



It's not a stretch to call Svein Rasmussen the leader of a cult. He's got all the signs. Unbridled enthusiasm. Outlandish ideas. A corporate compound in a far-off land. Followers who tattoo his brand's logo on their bodies. He's one of the most widely recognized windsurfers in the world, and possesses the mind responsible for some of the craziest ideas our sport has ever seen. But is Svein Rasmussen selling us the future of windsurfing — or is he selling us the next windsurfing gimmick?

# SVEIN RASMUSSEN IS A MADMAN

BY JOSH SAMPIERO

## SVEIN RASMUSSEN IS INSANE.

There's almost no question Svein Rasmussen is a little nuts. You get the first inkling of this quickly — when he says hello. It's midnight when I land at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Thailand, and Svein is as wired as a 14-year-old on a sugar binge. We barrel through an army of scooters into the Bangkok traffic and Svein is already talking windsurfing.

Svein has lived for windsurfing ever since he first saw a picture of Matt Schweitzer cruising on a lake in a 1976 edition of *National Geographic Kids* magazine. It took two years of delivering newspapers for Svein to save up to purchase his first windsurfer at the age of 15, and another year before he made it to the Windsurfer World Championships in Greece. For the next 15 years, he traveled the world competing as a professional windsurfer, until at the age of 31 he decided it was time to make a strategic shift in his life plan: He would no longer race windsurfers. He would make better boards to race.

In my time at the Starboard complex, I see there is one thing Svein is not intimately familiar with: sleep. When we arrive at Svein's home, he shows me to a bedroom so I can rest after the 30 hours of travel it has taken me to get to Bangkok. Svein's house is famous among

those in the windsurfing industry who have had the opportunity to visit. It's big by Bangkok standards, but not vulgarly so — a clean, modern design with dark wood and lots of glass. The house is made for entertaining. Apart from the 20-person dinner table, pool and hot tub, there are three bedroom suites upstairs, and from what I understand, they're constantly occupied by visitors to Starboard headquarters. As I nod off to sleep, I can hear Svein pacing around downstairs, and in the morning he's up early. When I wake up, I walk out on the balcony that overlooks Lake Taco, across which sits Starboard's office and design shop, and I see Svein stand-up paddling across the lake with his laptop bag slung over his shoulder.

By windsurfing standards — by almost any standards — Lake Taco is fairly unimpressive, 30 or 40 acres at most. The water looks muddy and dingy. As for wind — well, the most notable thing is that circling the lake is a cable system developed to pull water skiers and wakeboarders — and wakeboarders aren't inclined to put cable systems on lakes that get lots of wind. Eight knots would be considered a healthy breeze on Lake Taco, and it doesn't happen often. Yes, Svein and the windsurfing team have taken pulls around the lake on a windsurfing board. If you want more wind,

there's the coast at Pattaya — don't worry, Svein's got a big house there too — where a thermal effect sometime draws in a very light sea breeze.

So why is one of the world's biggest windsurfing companies located in a place that, for all practical matters, has very little windsurf-able wind? The original reason is a little obscure: the Cobra factory, which makes Starboard's boards (and nearly every other major brand's too), is located in Bangkok, just a few miles down the street from Starboard headquarters. The proximity to the board factory makes for faster turnaround on R&D (of which Starboard does a lot) and, Starboard claims, better quality control on the product.

The interesting question, however, is not why Starboard is located in Bangkok, but how this has shaped its business model and vision as a company. In many ways, placing headquarters in a light-wind location was the best decision Svein could have made. While Starboard's high-wind, freestyle and wave boards perform admirably and as well as any other board company's gear, it is with light-wind gear that Starboard has really developed a reputation for creating unique products. The fact that the R&D center and headquarters are in an area

PHOTO: COURTESY STARBOARD

## MISTAKES OF A MESSIAH

Part of what makes Svein an easy man to like is his transparency in business and his willingness to admit that every board might not be perfect for everybody. The willingness to admit to – and learn from – mistakes is part of what makes Starboard successful, and of what makes us trust Rasmussen as someone we can listen to. No one else in the windsurfing industry is as willing and eager to hear what didn't work about his gear. Even if he doesn't agree with that opinion, he's damn sure to find out why you thought that way – because he thinks it's going to help him build a better board next time.

