



Novak: Takin' it to the street.

## Rad Wheels Propel NHS

**F**ORMER surfboard shaper Richard Novak's 1972 decision to leave the water sports industry for "sidewalk surfing" has rolled NHS Inc. of Santa Cruz into third place among the nation's custom skateboard manufacturers with annual sales of more than \$10 million.

From its 12,000-square-foot Soquel Avenue building, the 70-person firm markets American-made custom skateboard components ranging from \$1.50 wheel bearings and \$5 "nose pieces" to \$19 wheel trucks and \$45 boards. An estimated 200,000 custom skateboards are sold in the U.S. each year.

All of this is a far cry from the crude "roller skate and two-by-four" boards Novak and his pals banged together in Capitola in the 1950s. "Those were the days of crash, lick your wounds, and go for it again," recalled Novak, a 1960 graduate of Santa Cruz High School.

But the invention of the urethane wheel in 1972 and the subsequent development of precision bearings, composite boards and durable wheel trucks kicked off a whole new industry. As one of the inventors of the precision bearing wheel in 1974, NHS was positioned well for the great skateboard boom of 1975-1977.

"But then they started building skateboard parks and trying to regulate where the kids could skate and what they could wear," said Novak, who likens today's skateboarders to the surfers of the 1960s. "It all died back down, so in 1979 we launched a campaign to turn the sport back to the streets."

To reach new markets, Novak teamed with Eric Swenson and San Francisco skateboard guru Fausta Vittelo to create a splashy tabloid called "Thrasher." Modeled after GOOD TIMES and Rolling Stone, the magazine started with a press run of 1,300 copies in 1980.

"We figured we'd do 30,000 to 40,000 units a month at best," laughed Novak. "I think it's now doing something like 200,000 a month."

With an estimated 14 million teenagers and 30 million 5- to 13-year-olds in the U.S. alone, Novak figures the domestic skateboard market is far from saturated, and he predicts increasing European, Japanese and Australian interest in riding the concrete wave.