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Creating a surfboard is an art, not a science

By Amber Ambrose

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Surfer Jarrod Guidry rides a board made by Pearson in Playa Negra, Costa Rica. Photo: Stonefishfoto.com / HC



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[Stephen Pearson](#) is an artist. His medium is heavy-duty Styrofoam, and his work is not meant to be hung on a wall. In fact, the less time his artwork is indoors, the better.

Pearson's passion is crafting custom surfboards, second only to his love of surfing itself.

When he's not working his day job as a construction project coordinator for [M.D. Anderson Cancer Center](#) or searching for rideable waves, Pearson is most likely inside a hot workshop in Spring Branch, which he shares with another surfboard shaper, [Bryson "B.J" Williamson](#), a pioneer in the Texas surfing community and founder of the now-closed chain BJ's [Surf Shop](#).

More Information
Want to try surfing in Texas?
When to go: The best, most consistent surf comes around in the fall, winter and spring, Pearson says. Summer conditions are more dependent on tropical storms and depressions, though smaller waves are good for beginners.

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Where to go: Local surfers say the best spots are off South Padre Island. Corpus Christi, Surfside and Matagorda also are good areas. Galveston also is popular when conditions are right.
 What to have: A thick, buoyant long board with a soft foam top, to soften blows, is best for beginners. Pearson also recommends surf lessons, along with a willingness to learn.

Pearson got into surfing as a teenager after his sister's then-boyfriend brought up the subject.

"He surfed, and he was from Florida. He gave me and my brother some surfing magazines, and it just kind of progressed from there," Pearson says. "I've been surfing since I was 17. I'm 43 now. My background and my nature is to build things, so I have a friend that came to town in 2001 with some materials (for surfboards) and from there it took off."

Surfers like to get custom boards to match their size and ability, Pearson says, adding that a board also can be designed for a particular style of surfing as well as different types of waves.

Pristine white rectangles called blanks lean against a far wall of the cluttered but comfortable warehouse, awaiting their turn inside the shaping room. In this state, they are no match for any ocean wave.

The best boards for the Texas Gulf Coast's relatively small, weak waves are made from polyurethane, or as Pearson calls it, "old-school foam." But his preferred material is EPS Epoxy, which he describes as "basically industrial-grade beer-cooler foam." On rare occasions he'll shape a board from balsa wood, but the wood is expensive, the boards are ill-suited for the region, and surfers, Pearson says, are notoriously cheap. He declined to say how much he charges for a custom board or how many he makes in a year.

Whatever the material, the process of creating a board is the same: Pearson lays out a design; selects a blank, typically 5 feet to 11 feet long; sculpts the blank into the proper shape; smooths out the bumps; then shapes the sides, called rails. The board is then ready for finish shaping.

"You make sure that all the flats and curves blend together and that it is symmetrical and go through a series of grits of sandpaper," Pearson says. "The smoother you get it, the better the shape turns out. Then it's laminated with epoxy (to seal and waterproof it)."

No matter whether he's making a finished long board or short, high-performance board, he says it takes more than skill to create a surfboard.

"It's an artistic craft, and there's no science to it. Boards are psychological," Pearson says. "For hard-core surfers, if they believe in a board, they make it work. It's more the attitude. As somebody that shapes, you try to give them what they want, but you also try to push them in the direction to give them what they need. You don't want to be an arrogant artist."

Pearson takes four to 10 weeks to complete a board, depending on the ocean.

"I work on nights and weekends ... when there's no surf," he says.

[Amber Ambrose](#) is a freelance writer living in Houston.

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