

# Firm rides sidewalk surfing crest

By JOHN ROBINSON  
Sentinel Staff Writer

**I**N THE 1960s, on every street in the country, some kid could be found flattening his sister's roller skates with a hammer and nailing them to a piece of scrap wood to surf down the sidewalk. The first stray pebble or uneven crack in the sidewalk sent riders flying — chipped teeth, broken arms and massive abrasion were the look of skateboarding in the '60's.

In the '80's, hamburgered bruises are still worn as badges of courage, but today's skateboards are bright-colored, high-tech works of art that can cost more than \$100. Skateboarding is an identifiable youth subculture with fashions, art, slang and specialized media.

For Richard Novak of N.H.S., a Soquel-based firm turning out skateboards and accessories, it's also a \$20-million-a-year business.

N.H.S. manufactures and distributes skateboards and parts under various names, including Santa Cruz Skateboards, Roskopp, Hosie and Slime Balls. When you see a kid with a beat-up, wildly colored skateboard under his arm, odds are it came from N.H.S.

**I**T HASN'T all been an easy ride for Novak.

Novak, with partners Doug Haut and Jay Sherman, started N.H.S. in the late '60s as a distributor and importer of surfing materials. It was a decent small business for a surfer, but as recently as 12 years ago, Novak was sleeping on the floor of a garage.

"All I wanted to do was surf and make some work three hours a day," Novak said. But once into it the skateboard business, "I became a workaholic. Now I get to work six or seven days a week."

Novak moved into skateboards as a fluke. In the mid '70's he ran short of cash and signed a deal to import 500 skateboards. The boards sold out and he ordered more. And at the time, the skateboard market was exploding.

In 1961, the top-line skateboard was manufactured by Hobie, out of Southern California, and sold for \$19.95.

In 1973, Bill Blaine of Florida introduced Cadillac Wheels, which were relatively soft wheels made of polyurethane. It revolutionized the sport. No longer did the wheels hit a pebble and lock on the pavement. The new wheels could go faster, grip surfaces better and opened up whole new worlds of skateboarding.

The market exploded. Every

wild and surf-styled kid had a skateboard. Skateboard parks opened, contests were organized, movies were made and a host of specialized accessories were marketed.

Novak entered the market with a Road Rider wheels, an improvement on Cadillac Wheels, featuring sealed, precision ball bearings. Business boomed and in the first year he sold a million wheels. Novak bought out his partners, left the surfboard indus-

try and placed his bet on skateboarding.

**I**N LATE 1976, the bottom dropped out. Skateboarding, because of injuries, the fickleness of fads or for whatever reasons, dropped to a base group of hardcore skaters.

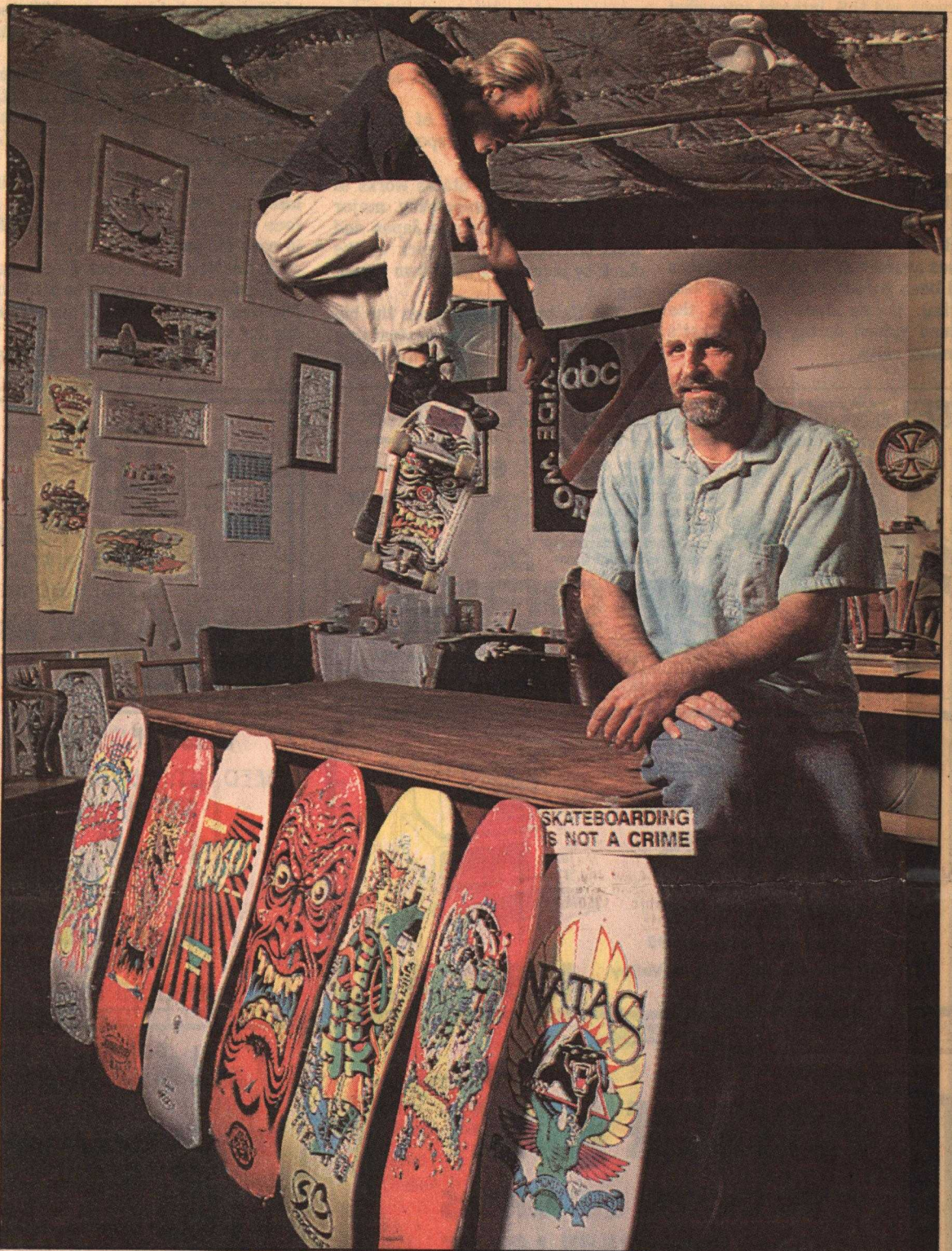
"We lost the wheel market and our sales dropped from close to \$10 million to less than \$100,000 in three years," Novak said. "We saw the declining trend and started descaling the company. In

