



# MAN ON A MISSION

**2012 is a milestone year for Mission Kayak NZ's managing director Michael O'Donnell. He has now been making plastic kayaks for 30 years, but the story extends even further back for this former New Zealand national slalom champion. Here we trace his twin passions for paddling moving water and high-quality engineering, back past their confluence, to their very source.**



When you've been kayaking as long as Michael O'Donnell, it's almost inevitable that your time on the water would have involved an element of DIY at the beginning – and putting your life in the hands of homemade equipment is always an adrenaline sport.

"When I started paddling we made our own gear," recalls Mike. "We had to. There was no alternative. We used to make spray decks from vinyl and secure and tension them with curtain wire – because you couldn't buy bungies back then.

"I nearly drowned in a slalom comp in 1974. I found myself in a situation where I couldn't roll and I couldn't get out. We were all macho about it back then, and we had no pull-cords. I finally found some slack and managed to get the skirt off, and as I came up a big hand came down and pulled my head out of the water."

The incident came at a time when O'Donnell was training (and saving) hard. In 1973, he and a group of boating buddies made a pact that they would all go to the 1975 World Championships in Europe

– even the ones that didn't qualify – and they worked and saved up for two years to get there. "You had to pay your own way back then," he says. "In the end about 10 of us went over to Yugoslavia. We spent four months going all around Europe, paddling."

The hard graft paid off for O'Donnell, who was crowned New Zealand National Slalom Champion in 1975 – although, in typical self-deprecating style, he claims that this was only because his brother Kevin was injured at the time.

Another member of the group that went to Europe was Michael Fletcher. In one of the most enduring relationships in the industry, O'Donnell has worked with Fletcher since they made paddles together at school in Palmerston North.



**O'Donnell testing to ensure a tonne load.**  
"When Kevlar was fairly new, some composite boats were folding round rocks, trapping the paddler. In the plastics we came up with the concept of a 'Lifecage' where the cockpit area was reinforced with fibreglass pieces and strong foam blocks went down to the footrest area."

**PROFILE • MICHAEL O'DONNELL**

"We used to make a pair of paddles a week at school and sell them in order to buy some gear for ourselves," he says. "Back then, \$10 went a long way. That's how we got into it."

It didn't stop at skirts and paddles either; soon entire boats were being made in backroom-style production lines. "People were bringing boats back from Europe and clubs would copy them," O'Donnell laughs. Everyone was doing it."

"I remember being downstairs in the Palmerstone North Canoe Club making boats on a Saturday nights while there were weddings going on upstairs. They must have wondered what the hell the glue smell was. You can still see the resin droplets on the floor now."

The two Michaels are still making kayaks in Palmerstone North to this day, but O'Donnell's other calling, engineering, took him to university in Christchurch on the South Island.

"Kayaking and engineering seem to go hand in hand," says Kiwi multisport legend Steve Gurney, a friend and sometime paddling partner of O'Donnell's, who is also an engineer and alumni of Christchurch University.

"Mike is a paddler first, but he's an engineer as well. I started kayaking when I was at engineering school and I joined a kayak club at Canterbury University. Probably the strongest club in New Zealand was the university kayaking club, and it was full of engineers.

"Paddling suits Mike's style - he's very well planned, very intelligent, and that's the way he conducts himself and his sport. He likes to put connections together.

Right now he's into gliding - he's found another passion that can combine his engineering mind with precision and his way of organising stuff."

For some years, the paddler portion of O'Donnell won out over everything else. In 1979, he started a tourist business, leading 3-4 day canoe safaris down the Wanganui River. "I was a quite the pioneer in terms of adventure and luxury camping tourism," he grins. "But

I wanted to expand into leading whitewater trips while I was still physically able to paddle the rivers. I had great local knowledge of where to put in and pull out, when to portage and so on. Eventually I took two groups of Americans. And it was really hard...a bit of a nightmare really!"

