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Board shorts get creative for spring-summer 2011

By Adam Tschorn

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Based on the displays at the Action Sports Retailer trade show here last weekend, the future of the surfer dude's summer wardrobe (board shorts and T-shirts) is decidedly retro. But the clothing that will show up in stores next year has a definite 21st century twist—it took high-tech processes to create the decidedly low-tech looks.

The ASR event, held at the San Diego Convention Center, drew about 10,000 attendees, many of them retail buyers looking for trends and to place orders for next summer's shoppers.

Among other garments, they could view T-shirts that felt like a bit of a throwback — not only because of a surge of sepia-toned photograph-style screened tees, but thanks to a surprisingly strong showing by the tank-top silhouette — yes, for the guys.

"Tanks have been doing really well for us," said Vans' Chris Overholser, who credits the professional surfing community for helping stoke demand for the sleeveless style.

That sentiment was echoed by Scott Madison, vice president of Atwater Collection. "I can't keep [tank tops] in stock," he said, adding that the line's selection of crewneck and V-neck knit tops for spring were strong performers as well. "I think, in general, people are just getting sick of the polo" silhouette, he said.

For the action-sport brands, board shorts are the bottoms to focus on for spring-summer 2011. The crop coming to market next year will be a heavily hybridized bunch — highly technical microfiber garments boasting things like **Nano-Tex** coating, four-way stretch and welded seams but made to look like the most well-worn, rumpled pieces in the bottom of the hamper. Atwater's Madison said he's had a strong response from buyers to a board-short style he calls the Gripper. "I was inspired by the kids who are cutting off their jeans and corduroys to make shorts," he said. So Madison added touches like rivets, contrast stitching and a leather patch to a pair of shorts with an uneven blue finish that was crafted to resemble the natural variations in denim.

The board short that doesn't look like a board short was the emphasis over at O'Neill as well, where the use of the increasingly popular dye sublimation printing process has been used to create photo-realistic renderings of well-worn camouflage cargo shorts — with crumpled pockets, belt loops and even the weave of the slightly faded fabric — in a traditional board short silhouette. O'Neill representatives showed similar versions of the board short that appeared to be made from gray-check suiting fabrics.

O'Neill, like many of the other brands on hand, used the dye sublimation photo-printing process to turn the board short — once limited to bold color blocking or floral — to humorous effect. The most memorable included a pair printed with a beer tap and stacks of red plastic cups typically found at fraternity keggers (at O'Neill) and another pair printed with ukulele-strumming dashboard hula girls (at Vans).

It seems the board short is on pace to become the kind of artistic canvas that was once the exclusive real estate of the T-shirt. Which is a good thing, since that piece of real estate seems to be shrinking — or at least saying farewell to arms.