'78 we knocked off the high-paying jobs."

While Novak scaled down, most skateboard entrepreneurs took a high-speed skid on their faces. They quickly lost their rented Mercedeses with surf racks, and their ocean-front houses.

Even large corporations such as Mattel, which had invested \$5 million in the skateboard market, promptly lost their investments and pulled out.

Please see Page D3



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Pro skater Rob Roskoff shows how it's done while skateboard entrepreneur Richard Novak looks on.



S.C. Sentinel  
10/18/87

# Sidewalk surfing

Continued from Page D1

It was a dead market. A fad that had come and gone.

The problem, as Novak saw it, was the skateboarding had become too regulated. The essence of skateboarding was not skateparks and contests, but freedom. Kids tearing loose, running amok, and getting their aggressions out on concrete.

"We put skateboarding back in the street," Novak said. "We did ads featuring laybacks on the curb and vertical skating in pools. We hammered away at that. We put together the 'Thrasher' program and changed the identity of skateboarding."

"Thrasher" was the name of a magazine, created to promote Novak's products and to reach the hardcore street skater.

"We patterned the first issue after 'Rolling Stone,' Novak said, "and printed 1,300 copies on newsprint."

Today "Thrasher" is a high-gloss, thick magazine with a circulation of 200,000. It is successful enough that Novak says Time-Life has offered to buy the publication for a sum that he says would make him very well off.

Novak's street approach worked. The skateboarding industry regained its base, the 13- to 15-year-old male, and started growing again. N.H.S. slowly rebuilt, this time planning for the future.

"You have to keep a close watch on the industry to see what's coming," Novak said. "We're survivors."

**N**OVAK SAYS N.H.S. sells more than 35,000 skateboard decks, 45,000-plus wheel assemblies, 200,000 wheels and 500,000 stickers with various N.H.S. logos each month. They distribute to 14,000 retail outlets throughout the United States and export to 21 countries, he says.

"The name Santa Cruz is very

saleable throughout the world," Novak says. "It's being in California, surf city, and its given us a grassroots appeal which is something we use in selling skateboards. Skateboarders are like the surfers of the 60's," Novak says.

To market the products, Novak says, "I talk to the kids. They tell me what the ads will be, and determine the artwork."

The products, for the most part, are marketed under the models bearing the name of a professional skateboarder such as Rob Roskopp, Christian Hosoi, or Jeff Kendall, star names to any skateboarder. The artwork, which has an identifiable style, is drawn by Jimmy Phillips, a local artist.

The pro skaters travel the country promoting their models in demonstrations, contests and at trade shows. They also get a percentage of the sales of their models.

"That's how they make their

money," Novak says. "We try to bring skaters up to mid-level management. We're not going out and grabbing somebody right out of college. These guys have ridden the skateboards and nobody can B.S. them."

The problem with pro skaters, Novak said, is that as soon as they start making money they grow moustaches and start driving Porsches — which the average 14-year-old finds hard to identify with.

"It's something we're working on," Novak said. "But we're pretty smart this time around. I'm not bragging, but we've beat off Taiwan, and kept the big guys out, which we didn't do last time."

As long as there's a kid who wants to get out, and a hill to conquer, there's going to be skateboarders. Little sister can keep her skates — all the kids have to do now is convince their parents to shell out \$100.