

how to spend it

At the top of their game

Finely crafted, bespoke sports equipment is a labour of love for its artisan creators – and could make a present ne plus ultra for family and friends who are passionate about their pastimes, says Emma Crichton-Miller



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EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

Based in the US, Bespoke Global matches an international clientele with specialist designers to produce extraordinary custom creations for the home. Within a year of its foundation in 2011, however, the company was fielding some unusual requests. While discussing a craftsman-made cabinet or light, the client would say, “Oh, my husband is mad about fishing” or “My wife has just taken up cycling” or “What can I buy my husband

for our anniversary? He loves to get away from it all.” Co-founder Pippa McArdle understood these needs: “I’d dabbled in falconry before I started the company.” It emerged that other members of the team were interested in fly fishing and rock climbing. Meanwhile, Gwen Carlton, McArdle’s business partner and co-founder of Bespoke Global, had fallen in love with a kayak. Not just any kayak, but a finely carpentered creation by Nick Schade, who takes his inspiration from the Inuit people of Greenland and the Aleuts, whose remote islands lie between Siberia and Alaska. Thus was born the leisure section of Bespoke Global, a range of high-performance sports and games products made by individual artisans who marry performance and beauty.

Until recently, custom-built equipment was primarily the preserve of professional sportspeople, with function the first priority. Increasingly, however, the new breed of passionate amateur is driving established companies to offer a bespoke service alongside their best off-the-peg ranges. McArdle reflects, “Our clients are time-poor, so for the brief moments when they can enjoy their sport, they want the very best equipment.” But as well as a tool they can use, they desire an object they can treasure.

The company now offers eccentric, eye-catching, sculptural but entirely functional bespoke wooden bicycles, made by master woodworkers Bill Holloway and Mauro Hernández (Freedom bike, \$7,953). It can provide bespoke bamboo fly-fishing rods from the legendary rod-maker WS “Bill” Oyster, with elaborate customised engraving (Epic Series rod, \$9,050), which may be matched with precision-designed, hand-turned classic reels by Michigan-based Chris Reister (flower design, \$699). You can order handsome all-leather rugby balls, basketballs, baseballs and American footballs (Handsome Dan, \$130) from New Jersey craftsman Paul Cunningham that turn ball practice into a ritual pleasure, while hand-stitched hoods for falcons (Cole-Man, \$290), made from calf and

lizard skin, come with a variety of decorative crests. These last jewel-like creations, produced by falconry hood-maker Ken Hooke from Winnipeg, look as fine on a stand in a drawing room, displayed like a work of art, as on a falcon. Likewise, one of Schade's beautiful Night Heron kayaks (\$16,650) is in the permanent collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art. As McArdle explains, "These are high-performance items. They are made to work, but we have spent a great deal of energy finding makers who create objects that are both high functioning and aesthetically pleasing." The response to their efforts has been very positive. "Our clients are looking for something aligned with their passions – and they transfer their passion and connoisseurship for that activity over to these objects."

The demand for such personalised services is not restricted to the US. Two years ago Farlows, a leading London retailer of fine fishing rods, began to offer a bespoke service for traditional split-cane fly-fishing rods. Max Sardi, its fishing manager, explains, "The carbon-fibre fishing rod has reached such a peak of perfection that we have had people saying, 'We want to go back to what we knew before, a traditional cane rod.'" Farlows' bespoke rods are made in the UK at the Chris Clemes workshops (fly-fishing kit, £3,500). Clemes was a fly-fishing guide in South Africa and England, and dreamt up the idea for his bespoke rods while working with, among others, gunsmith Anderson Wheeler, a producer of bespoke hunting rifles. "A bamboo rod is an aspirational item for all fly fishermen, who are by nature traditionalists," Clemes suggests. When he came into the market, cane rod-making was a dying art. His company now has three workshops, and some of his employees are third-generation rod-makers. The bespoke process involves a short walk down to St James's Park to cast alongside the pelicans. Clemes will construct a rod that suits the kind of water the buyer fishes in, as well as their height, weight and casting

action, the types of fish they want to land and so on. In the top-end Symphony range, starting at £1,750, there are 180 decorative combinations, with customised engraving as another optional extra. For those who travel a lot, Clemes can make a three-piece rod for easy packing and a leather rod tube; a custom-built wooden presentation case is also possible by special request. As he puts it, “This is not an impulse purchase.” The firm makes only 20 to 30 rods a year, and 20 reels at a time.

If the spring and summer months might be made sweeter by a bespoke rod, you’ve only to be moderately acquainted with a shooting man or woman to reflect that a great deal of pleasure might be granted in the autumn by a bespoke gun. Purdey has been making them since 1814. As head of gun sales, Ian Andrews explains, “While we have a number of guns available for short delivery, there will always be collectors across the globe who want the finest in the world.” A bespoke gun can take two years to build. Clients begin by choosing the calibre, format (side-by-side or over-and-under) and barrel length, depending on their preferences and the type of quarry. They can then select traditional scroll engraving or a more personal motif to decorate the gun, together with the wood for the stock, ranging from burr walnut to a linear-grained variety (side-by-side from £94,080; over-and-under from £108,720), and it is possible to spend another £50,000 on decoration if you are after something very elaborate. The skill and artistry result in objects that are staggeringly beautiful to any eyes.

