's always meant more to me to watch someone do better, have more fun, accomplish something, than to actually engage in a commercial transaction."

"We just believe in loyalty," states Juliet. "We believe in partnerships with those who share the same commitments we do. Wave Sport helps us get people into the right boats for where they are in their paddling. Since day one, kayakers have trusted us more because we aren't just trying to be salespeople—we are instructors first. We know that if we give a kayaker the right product and the right instruction, we will see them work up to the Ocoee from the Nantahala, and then join us in Costa Rica or Ecuador. We have people who have been our customers since the day our doors opened—only now they are showing up with their kids!"

Chan sums it up this way: "Ken and Juliet and I have fundamentally similar underlying mentalities and ethics. We relate to people. We want them to do well and have fun. And coincidentally we were both very successful companies. That success was founded on our relationships with our customers who were paddlers, who were like us because we were paddlers."

A New Kind of Relationship

In 1999, several whitewater kayak manufacturing companies were purchased by a group of investment bankers, Wave Sport among them. A new company, Confluence Watersports, combined eight boat brands under one roof. No longer were boat makers actually boaters themselves. A new emphasis on profitability resulted. Would this be the end of the unique partnership between Wave Sport and ERA?

"There was a time when the CEO of Wave Sport would sit on our porch and say 'Tell us what we need to be doing differently,'" remembers Juliet. "When Wave Sport moved its headquarters to North Carolina, they would invite us over for product meetings. They wanted to know what real boaters were looking for in kayaks." While the CEO of Confluence has yet to sit on ERA's porch, the outfitter still provides invaluable input on boat designs and paddler needs.

"It's definitely different," reports Juliet. "But the people on the ground floor still look to be innovative and open minded, and they're really good at knowing that we are the go-to people." New boats now come out about every three to four years, instead of twice a year, but Juliet says that's often enough given how good the designs are.

And Chan? While he hasn't had direct involvement in boat manufacturing for over a decade, he still keeps in touch with Ken and Juliet.

The Next Generation of Boats and Boaters

Interestingly enough, kayaking as a sport has held steady in the 20 years since Endless River Adventures began. It hasn't shrunk, nor has it exploded to become part of mainstream America. It's a tight-knit community of perhaps 200,000 fun-loving individuals nationwide who just can't seem to get enough moving water.

Nowadays, you aren't likely to find Team Wave Sport with a keg at the take-out, but you'll still find new boat designs and new ways to enjoy whitewater. After innovations over the last decade saw boats about as short as they could get, Wave Sport released the Diesel, a forgiving river runner that allowed participants to learn the sport more quickly and be more comfortable in a boat. Today's boaters are as likely to be a mother and/or father and children as they are young hardcore males shooting Class V rapids.

Last year, ERA expanded its shop into a larger retail space with added offerings for kayakers and fly fishers alike. They've come a long way since their humble beginnings as a small unknown kayaking school in the Nantahala Gorge. But some things haven't changed. You'll still receive a warm welcome and a seat on the porch, just as you would have 20 years ago.

So next time you're tearing it up in a hole or executing a spectacular stern squirt, think of Endless River Adventures and Wave Sport. These are some of the daring individuals in the whitewater industry who paved the way for you, who did what had never been done, who took a gamble whether it was a "good business decision" or not, who innovated to the extreme, and contributed to making whitewater kayaking what it is today.