



TAKIN' THE BULL BY THE HORNS

The Transformation From Simple Runabout to Fully Equipped Red Bull Tow-In Machine

TEXT BY JUSTIN STANNARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS WOOD, JUSTIN STANNARD AND MIKE SLATTERY

It's no secret that Red Bull's involvement in the extreme-sports industry has helped catapult the brand to worldwide success and action-sports dominance. Though their television and radio commercials may be cheeky and funny, the energy drink's event sponsorship programs and generous support of several extreme-sports athletes are taken much more seriously by their marketing teams.

It's not uncommon to see top motocross or sportbike racers wearing beautiful custom-painted helmets graced with Red Bull insignia. Nor is it unusual to spy custom pro surfboards and race cars flaunting the same classic blue and silver background with the silhouettes of the iconic red bulls proudly emblazoned on top. Truth be told, that highly guarded and carefully manicured image is partially responsible for Red Bull's astronomical success in those respective markets.

Aiming to support the exponential growth of PWC, used in everything from tow-in surfing to marketing/promotional tools, American Honda agreed to supply three new turbocharged Aquatrax for use by Red Bull. These skis, when finished being decked out, are planning to travel the world, facing anything and everything the Red Bull team could throw at them. They intend to

run support and recovery operations for the world-renowned Red Bull Flugtag – you know, those wacky events where people bring out homemade human-powered flying machines (that rarely fly at all) and jump off of bridges. In addition, the Aquatrax will be used with Red Bull's tow-in surf team, sponsored Hawaiian surfer Jamie O'Brien, and Red Bull promotions girls (ever see those cute girls giving away free product from their customized Red Bull Mini Coopers? Well, it's kind of like that, but on water).

Needless to say, Red Bull needed to make sure that their high standards and sparkling image would be held in the highest regard when the Hondas undertook their transformation. That's why they asked Chris Wood of Airtrix and Mike Slattery of HSA to turn the three plain-old Aquatrax into full-tilt Red Bull machines.

Chris Wood, a resident of Santa Barbara, California, is the owner, creative director and painter for Airtrix. Since 1994, he and his crew of specialists have been custom painting helmets, motorcycles, PWC and much, much more. In fact, Chris (or "C-Wood," as he is commonly addressed) is the only painter that Red Bull trusts to design and paint their helmets and skis, work that is

held to extremely high standards. That's a pretty heavy crown to wear, considering the hundreds of other talented designers across the world who would kill for the shot to do Red Bull's work. But don't take our word for it, just check out the highly-anticipated sequel, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*

Sources

Red Bull North America, Inc
Santa Monica, California
redbullusa.com

High Surf Accessories
Haleiwa, Hawaii
808/638-5952
highsurfrescue.com

Airtrix
Santa Monica, California
805/962-8672
airtrix.com

American Honda Motor Co.
Torrance, CA
Honda.com

(scheduled to be released in late June), to see C-Wood's handiwork on the big screen (that's all we're allowed to say at this time). In addition to his stellar paintwork, Chris also excels in computer-aided corporate and personal logo design, a practice that is the "meat and potatoes" of the business.

For Hawaiian native Mike Slattery, outfitting the Red Bull Hondas with his class-leading HSA (High Surf Accessories) system was just another project in an already decade-old career of outfitting PWC for special uses. Using his "you can never be too prepared" philosophy and lessons learned from his

experience in some of the most violent waters on Earth, Slattery's HSA systems and rescue boards were not only adopted for use by the Hawaiian Lifeguards back in 1998, but are currently used extensively as specialty work platforms by swift-water, military, and ocean rescue teams and lifeguards, in addition to Navy SEALs and the majority of professional tow-surfers. The attention to detail and high quality, personalized installation of the HSA system has kept it at the forefront of the market, and obviously was what brought him to the top of Red Bull's most-wanted list.

Luckily for *Personal Watercraft Illustrated*, Chris Wood, Mike Slattery, Red Bull and Honda were gracious enough to allow us to document a step-by-step glimpse into the transformation of a stock Honda Aquatrax into an all-out wave chaser and beautiful piece of artwork. They even let us hang out in Honda's legendary Bay 8 (or "Hangar 8") in their Torrance, California, headquarters – where much of the work is done to their high-performance factory-supported race bikes – to watch on as Slattery carefully installed the HSA system over two full days.



(Left) HSA's Mike Slattery helps carefully remove the remaining trim and side molding from the Aquatrax's bondline. All three craft had to be towed to Airtrix in Santa Barbara, California, and completely stripped down – naked as a newborn baby. Everything from major body parts to the tiniest nuts and bolts needed to be removed.



(Right) After all OEM stickers, paint, trim and traction mats were stripped away, the entire upper deck was sanded, sanded, and re-sanded, then painted with a white base. As C-Wood likes to put it, "Preparation is extremely time consuming – when done correctly."