But by 1981, the engineer half of O'Donnell's brain had realised the potential of plastic boats. "First I started bringing in Perception boats, but then in 1982, I began manufacturing my own plastic boats, under company name Current Craft."

"I designed and made three boats in that first year: the Endura, the Minnow and an open canoe. It was a big gamble. At that time about 1000 fibreglass boats a year were being made and sold by backyard outfits; we had to convince people that plastic was the way to go, and to try and sell at least 1000 boats ourselves."

The company diversified into lots of things. They made a lot of paddling accessories - such as 3D life jackets, helmets and shaped foam inserts - They also made a lot of products that had nothing to do with kayaking at all, such as plastic bins.

All the time, though, the boat business was the main focus - everything else was done in the name of diversification and financial stability, but designing boats was always the passion. And it was a passion that paid off. In 1987 the company sold its first million dollars worth of kayaks.

"Kayaking is about thinkers," says Gurney. It attracts people who like to understand hydrodynamics - people who like to be able to say: 'right, if I carve that wave and into that eddy this is how the boat is going to behave, and if I modify the boat to have this, and modify the paddle to have that...' They're always strategizing about what's going to happen, what are the consequences."

Sometimes those consequences can be deadly serious. In 1997, Gurney and O'Donnell raced alongside one another in the Cameron Highlands Kayak Epic in Malaysia - an event that turned out to be so full-on that a



O'Donnell doing an ender at Fulljames in 1983. "We were testing to check the front pillar could stand the pressure. The old boats did good loops as they were so long. You could get totally airborne."

competitor died on one of the rapids. They were paddling plastic Wavehopper kayaks made by O'Donnell, and at the outset Gurney thought they were at a disadvantage because everyone else was in fibreglass boats. The Wavehoppers did them proud over a very challenging course, however, with Gurney winning and O'Donnell placing fourth.

"Mike's very much an innovator," says Gurney. "An early adopter if you like. He's been at forefront of kayak design. He's, in a business sense as well as with boat designs. He comes up with an idea and he's good at articulating it, draw a sketch and pass it on to someone else to go and complete.

"He cuts through the bullshit and figures out what you actually need to do, and what are fun things to do. He knew paddling an international race was a fun thing to do, but he also wanted to build business contacts over there. He's a strategist."

In 2000, O'Donnell came up with a new strategy, severing his relationship with Perception and rebranding everything with a new name: Mission. Under this logo he continues to make boats that open up the pursuit of paddling to almost everyone.

Where his generation were building their own whitewater boats and wedging themselves into them as tight as Inuits (who used to sew themselves in), now anyone can pick up a plastic boat for an affordable price and begin paddling with zero experience.

These days Mission make boats for a wide

range of skill levels and paddling preferences, from the high-performing, expedition-capable Eco Bezhig sea kayak right through to the kid-friendly Squirt. And while the Eco Bezhig might sit at the top of the triangle, the Squirt is their highest selling boat.

"The market is different now," he agrees. "The kayaking industry has matured and become mainstream. In the old days, if I saw a car with a kayak on it I would flash my lights, stop and have a chat. Now I just count the boats to see how many are mine. I can recognise one I've designed a mile off."

But engineer in him demands that his designs need to remain easy on the eye as well as on the water. "Boats should be good looking," he says emphatically. "I believe in exploring the extremes of possibility. I like smooth and streamlined shapes, not chunky looking things. A kayak should look good on a car.

"If a plastic boat is cheap but ugly and crap, it'll go to waste. People will buy it, but they won't use it. That's bad for everyone. Bad for then environment and bad for the industry."

After three decades of production, opening up the pursuit to many thousands of paddlers, and having spent a lifetime on the water, O'Donnell remains more than anything else a kayaker.

"I paddle at least once a week," he tells me. "I still paddle my old wooden K1. And I paddle everything I make. Over the last 30 years, if I hadn't paddled I would have gone mad."



O'Donnell paddling an early model kayak, a Dura, on one of the bigger drops on the Rangitikei.

