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Diane Mastrull: Riding the crest of a surfer's dream



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For those who awaken thinking the New Year's holiday holds no parade of relevance but the Mummers' march, an engineer for a Burlington County small business has this to share:

A dog will surf on what is being billed as the world's longest and heaviest float - Guinness Book certification pending - in the 123d Tournament of Roses Parade airing from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday on NBC10.

But forget the dog. Sea Box Inc. in Cinnaminson wants you to pay attention to the technology behind the wave.

It's the creation of American Wave Machines Inc., of Solana Beach, Calif., whose founder, Bruce McFarland, is the mind behind some of the most creative and difficult projects produced at Sea Box, a manufacturer of customized shipping containers used from circuses to war zones.

And Sea Box has played a role in helping McFarland, a surfing enthusiast, develop and improve on his wave technology since 1999.

Back then, Sea Box owner Jim Brennan helped McFarland design a large mobile wave machine. The solution to moving it around the world was to use shipping containers as the basic structure - about six or eight of them, each 40 feet long, connected together to hold the water.

At the time, Sea Box was much smaller, both in sales and physical space. So the construction work went to a company in South Carolina. Brennan was put in charge of ideas and sales.

Thus was McFarland introduced to the world of shipping



Go, Moondoggie? A lab tests Bruce McFarland's Tournament of Roses Parade float. Sea Box has been working with McFarland since 1999.

1 of 4

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containers and Brennan introduced to a design engineer he decided he could not do without: "I thought he was brilliant."

So Brennan offered the California-based McFarland a job at Sea Box, allowing him to work from home and e-mail his shipping-container designs to New Jersey.

By 2005, McFarland needed Sea Box's help again. He had designed a surf machine that worked with deeper water and made a more natural wave, and needed a full-scale prototype to market it to hotels, resorts, and water parks.

Again he went to Brennan, who, McFarland said, was "excited to build anything that you could make out of a shipping container."

What emerged is what American Wave Machines markets as the Surfstream. It came to life on land Brennan first had graded and then covered with sand behind Sea Box's former factory in Cinnaminson.

There, Sea Box employees cut old shipping containers into shapes McFarland designed, "bent a bunch of metal," added three huge pumps, and set four or five container footprints into a vinyl above-ground pool measuring 35 by 65 feet in width and length and 4 feet deep.

"We turned it on; it worked great," McFarland recalled during a recent visit with his wife and business partner, Marie, to Sea Box to attend the company Christmas party.

Since then, American Wave Machines has sold permanent versions around the world. But as a privately held company, it will not disclose its sales figures.

McFarland has continued to design projects for Sea Box as he has worked on expanding his wave-machine business, confident demand will expand.

"Surfing is a well-known thing around the world, but few people are near enough an ocean to do it," McFarland said.

In California, they are. Which brings us to the Rose Parade and a pet-food company that appears to be hell-bent on making a bigger splash (pun intended) each year it enters a float.

This year, the Natural Balance Pet Foods Inc. float is 116 feet long and more than 100,000 pounds, what with the nearly 7,000 gallons of water it will be toting, said Ron Davis, the Pacoima-based company's dog trainer.

Wearing a wet suit, he will be in the water during the parade, to make sure the star, Tillman the bulldog, and friends "are stable on their boards right before the wave comes."

McFarland's wave, that is. Something that Davis, the ultimate surfer dude, marveled over last week not because of its size - no more than two feet high, on the theory that parade-watchers would not be amused to see a dog wipe out - but because of the technical sophistication behind it.

"What they've built in the rear of the float . . . it's like a giant science project," Davis said. "To me, it's amazing because I push a button and I get a wave."

At Sea Box, there is disappointment the company lost out on actually constructing the float's wave machine. Rather than building it in New Jersey and shipping it across the country, "they decided they could do it cheaper with a float-maker locally," Brennan said.


No hard feelings, though. He said he expects that Sea Box will get plenty of future business making steel component parts for McFarland's wave machines. (The main structures are made of concrete and fiberglass, not Sea Box's specialty.)

Granted there will be fur rather than feathers in the Rose Parade, but Davis assures Philadelphia's Mummers faithful they will not be disappointed if they tune in to see surfing dogs.

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"The end-all goal," he said, "is to make people crack up, have a great day, and make people be wowed."

Diane Mastrull:

For additional coverage of Sea Box Inc. - "Burlco firm's big box strategy" - go to www.philly.com/mastrull

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