



WILL ALLISON

{BORN NOVEMBER 16, 1950}

{INDUCTED IN 2005}

By Pete Viele

Gingerly maneuvering around the 12-foot foam blank that takes up nearly the entire bay of his home shaping shack, Will Allison glances down the nose of an enormous would-be stand-up paddleboard. "It's for a fisherman down in Alabama who wants to glide quietly in the flats, not ride waves," Allison laments, sliding his hands across the foam. "So I have to make a bit of a hull at the nose. It's a lot of work."

"George Downing showed me how to make these properly," Allison continues, referring to the legendary paddleboard maker and one of many friends he's made during his years on the North Shore. The fact that he decided to make such an obtrusive non-surfcraft reveals much about his character, seeing as how most shapers would scoff at the offer. Yet the soft-spoken, longhaired, mustachioed Will Allison politely obliges. It's this Southern Boy piety that has granted him access to some of the best shapers on the planet, allowing him to cruise the globe since the mid 1960s surfing, shaping, judging pro contests, and quietly becoming an East Coast legend along the way.

Born and raised in Wilmington, NC, Allison grew up surfing the surrounding beaches, immediately forming an affinity and skill for the sport. "It was about late '63 when I started surfing, and by '64, I was consumed by it," he says. That consumption led him to win dozens of surf contests, taking top honors at the East Coast Championships and United States Championships multiple times and earning a spot on the coveted Dewey Weber surf team. Allison's prowess garnered respect, but he maintains that his surfing grew because of the peers he was surrounded by, including legendary North Carolina surfer Buddy Pelletier.

But Allison's first two seasons on the North Shore really shaped his surfing and persona. By the mid '70s, the shortboard revolution was in full swing, and as evidenced by recent movies such as *Bustin' Down The Door*, the North Shore was a dangerous place for white surfers. But the Southern humility and positive attitude that Will and his buddies kept up while visiting Hawaii earned them a place in the lineup. "We were just trying to survive," Allison remembers. "When we saw the waves in person for the first time, it was scary — and then to see guys like Jock Sutherland, Gerry Lopez, and Jeff Hakman out there going for it... you couldn't help but be influenced and challenged by that. We just tried to be friendly and cooperative; we didn't pose a threat, because those guys were so much better than us, so we goofed around and made fun of ourselves, and I think they liked that."

Allison also believes that the good ol' boy attitude allowed him the chance to meet some of his heroes and future shaping influences like Tom Parrish, George Downing, and David Nuuhawa. "I would go right up and talk to some of these guys," Allison says. "I'd ask about boards and design and they would open right up, giving me a lot of insight." With surfboard design changing rapidly during this era, and the waves standing taller than anything he had ever seen in person, Allison rose to the challenge, mastering the North Shore's massive surf while also managing to evolve and ride a multitude of different shapes. It was this time spent in Hawaii that would inspire Will and give him enough motivation to get through the coming years.

Spending the majority of his adolescence raking in titles and becoming a recognized figure in East Coast surfing, Allison was accustomed to the notoriety. But he soon realized that surfing would not provide much of a career. Only the top professionals were making anything close to a living back then, so Will decided that he would have to take another route, prompting him to earn both an Associate's Degree in Marine Technology and a Bachelor's in Marine Biology. After graduation, an offer came through to take a job in Louisiana working on a surveying boat. While he still maintained a connection to the ocean, his first love of surfing took a back seat to workaday necessity.



Studying up on the styles of the day at Atlantic Beach, NC, circa 1966



Snagging some Leftovers on the North Shore, circa 1975

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The long days in the hot, sticky bayou were difficult, but the work allowed Allison a few long weekends and extended vacation time. He used these weekends to hop in the car and visit his friend Pete Dooley of Natural Art Surfboards in Florida, and Dooley eventually encouraged Allison to take up shaping during his free time, giving him his first blank. He took the materials back to Louisiana and quickly built his first board. "I always wanted a Lightning Bolt surfboard, but could never afford one," Will points out. "I loved Tom Parrish's shapes and was able to rekindle my affinity for his boards by trying to make similar ones, so when Pete suggested it, it seemed like a natural progression for me."

Allison honed his shaping chops quickly, putting his Marine Technology degree and years of surfing to work. "I was back and forth to Florida during my couple of years in Louisiana," he says. "Finally, I was able to break free from my job and move over there, where I started working in Charlie Baldwin's factory. Things just started taking off from there. It's such a neat vocation, because you're always learning. It's a constant quest to get better, kind of like with surfing."

Upon moving back into the surfing world, Will discovered that he could, in fact, make a career out of his love, and Allison Surfboards officially began. "I've been really lucky to forge friendships with some of the great surfers like David (Nuuhiva) and shapers like Tom (Parrish) and Bear Mirandon," he says. "We constantly learn from one another and discuss design." Allison has since taken the classic approach, handshaping each blank from start to finish while also applying his signature aesthetic learned in Hawaii, with floral cloth inlays, resin tints, and retro outlines taking prominence. The trademark Allison Surfboards seahorse logo is indicative of his personality, and the former Marine Biology major points out, "The seahorse is a mellow creature that's very unique."

As Allison Surfboards gained momentum, Will was able to spend more time in the water and relocate to his hometown of Wilmington. "I'm a country boy," he says, "and Wilmington has always been home to me." Will continued to compete, and in 1980 was invited to France for the World Surfing Championships as a member of the U.S. Team, alongside a young Tom Curren. Allison recalls the trip as one of his favorites: "We rented a car in Bayonne with a couple of the Hawaiian guys and started exploring the coast," he remembers. "We went down to Spain and surfed Mundaka, where the locals kept asking me who the black guys were. When I told them they were Hawaiians, they were stoked, because they had never seen them before."

As the 1980s wore on, high performance surfing on thrusters was taking center stage, and the professional surfing circuit reached a pinnacle of national attention, with major corporate sponsors backing the contests and events being broadcast on television, day-glo spandex trunks, webbed gloves and all. The Association of Surfing Professionals had formed in 1982, and Will Allison played an integral part of the circuit, getting recruited as a professional judge. Allison helped determine the outcome of some of the most memorable events from the '80s, such as the Stubbies Pro, the OP Pro, and the infamous Allentown, PA, wave tank debacle that led to Tom Carroll's ASP World Championship win in 1983. Will spent 10 years traveling as a judge, and says of the experience, "I made a ton of friends, traveled a lot, and I still like to keep up with the World Tour — I'm glued to the computer for all the contests now."

Today, nearing age 59, Will Allison continues handshaping boards in his home shaping shack that overlooks the Intracoastal Waterway in Wilmington. He rides just about every single type of watercraft imaginable, takes regular trips with the family back to his second home on the North Shore, and lives a conservationist lifestyle that started long before it was trendy to "go green." He's as stoked as ever, and with an eye on the past and his mind in the future, Allison continues to evolve as a surfer and shaper happy to experiment with new designs. "I'm loving the quads right now," he gushes. "They're so fast, but can turn on a dime — perfect for the waves around here." That kind of personal flair, combined with his Southern grace and humility, has allowed Will Allison to carve his own place in East Coast surfing history as a professional judge, acclaimed surfer, and renowned shaper.



Runnin' and gunnin' at Pavones, Costa Rica, circa 2008



Inside Allison Surfboards headquarters, circa 2009

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