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A second generation of Masters brings new sport to water with Bellyak

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Outdoor Headlines

A familiar name in the industry is bringing a new water sport and equipment to the outdoor retail market this summer.

Adam Masters, son of Perception Kayaks founder Bill Masters, is set to debut **Bellyak**, a new equipment company for the sport of bodyboating — best described as a cross between kayaking and riverboarding.

The idea for Bellyak arose while Masters was playing around with his father's kayaks on the creek one day, riding them in any fashion he could, including lying down face first.



“I had a blast,” he said. “It was Class 5 whitewater fun on Class 2 water.”

Of course, kayaks weren't designed to be ridden on one's belly, so Masters went to work modifying the boats with everything from plastic sheets to duct tape.

“I cut up every kayak I owned,” he said. “I had to find a way to get my center of gravity lower.”

By September 2010, Masters had several prototypes, honing in on what made for the best ride. As he and his wife Anna shared the sport and equipment with friends, they could see a wider audience developing.

“People who would never try kayaking, were trying this,” he said. “With kayaking they'd say, 'I'd love to try, but I don't want to feel trapped.' Bellyak eliminates the spray skirt from the equation. It offers a lot of freedom. It's primarily intended to be ridden on your belly, but it's easy to switch to your knees or sit. You have a pair of webbed gloves, a life jacket and a helmet, and away you go.” *(Click on the YouTube video below from Bellyak demonstrating the equipment and sport.)*

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The market, Masters said, is for people who want a fun way to go down the river without a huge learning curve. It's the same reason why stand-up paddleboarding has taken off, he said. "If you fall off, it's easy to hop back on." The boat's design uses the body's center of gravity to keep the rider anchored inside, along with handles up front and foot cups in the back. It's different from riverboarding in that the rider's whole body is out of the water: "You're not dragging your legs and feet."

The sport is intended for Class 2, 3 and 4 water, but Masters is anxious to get the product into the hands of some expert riders to see what they can do. "I do think there are some limitations," he said. "Going headfirst down a waterfall probably isn't something your health insurance company wants to know about."



In June 2011, Masters upgraded to more professional CAD digital designs of the product, developing two versions — the Frequency (MSRP: \$749), which includes a hatch for storage and foot cups for fast river running, and the Play (MSRP: \$699), designed for more action in surf. Masters said Bellyak targeted the approximate pricetags below those of kayaking to reiterate the point of the sport's greater accessibility.

Bellyak is co-owned by Adam and Anna (*photo, left, in the factory*) and it employs four people in a 2,500-square-foot space in Asheville, N.C. The company does all the model and design work, contracts to manufacture the products within the United States, and then handles assembly and distribution.

Masters said he's relied on the inspiration and expertise from some of those who did business with his father, Bill, who founded Perception Kayaks in 1975, before selling it to Confluence Watersports' Watermark in 1998. One of Bill's first employees at Perception and Adam's uncle, Allen Stancil (who cofounded Liquid Logic), has been a key adviser to Bellyak as an expert model maker, Adam said.

Bellyak's first products will be available to retailers in June, ready for sale to consumers in July. The new company will exhibit at Outdoor Retailer Summer Market, Aug. 2-5, 2012.

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There's only one size of each Bellyak product to start, with the Frequency suitable for people from 5 foot, 2 inches to 6 foot, 4 inches and the Play able to support a person up to 215 pounds.

Masters said the company is already looking ahead to 2013 and beyond with plans for kid's model and licensing its own brand of webbed gloves. In the meantime, it's about putting the word out and getting people interested.

"It offers a new middle path for people with a lot of versatility and freedom," Masters said. "This opens watersports to a whole new group of people."

--David Clucas

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SNEWS® Editorial Contact Information:

Mail: 2520 55th Street, Suite 210, Boulder, CO 80301
Phone: (530)-268-8295
General SNEWS® email: snewsbox@snewsnet.com
Press Release and news email: news@snewsnet.com

SNEWS® Subscription Sales Contact Information:

sales@snewsnet.com

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