The template for the blue and silver areas of the Red Bull logo are carefully positioned and trimmed by two of Airtrix's crew, Hector and "Grommet." The graphic will extend up past the visible area of the fairings, for that factory-looking fit and finish, so extra care must be exercised when positioning to ensure they line up with the graphics painted on the front storage lid.



Although they can't reveal all of their top-secret painting techniques, we were able to show you this really cool shot of David, one of Airtrix's painters, laying down a coat of metallic blue paint. Every color used – silver, blue, red and yellow – is specially prepared and mixed to meet Red Bull's stringent standards.



No cutting corners here; every piece is disassembled and painted individually. The eagle-eyed will note how all hardware and sealing strips have been removed, and how the painted graphics reach even into areas that will eventually be covered again by hardware or the HSA system.



The handwritten note reads, "DO NOT TOUCH!" Apparently, this is a paint job you don't want to smudge! Check out all of the custom-painted Red Bull street and motocross helmets in the background. According to C-Wood, this is the only place in the world that you'll get to see those being painted.



Loaded up and ready for their trip back down to American Honda in Torrance, California, the Aquatrax have been carefully reassembled, but just enough for the ride home. They will once again be broken down upon arrival to install the HSA system on each unit.

Honda's Tim Patnode helps carefully guide the ski as it's lifted up and off the trailer and onto a rolling PWC cart. Welcome home, babies.



Once inside, the Hondas are stripped completely bare – again. Mike Slattery, seen here using a template to cut out some EVA traction mat, prefers to start working from the inside out, starting with the inner EVA footwell and gunwale traction pads, then progressing to the rescue board attachments and safety straps, and ultimately finishing off with the over-the-rail gunwale pads.

Scotty Martinson, of Channel Islands Surfboards and Al Merrick, helps Slattery mark and trim the EVA pads. In addition to fitting the contoured dimensions of the upper deck, the EVA material must be carefully chosen and the colors approved by Red Bull. After finding the perfect fit (and being careful to follow the blue and silver lines of the Airtrix paint job), a heat gun is used to aid in installation. Without it, the EVA is simply too stiff to properly contour to the curves, and the process becomes much more difficult.



Honda's removable engine-access panels are a dream – unless you're the one tasked to cover them with EVA padding. The side panels' traction padding must be carefully cut and applied in order to match the surrounding padding's striations and to provide a watertight seal once the panel is fastened back into place. Since the EVA material doesn't absorb water, its application supercedes that of the original foam sealing trim.

Due to the rough conditions expected in the surf, Slattery rivets a precut polypropylene sheet to the back deck, where the board will mate with the craft. The sheet is approximately the same hardness rating as the rescue board's nose cone, which will minimize wear and tear and keep the board from ruining the paint – or one component from wearing down another. Occasional replacement of a nose cone or poly sheet is easy, when compared to potentially ruining a one-of-a-kind paint job.



Since a new tow-hook fitting is installed in place of the OEM system (along with an additional anti-scuff poly plate), Slattery makes accommodations so the factory zerk grease fitting can still be easily accessed. U-bolts are also attached to both port and starboard sides of the bondline in the rear, which will connect to the rescue board's rigging when the setup is complete, acting as lateral stabilizers.



Three nylon-webbing straps with heavy-duty buckles are affixed to keep the front storage hood, glove box (and the front of the driver's seat), and rear seat in place in the event of the craft being overtaken or swamped by massive, powerful waves. Not only are the parts riveted in place, but an additional washer is used on each rivet, to enhance its load-bearing capabilities and prevent pull-outs.



(Left) Before getting too excited, Mike and Scotty scour the Honda inch-by-inch, making positive that every piece of hardware is correctly in place and torqued to spec. Every single nut/bolt fitting (with one or two exceptions, due to space constraints) is held in place by a lock washer, nut, then an additional nylon-insert nut, as a failsafe to keep things from backing out and coming loose with the continual strain and vibration that will be encountered in the Aquatrax' work environments.



Here, the custom-designed, officially approved Red Bull rescue board is properly attached to the HSA rigging. The three-point connection system's purpose is twofold: it ensures that the board remains tight and doesn't sway back and forth, and it actually helps stabilize the craft in both low- and high-speed maneuvers.



Here we see a completed Red Bull-edition Yamaha FX. The Honda Aquatrax will look nearly identical once finished, ready to charge surf or haul pretty girls around the lake. The yellow quick-release tow rope allows the PWC pilot to quickly detach the rope if a surfer becomes entangled, and is held securely in place for transport by nylon webbing loops incorporated into the safety straps. Also, a closer look illustrates how HSA has installed a backup lanyard key, permanently attached to the handlebars, in case the primary pilot is thrown off and someone else must operate the ski.

Special thanks to:

Mike Slattery at High Surf Accessories (HSA)

Chris Wood at Airtrix

Josh Kendrick at Red Bull North America, Inc.

Tim Patnode at American Honda Motor Co.

Scotty Martinson at Channel Islands Surfboards/ Al Merrick