Boss & Co, a smaller member of the exclusive band of London “Best” Gun manufacturers, established in 1812, only makes guns to order, with a maximum of 18 a year. Pioneer of the single-trigger over-and-under shotgun, it also makes rifles and side-by-sides. Gunroom manager Roy Lyu explains that while clients undoubtedly like to choose the action (mechanism), “it is the aesthetics of the gun that they most like to control – the wood, the

engraving, the finish". A bespoke over-and-under starts at £90,000, although again, engraving can add to that price.

For those who like to indulge in the full trilogy of country sports, a bespoke saddle might be the ultimate luxury. Fitting a saddle to the horse and to the rider is an essential stage in horse ownership. Much debate rages online about the relative virtues of a Stubben, a Passier, a Crosby or a Harry Dabbs. Sue Carson Saddles can take the process further by designing a saddle specifically for the rider, their horse and their riding ambitions. Franchised throughout the UK, it makes between 350 and 400 saddles a year, at around £2,500-£3,000 each (Grand Prix Special, £3,000), with the business growing both at home and abroad. As Carson herself says, "Our biggest clientele is serious amateurs. The event and dressage riders realise that if their performance is to improve, they need a bespoke saddle." Carson and her colleagues, all of whom are expert riders, fit the tree and panels of the saddle to the horse, before designing the seat, blocks and flaps to suit the rider and their main discipline. The saddles are made up by a small batch manufacturer in the UK, so quality is maintained. Carson's aim is "a happy, athletic horse". She is also interested in the aesthetics; she has done Porsche purple at the back of the saddle for one particular client and a black-and-pink combination for another.

For those whose passion is tennis, there is also a bespoke culture, though it has only begun to infiltrate the UK over the past few years. Paul Angell has had a long career at the top of racket development. Trained as a mechanical and composite engineer, he initiated the use of Cad Cam and analysis software at Dunlop Slazenger's UK research facility. As head of design, from 1999 Angell was responsible for all racket developments, including the legendary Muscle Weave and Hot Melt ranges, and designed rackets for the players in the company's distinguished tour team, such as Tim Henman, John McEnroe, Wayne Ferreira

and Mark Philippoussis, gradually developing the software to enable greater customisation. In 2005, he set up on his own to offer this service to the general public. “One major advantage of Angell custom rackets is the range of grips, as curiously, the different manufacturers do not use the same octagon, and players become very attached to the one they are used to,” he says. Customers can also choose the head size, length, weight and balance point. The frames come in two stiffnesses, “depending upon whether you play more like Nadal or Henman”. They are only available in grey, but can be customised with colourful bumper guards and grips. Strings are a whole other question, and Angell does not supply them. He has set his price at a competitive £130, and targets serious regular players who understand how the racket affects performance. “In the UK, we are poorly educated about the quality of rackets. In the US and in pockets of Europe, players are very into the spec of their equipment. Here, most people are happy to buy a fully strung racket off the peg.”

Angell’s exasperation is matched by David Doyle’s, owner of Made to Measure Golf, which offers a custom club fitting, making and repair service. “People don’t realise that when they buy a set of golf clubs, it is often not a set but a collection of clubs that neither match one another nor the requirements of the player.” He invites clients to his base in Basingstoke, where he analyses their stature and swing and discusses the type and number of clubs they need. Doyle says he is “like a tailor” and insists that for a set of clubs to “fit” a golfer, he must assess the club length, to optimise distance and control; the shaft type, to match swing speed and tempo; the loft and lie, to maximise distance and trajectory; as well as the grip size and “18 other variables to provide a fully bespoke set of golf clubs that perfectly match your game”. His prices start from £60-£80 for an iron.

A more ancient sport – longbow archery, which still has passionate adherents – also lays

claim to bespoke artisan bowyers. Marc Grady, master bowyer at The Longbow Emporium, based in the romantic Hampton Court Castle in Herefordshire, makes between 30 and 40 a year (from £450). He will also make bespoke arrows to match the bow. His customers like to choose the decorative exotic hardwoods he uses and the Italian braid or tooled leather on the handles. For the “nocks” and “passes”, Grady employs pieces of carved water-buffalo horn and abalone shell that carry the string and protect the bow from the arrow as it passes. He matches the overall length, draw weight and draw length of the bow to the archer and the type of shooting they intend to undertake, but ultimately each is also a work of art. Even those who do not intend to use the bow competitively will be able to act out their Legolas or *Braveheart* fantasies with full authenticity.

For in the end, while performance matters, it is the opportunity to customise a uniquely beautiful object that will become a lifelong partner in a favourite pastime that draws people to the bespoke service. Indeed, so pleasurable do clients find the whole process that last month Bespoke Global launched a gifting service, whereby you can not only gift the object but also the whole experience of creating it.

Angell Tennis, www.angelltennis.com. **Bespoke Global**, +1212-537 0112; www.bespokeglobal.com. **Boss & Co**, 020-7493 1127; www.bossguns.com. **Chris Clemes**, www.chrisclemes.co.uk and see Farlows. **Farlows**, 9 Pall Mall, London SW1 (020-7484 1000; www.farlows.co.uk). **The Longbow Emporium**, 01568-797 890; www.longbowemporium.co.uk. **Made to Measure Golf**, www.madetomeasuregolf.co.uk. **Purdey**, Audley House, 57-58 South Audley St, London W1 (020-7499 1801; www.purdey.com). **Sue Carson Saddles**, 01629-540 343; www.suecarsonsaddles.co.uk.