Here are three boards that have been pulled from the Starboard lineup – and how they affected shapes in the future.

### Starboard Compact

The idea behind the Compact was a highly transportable windsurfing board for city-dwellers who commuted to work via public transportation. While lighter sailors (especially kids) loved the board, other sailors found it a supreme challenge to even get going. "When heavier and taller sailors got on board, it was hard to get planing and became directionally unstable. We learned that taller sailors need longer boards, and we started to use weight jackets to monitor the weight differentiation."



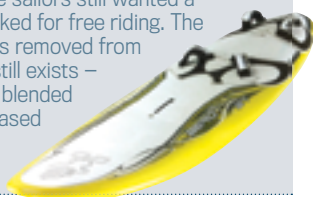
### Starboard Hypersonic

A super-stubby shape with extreme double concaves designed as a one-board solution for slalom racers. Fast? Absolutely. Easy to use? Arguable. Jibing? That definitely took talent. The Hypersonic was a love-it-or-hate-it board for many sailors – but after two versions, it was gone from the line, in favor of the less-radical iSonic (which, although it still owed much of its short and stubby shape to the Hypersonic, was easier to sail and offered better performance – albeit in a narrower range).



### Starboard Aero

Before the SUP craze, Starboard looked to improve light-wind wave sailing with the Aero – a rockered-out, high-volume shortboard. It worked in waves, but it didn't plane as early as other shortboards of similar volume. Turned out lots of those light-wind wave sailors still wanted a board that worked for free riding. The Aero model was removed from the line, but it still exists – the shape was blended into the re-released Carve series.



So after Svein convinced us that we could plane in lighter winds than ever before, he wants to remind us that we don't need to plane to have fun windsurfing.

"The crossover potential between windsurfing and paddle boarding holds great promise," says Svein. Bringing back the simple fun of windsurfing as it was before the shortboard revolution is the goal. Svein's mission now is the same as ever: to introduce as many people to the sport of windsurfing as possible, and he's making a heavy bet on SUP to help him do it.

Starboard's SUP line now rivals its windsurfing line in size, and all but the pure SUP race-division boards are built with a mast track or plug for screwing in your mast base. Will SUP sailing save windsurfing? Like everything in windsurfing, only time on the water will tell.

If it means new windsurfers come to the sport en masse, we're ready to hear the gospel. For Svein, it all starts with new ideas — it's just going to take us a little while to get there: "The difference between crazy and normal," says Svein, "is often simply a matter of time." ✖

## IS STARBOARD COBRA? (OR DOES COBRA OWN STARBOARD?)

The proximity to Cobra fuels a common rumor that Starboard owns part of Cobra – or the other way around. As I said before, Svein's a pretty straight-up guy, so I just maintained my usual disregard for tactful behavior and asked him. Here's what he had to say: "I am not a shareholder of Cobra and Cobra is not a shareholder of Starboard, but we have enjoyed a fruitful journey together. When I landed in Thailand in 1994 Cobra was producing 6,000 windsurfing boards per year

and Starboard was not yet a brand. Both companies have come a long way. Cobra has created what is currently the best and most reliable manufacturing base for windsurfing boards." Well, that answered our question. So could Svein use that longstanding, fruitful relationship to get me a tour of the Cobra factory? Well, a short-notice visit by the windsurfing press didn't seem to be in the works this particular trip. But hey – it didn't hurt to ask.

➤ Svein, on an early Starboard GO, shows us that wide boards can carve.



PHOTO: COURTESY STARBOARD



Listen to Svein Rasmussen. He's a preacher, and Starboard is his pulpit. Whether he is the originator of some of the most revolutionary ideas in windsurfing is up for debate. But his talent for disseminating those ideas to the windsurfing public is not. Svein convinced us that wide boards would work. He beseeched us to teach beginners. But most importantly, his Starboards started winning races and making windsurfing easier than ever to learn. Svein Rasmussen may already have saved windsurfing once. Now he's trying to save it again.

