

Local entrepreneurs finding home-storage solutions for outdoor sports gear
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For outdoor sports enthusiasts, few things are more exciting than buying new gear.

But when that new bike or surfboard arrives at your home, that joy can be dampened by an unforeseen problem: Where are you going to put it?

Two Charlottesville-area entrepreneurs are trying to give their customers better ways to store their gear at home, allowing them to hit the slopes, trails and waves with greater peace of mind.

“Home storage for board sports is a need that kind of goes unrecognized, until it really comes up,” said Josh Gordon, founder and president of StoreYourBoard.

While living in Pennsylvania in 2009, Gordon designed and built the Scorpion Rack to mount wakeboards on his wall. But online and brick-and-mortar retailers declined to add it to their inventories, saying there wasn’t sufficient demand for his product.

After that initial rejection, Gordon decided to sell the Scorpion Rack and similar storage products through a website of his own.

Gordon said he was lucky to have founded StoreYourBoard just as standup paddleboarding became a popular outdoor activity in the United States. At about 12 feet in length, “you can’t keep a paddleboard under your bed like a skateboard,” he said.

In 2014, Gordon resigned from his job as an engineer for AirSolutions to devote himself to StoreYourBoard full-time. Today, offers nearly 2,000 products, including dozens designed by Gordon and his team. While Gordon's first rack is no longer in production, its legacy lives on in his company's scorpion logo.

This summer, StoreYourBoard relocated from a small warehouse on Avon Street Extended to a 25,000-square-foot industrial office building in Fluvanna County. The larger warehouse there has enabled StoreYourBoard to process more than 100 orders a day at peak times of the year, Gordon said.

Gordon said original videos and in-depth information about specific products on set his business apart from Amazon and other online retailers. "We do a lot to make online shopping more like the in-store experience," he said.

Although StoreYourBoard competes with Amazon for purchases, it still sells its branded products on and uses the company's fulfillment services. "Amazon is the big Goliath of e-commerce now," Gordon said. "It's hard to live without them."

Gordon said StoreYourBoard has become a target of copycat manufacturers in China and other countries. He has applied for a patent on the design of one of the company's ceiling racks, the Hi-Port 2, to protect his brand.

"Making straps and racks isn't as sexy as designing new surfboards or skis," Gordon said. "But if we spread awareness of the need for home storage, there is a lot of business to be had."

While bicycle storage might not be sexy, inventor Eric Pearson has spent more than two years trying to make it beautiful.

Pearson's ALPEN Bike Capsule, in the final stages of development, looks like the shell of a nautilus, and slides open and shut on finely machined gears. Pearson describes it as "a sculpture ... to house and protect a bike."

The first ALPEN Bike Capsule, made of a durable plastic, has an anticipated retail price between \$899 to \$1,999. Pearson said he also might sell a premium version of the capsule made from aluminum.

Pearson has overseen the development of several full-size prototypes of the plastic capsule, and uses one to store his own mountain bike in his backyard.

"It has been amazing to make something that was just a figment of my imagination come into being," Pearson said. "Even if nobody bought it, I still would be glad I made it. But I'm looking forward to starting a real business out of it."

After graduating from Princeton in 2003, Pearson worked in real estate and finance in California for over a decade. He said he had his bike stolen twice, and never had enough space to keep his bikes indoors.

Pearson remembers searching for an outdoor storage container for his bike, and being disappointed by the options he found.

“Basically, I would have to get a tent, an ugly green plastic box from the Home Depot, or a commercial strength steel bike box that was totally impractical for home use,” he said.



Rendering provided by Eric Pearson, Alpen Bike Capsule ().

Pearson started dreaming up a more elegant solution. “I was intrigued by circular forms, and the strength of an arch,” he said. “I drew an initial sketch on a cocktail napkin, and things took off from there.”

“I always wanted to invent something; I was always looking for my widget,” he said. “I probably have kicked around 200 ideas like this over the years. [The bike capsule] is the first one I have really gone after.”

Pearson moved to Charlottesville in 2016 to live with his future wife, Kyle, who grew up in Albemarle County and graduated from the University of Virginia.

Pearson has contracted with Swarm, a product design and engineering studio in Salt Lake City, to see the bike capsule through the final steps of the design process. He said he has raised \$400,000 in private investment to support this work.

“We feel confident that this money will get us to the point where the product is fully designed and engineered,” he said.

While avid cyclists have expressed interest in purchasing their own ALPEN capsules, Pearson said his business also might enter the “arms race” to provide rental bike storage in major cities.

With rent in New York and other major cities becoming exceedingly expensive, Pearson thinks many city dwellers would consider a \$100 monthly fee to safely store their bikes in his capsule “... just a drop in the bucket.”

“These days, we tend to live in smaller spaces,” he said. “But we still have all this stuff that we don’t want to get rid of – especially the fun stuff that makes life worth living.”

Pearson said ALPEN will launch a crowdfunding campaign on IndieGoGo in early 2018 to bring the capsule to market later that year.