Skateboard!

This solid-wood sidewalk surfer will get you on your way in no time

By Matt Berger

As I note in my book "The Handmade Skateboard" (Spring House Press), the skateboard was born in the 1950s in Southern California, when some teenagers fooling around in a garage nailed a set of roller-skate wheels to a plank of wood. The universally-awesome concept quickly caught on around the world and, as the popularity of the skateboard evolved, so did its design. By 1970 the kick tail was added for leverage to hop up curbs. In the 1980s, skateboard makers added a concave bend for extra strength and maneuverability. Today, skateboard decks are laminated from seven layers of hard maple veneer to create a precision deck with complex bends and curves.

Still, a vintage pin stripe hardwood cruiser like this is fun to ride and easy to make, even with limited shop space and tools. It’s great for first-time riders, urban commuters, or for just getting around the neighborhood. And you’ll have a good time mixing and matching wood species to create your own unique design that will turn heads wherever you take it.

Mill straight, square lengths of stock at least 5/8” thick, rip them to widths that suit your design, and arrange them to your liking. Try to slope the wood grain on all the pieces in the same direction for cleaner shaping later. Draw a triangle across the arranged pieces for reorientation, and then practice your clamp-up procedures to prevent any surprises or delays during glue-up. Then liberally apply glue to all the mating surfaces, and clamp up the blank. After the glue cures, plane the blank to 9/16” thick.

Build the blank from solid strips

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Make a pattern and saw the profile

Make a full-size paper pattern (See page 25), and use it to transfer the profile to the blank. Outfit a jigsaw with a clean-cutting blade, and saw to within \(\frac{3}{16}\) of your layout line. Follow up by sanding the edges smooth and then rounding them over top and bottom to create a bull-nosed profile.

True grit finishing

For a finish, I prefer a fast-drying exterior varnish with UV protection, like the water-based polyurethanes from General Finishes and Minwax. Apply 3 coats to the underside and edges of the board, sanding between each coat with 220-grit paper. As for the top, rather than covering the pinstripe pattern with black grip tape, brush on a coat of finish mixed with transparent grit. Mix 1 tablespoon of clear silicon grit with 3 tablespoons of finish, and stir it into a thick slurry. Brush it onto the raw wood surface, making sure to evenly distribute the grit.

Selecting trucks and wheel assemblies

It only takes a few minutes to complete your board by setting it up with trucks and wheels. The challenge is selecting from among the array of brands and styles available. Here’s how I navigate the options to outfit a board like this designed for cruising.

1. Start with a pair of skateboard trucks equal to the maximum width of the skateboard deck (8" wide for this design). Independent is the premium brand, but there are alternatives. The trucks mount to the deck with 1" flat-head machine screws and locking nuts, with a \(\frac{3}{8}\)" riser pad in between to soften the connection. The ideal wheels measure anywhere from 50mm to 60mm in diameter—the softer the better—and they mount to the trucks with a set of precision bearings.

2. If you don’t want to puzzle out the selections yourself, see the Buyer’s Guide on page 64 for my specific recommendations for trucks and wheels for this type of board.