# SVEIN RASMUSSEN IS A *messiah*

BY JOSH SAMPIERO

## SVEIN RASMUSSEN IS A SAVIOR.

The first Starboard appeared in 1994 and didn't look all that different from other boards of that era. It was just 58 centimeters wide, and laid claim to being the lightest production board ever built at 5.4 liters (about 14 pounds). With Svein, a racer at heart, at the helm, Starboard made its biggest name for itself with the advent of Formula boards, and the company's early successes were based largely on the boards' success on the race course. In 2000, the top six Formula racers in the world were on Starboards. Windsurfing was mired in wind-snob heaven, and in hindsight, the wide-board revolution was a major kick in the pants for windsurfing. While many industry figures played fundamental roles in the story, Svein stands out as one of the earliest and most vocal supporters of experimenting with previously unconsidered board shapes. It was all about speed and planing, but the early gear didn't work in light air. Svein recognized the need to plane in light air.

An air of transparency and inclusivity pervades the atmosphere around Starboard headquarters. The only one with an office to himself is Svein; and he's rarely in it. Meetings take place in hallways, in the shaping area, on the water. I'm on the compound for but a few

minutes when I'm pulled into a very earnest discussion led by a graphic designer who has three new paint and design schemes leaned up against a wall. Bright greens, reds and oranges — lots of neon in testament to windsurfing's heyday — adorn a Starboard Kode prototype. I'm asked my opinion on which look is better, and barely sum up my thoughts before somebody else — someone from the kite team, no less, is lassoed into the conversation. Deliberation continues, with everyone given an equal chance to offer an opinion. This is how many decisions are made at Starboard — if John Locke were to describe it, it would be an impromptu democracy with a benevolent dictator. Nobody on the Starboard compound is without a voice — even visitors — and the people who work there are treated like family.

Long after my visit to Bangkok is over, I see the final version of the Kode — a further iteration of the designs we were examining that day — in Starboard's new press release. From the industry insider's point of view, there's one thing Starboard does very well that has absolutely nothing to do with how fast its boards sail or how easy they are to use: It makes a buzz. With each new board line, the Starboard marketing machine goes into overdrive — press releases, photo shoots, micro-sites,

the works — to build anticipation before the product is even in the hands of consumers (or, for that matter, magazine board testers). Part of this stems from Svein's natural tendency for windsurfing evangelism learned in promoting the wide-board revolution in the late 1990s — it has also proved to be a successful business tactic, assuring Starboard's position in the windsurfing industry. But ultimately, a successful product is what makes a great windsurfing brand, and Starboard has had plenty of those. One of the landmark boards was the Starboard GO, the first wide-style free-ride board. Another was the Carve, an immensely user-friendly free-ride shortboard. The GO was a beginning windsurfer's dream board — easy to balance on, quick to plane, and it worked with a wide range of sail sizes, while the Carve provided GO riders a logical next step into shortboard windsurfing. While Starboard's Formula boards cemented its reputation in the racing scene, it was the recreational boards that drove sales numbers.

So what's Svein's take on the wide-board revolution he helped create? "We went too far." Huh? A messiah admitting he made a mistake? Svein continues: "In all the focus on early planing, we forgot how much fun it is simply to glide along in the water."

PHOTO: MARGARETA ENGSTROM

## RAMBLINGS OF A MADMAN

### On windsurfing and religion:

Windsurfing might arguably for some be similar to a religion or cult. One may get peace from time on water or experience divine greatness by playing with nature. It is a source of power and energy playing a big role in people's lives – at least in mine.

### On what windsurfing needs:

We need great gear for growing our sport. Starboard would like to make better gear for people getting into the sport. Equipment for planing and nonplaning conditions is still a missing link. Within the next five to 10 years it will be the largest part of our sport.

