



Matt Kechele

Class of 1980

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Best known for his innovative surfing and tutelage of the world's greatest surfer. Floridian Matt Kechele is also a cunning competitor, an acclaimed shaper and a worthy ambassador for the sport. The son of a World War II flight engineer, Kechele is an aerial surfing pioneer.

Matthew Thomas Kechele was born in Florida, graduated from Cocoa Beach High School in 1980 and has lived there ever since. In the easy, warm conditions of Cocoa Beach, he began surfing at age eight with the help of Pete Hodgson, a former neighbor turned North Shore photographer. Inspired by local heroes Richard and Phil Salick, Greg Loehr and Jeff Klugel, Kechele adopted an aggressive style and began competing in the Eastern Surfing Association at age 13. He was a finalist in the ESA Championships on more than one occasion, usually battling East Coast rival Wes Laine. At 16, he turned professional, quickly expanding his horizons from Florida to the world.

An avid skateboarder, Kechele was among the first surfers to take to the air. He and Klugel followed the lead of Hollywood, Florida professional skater Alan Gelfand and began launching no-handed aerials around Sebastian Inlet during the late '70's. Most of the surfing world, still entrenched in the decade-old "involvement" style pioneered by Nat Young, was not ready to accept a skate-oriented approach. "They had no idea what we were doing," remembers Kechele. "At the Stubbies contest at the Inlet in '81, some guy spray painted on the bathroom, 'Kech, tricks are for kids.'" Undeterred, Kechele continued his aerial experimentation, pushing his free-surfing well beyond the constraints of competition and encouraging future generations of Floridians.

Competitively, Kechele was a presence international, but a force on the East Coast. "In the first Op Pro in '82, I made it through a lot of rounds doing airs," he recalls, "but when I went on tour, they didn't score well. I had to change my surfing." He narrowly missed earning an ASP Top 32 seed three consecutive seasons during the early '80's and eventually redirected his efforts domestically. In 1986, a highlight came when he defeated then-world champ Tom Curren in the Record Bar Pro in North Carolina. Kechele was an aggressive tactician, known to psyche out opponents and win heats before they began. He won events all over the East and Gulf coasts, earning the ASP East title in 1992 at age 30.



Kechele shaped his first board at age 13. At 16, he was shaping for Quiet Flight in Cocoa Beach, where his Matt Kechele Airlines model was a huge seller. Around 1981, he spotted a neighborhood kid performing unthinkable acts in the gutless surf. When the 9-year-old pulled three backhand 360s on a single wave, Kechele knew he was witnessing the future. He took the grommet, Kelly Slater, and his older brother, Sean, under his wing, shaping their boards and touring the coast with them for sponsor Sundek. It was during these trips in Kechele's VW bus that Kelly absorbed contest strategy and an understanding of surfboards, as well as his first taste of quality surf. "We caught this insane date in Hatteras when it was breaking like Kirra, and Kelly was only, like, 13," says Kechele. "He was grabbing the wall and pumping in the tube. I watched him learn how to ride the barrel that day. He blew me away for sure."

By the time Slater left his mentor at age 16, he had acquired the aggressiveness and competitive knowledge that helped to win six world titles. (Now in 2008—nine world titles.)

Matt Kechele Surfboards stands among the most established and respected board buildings on the East Coast. Kechele also handles promotions for Quiksilver, whereby he manages the team, organizes contests (including King of the Peak, a grassroots annual skins event at Sebastian Inlet) and conducts surf camps all along the coast. He has instructed thousands of young surfers since the mid-90's and helped cultivate their love for the sport. A resident of Satellite Beach, he lives with wife Diana and his dingo Uni, often trekking to Sebastian where he remains one of the premier local surfers well into his 30s, continuing to expand the vanguard of performance.

Written by Jason Borte, February 2001

