

LIFESTYLE

HERE'S A *surfboard* THAT CAN 'FLY'



Nick Leason is the CEO and cofounder of Lift, a joint venture with his father Michael Leason. >Carlos Rivera Gusti

The eFoil can reach speeds up to 25 miles per hour and lets the rider cruise smoothly above the water

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Back in 1989, the movie "Back to the Future II" envisioned a world where people would float above the ground and travel over the water in a wheelless skateboard. At the time, that place seemed to only exist in the imagination or the celluloid.

Fast-forward three decades. In the secluded sector of Bajuras in Isabela, on the northwestern region of the island, stands a small factory that pioneered the technology of the electric surfboard, a state of the art device with a futuristic vibe that seems to effortlessly levitate over the water.

"It's a magic carpet. It's the hoverboard," said Nick Leason, CEO and cofounder of Lift, to highlight the gliding and unorthodox characteristics of his wave riding machine.

The company, a joint venture with his father Michael, began manufacturing custom made surfboards, paddleboards and hydrofoils for kitesurfing a decade ago in this town of 40,368 inhabitants. It is a family business that employs 20 workers, inspired by a father and son's shared passion for the ocean and the sport of riding waves in their backyard at Milla Montaña, a secluded seaside resort near Jobos beach.

Six years into the venture, an electrical

fire burned down the factory in the midst of the eFoil's prototype testing process, but Leason's dreams didn't turn into ashes. Far from discouraging the young entrepreneur, the setback helped him refocus the business. From that point on, the factory shifted its attention and devoted its resources toward the development of the new gadget, which would revolutionize the future of water sports.

Up to that moment, Leason recalled, foiling or foil surfing was relatively unknown. Surfers like Laird Hamilton were beginning to embrace hydrofoils -a long fin or mast with wings- and discovering its potential to cruise in all types of water, thus redefining the concept of a rideable wave.

But things were about to change. In 2017, Lift introduced to the world the first commercially available electric-powered hydrofoil surfboard after testing the device in the turquoise waters of Crashboat beach in Aguadilla and the Guajatar Lake in Guayadillas.

"The invention of the eFoil, to make it electrically propelled and pull it out of the waves, that is an invention that took place here in our backyard," the 34-year-old engineer told **THE WEEKLY JOURNAL**. "It has

technology from the Tesla vehicle inside," he added with pride. "How does it work? Leason combined a high-performance board with a silent electric motor that's mounted on an all-carbon-fiber hydrofoil and works with an advanced lithium-ion battery.

It doesn't stop there. A wireless remote throttle that feels like a joystick controls the sleek electric surfboard that comes in three colors: white, blue

and black. A rider can travel for over an hour at a speed that ranges from 5 to 25 mph.

Besides offering wayfarer the thrill of flying over the water, the eFoil is an emission and pollutant-free watercraft. "Riding the eFoil evokes a completely unique feeling," indicated Leason of the sense of freedom and adventure that comes from cutting waves.

The majority of the efoil's components are manufactured in China, including all composite components and the hand controller, but the battery is built in San Francisco. Just one detail: to stroll around Puerto Rican waters in an eFoil you need a permit and a license issued by the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources.

"Everything is being assembled here in Puerto Rico where we can monitor the quality, but that could change after we build the brand, make it stronger. We could also go back to manufacturing those components here from raw materials as we did in the beginning," said Leason.

As part of the expansion plan, Lift submitted a proposal to acquire a space in a government-owned industrial park in nearby Aguadilla.

"We started shipping the product in April of 2018 and since then we have shipped 1,600 units, which is pretty good because they are \$12,000," Leason indicated with a grin on his face. "It is one of the world's most expensive surfboards. At first, everybody would say 'you are crazy that's never gonna work'."

He proved them wrong. The business is growing and next year's goal is to double the number of units sold, which ship mainly to the United States. Lift also sells surfing foils that range from \$2,500 to \$2,700.

So, how does an American man end up designing and developing fancy surfboards in a quiet corner in Puerto Rico?

"I was born in Hato Rey. My parents are Americans. They came here in the early '70s when they were 21-years-old," indicated Leason. "My grandfather, Hayden Leason, had come down in the '60s and started two factories in Maunabo for automobile and medical manufacturing, those were offered tax incentives back in the days."

For some time, Leason and his family lived at Palmas del Mar in Humacao. They eventually moved to the United States for a few years, before finally settling back in Puerto Rico. He attended high school at Saint John's School in Condado, where he fell in love with physics and studied engineering at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. His brother and sister also live on the island.

A self-proclaimed man obsessed with water sports and foils, Leason was a champ in the windsurfing racing scene.

"My family stayed here because of the lifestyle. My mom considers herself to be Puerto Rican. She does not associate herself with American culture anymore," Leason said. "There is no place like home [Puerto Rico]." ☺



"We invented it here, in the backyard," said Nick Leason of the process of designing the eFoil in Isabela. >Carlos Rivera Gusti



Since April of 2018, Lift has sold 1,600 eFoil. >Carlos Rivera Gusti



Launched in 2018, the eFoil is an electric surfboard that floats over the water. >Carlos Rivera Gusti