### On what isn't windsurfing:

Both Jim Drake and I believe that if we attached a two-horsepower electric outboard motor onto a Formula board we would create the earliest-planing, most fuel-efficient boat ever. As we are into windsurfing, we will leave it to others to figure out!

### On light-air sailing:

Lakes used to be full of windsurfers. Light winds did not stop them from having fun gliding around. Lots of sailors did not want to go to the sea, as rough water and strong wind made the sport less attractive to them. That's how the Serenity concept was born.

with light winds provided all the inspiration Starboard needed. These were windsurfers, and they needed the right gear to enjoy the wind they had in their backyard — real-world windsurfing. Svein's crazy idea — to put a windsurfing R&D center in a place that rarely had strong winds, while the rest of the industry based their R&D in heavy-air windsurfing destinations, proved to be a smart move — it has kept Starboard at the forefront of the industry in introducing new boards that perform in light air.

There have been failures. Boards that didn't work. Ideas that never made it off the drawing board. Expensive investigations into new materials — attempts to make boards faster, livelier, better — that didn't pan out. Behind the workshop and warehouse lies what employees refer to as "the graveyard." To me, it looks more like a board war zone, with board carcasses strewn about a windsurfing battlefield. At Starboard headquarters, guests and their ideas are treated with reverence — boards are not. Part of that



### IS STARBOARD RUINING WINDSURFING?

Despite Svein's stated intentions to grow the sport and make it accessible to anyone, you could also argue that Starboard's push for innovation and improvement on already fantastic gear is leading windsurfing into a self-destructive arms race. At some point, you've got to ask which is more important to invest money in: creating the next best windsurfing board, or creating a stronger infrastructure to encourage windsurfing through shops and schools, events and demos, and

spreading windsurfing through the mainstream media. Svein is clearly following the *Field of Dreams* mantra: If he builds it, they will come. He has no doubt we can make windsurfing easier by inventing new gear, and he has no intention of slowing down his efforts to do so. Starboard's effort with light-wind, learner-friendly gear in the past two years — including sailable SUP boards — shows significant follow-through of his stated intentions. Now let's just hope he's right.

may be because of the pure volume of boards that Starboard produces — 150,000 since its inception in 1994, making it the biggest board producer in the world — but mostly it's because each board is only a stepping stone to the next best thing. Svein has never made a board that wasn't, at some point in its life, going to be up for improvements — and Svein has never had an idea that he didn't want to try.

That's Svein the madman. The 15-foot-long, razor-thin Starboard Serenity that cuts through the water like a knife! The barn-door-wide Apollo that planes before any board ever built! The Serenity — a fantastically fun board to sail in the right wind range — remains a novelty on American beaches, drawing curious onlookers wherever one shows up, and while many people try it, few own it. It's too specialized, difficult to sail, and really difficult to transport (trust us on this one). The Apollo is on the opposite end of the spectrum — I've tried it, and it really is the earliest-planing board every built; but it's not something I'd own in my quiver, and I doubt many sailors would. Svein tells me that the Serenity board has proven popular the world over

📍 **Lake Taco, Bangkok — home to Starboard headquarters.**

(popular enough that Starboard has no plans to pull it from the line, and has even introduced an updated version that's easier to sail) but it's tough to call it a mainstream board. Despite the somewhat enigmatic meaning of the two words stamped on every board in the Starboard lineup — "innovation quality" — it's tough not to give credit for embracing that mindset. Boards like the Serenity or the Apollo help maintain Starboard's image as an on-the-front-lines windsurfing company working on advancing the sport through innovation in board design. As for the debate whether Starboard's outlandish designs are advancing the sport or selling windsurfers the next gimmick to make a buck? Svein himself, in his noble intentions, would be confused by the question. He's just an overly curious windsurfer who's given himself the means to try anything he wants, and when he likes it, he makes more. If you want to play, you're welcome to join the fun. And yeah, you can drink the Kool-Aid.

PHOTO: JOSH SAMPIERO