

Sustainable Stoke: We Ride the Loaded Vanguard

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A while back, we heard that the crew at Loaded was playing with bamboo deck construction. With the recent popularity of 'boo for various builders, this wasn't too much of a surprise: there are good reasons to look at bamboo for longboard construction. It turns out that Loaded has evolved their entire lineup to incorporate bamboo construction.

To evaluate the effect, the Longboard Consortium have ridden a pair of Vanguards: a 38", flexy deck and a 42", somewhat stiffer, version. They're both providers of a unique ride and proof positive that 'sustainable means' don't exclude material performance.

Big Dogs in the Lineup. The Vanguard is Loaded's signature board, and the largest they produce. It's available in both 38" and 42" lengths, in any of five different 'flex profiles' and built out in two different levels. For this review, we've ridden two of the new bamboo Vanguards: a 38", 'Flex 4', aimed at skaters in the 120-170lb range; and a 42", Flex 2, aimed at skaters ranging from 150-210lbs. Both are the 'Premium' build, utilizing Randal trucks and Abec 11 wheels. **LOADED VANGUARD MSRP: \$298.00** (as tested, 'Premium' version)
 Contact: <http://www.loadedboards.com>

'Flex 2'

Length: 42" Width: at Widest Points/Center: 8.50"/7.75"; at Axles: 4.25"

Thickness: 7/16" Concave: at Widest/Center: .300"/.200";

Wheelbase: 37.0 axle-to-axle Camber: .800"; axle-to-axle Static Flex: at 120lb: 1.125"; at 225lb: 2.375"

'Flex 4' Length: 38" Width: at Widest Points/Center: 8.625"/7.875"; at Axles: 4.25"

Thickness: 5/16" Concave: at Widest/Center: .300"/.200";

Wheelbase: 33.50" axle-to-axle Camber: .850"; axle-to-axle

Static Flex: at 120lb: 1.20"; at 225lb: 2.75" Construction: epoxied V-Lam Bamboo, with Fiberglass top & bottom layers.

Wheel Wells: No Cutouts: Yes Wheel bite: No

Deck Height: 5.50" (unloaded, at middle of concave)

Trucks: Randal RII 180

Wheels: ABEC-11 Gumballs, 81a

Bearings: 'Max', Abec 5 shielded. Includes spacer and speed rings.

Hardware: black truss-head hardware.

Grip: full-deck, clear grip system. Medium grit.

Utilitarian Shapes Can Be Pleasing; The Vanguard has been designed to accommodate the Randal RII 180 trucks without any possibility of wheelbite (and that works), so that means narrow ends. But, the very first thing skaters notice about the Loaded decks is the arched camber. The Vanguards look like Halloween cats, ready to screech. The next thing skaters notice is that the designers at Loaded have narrowed the center of the board and left nicely contoured, widened areas just inboard of each truck. We found these to be precisely in the sweet spot for performance riding these decks. The Vanguards are laid up with a combination of vertically-laminated bamboo, sheathed in triaxial-fiberglass and epoxy. Thickness and the composite material are used to create the different flex profiles.

The rails are squared-off, reflecting both a desire to simplify production and to telegraph the position of the edge through soft skate shoe soles. Loaded uses a roll-on, clear grit system with a medium texture that works very well. It's clear enough that the graphics and logos are crisply visible. Both decks have a variable concave between the trucks. From above, the big, green Gumballs extend well into the space carved for them, giving the appearance of cats paws, ready to pounce. Flipping the deck over, the visual resonance is solid. Clean, glossy lines of the lams and a smooth graphic of soaring birds floating across the underside of the deck. Skater's responses to the graphics and overall appearance of the Vanguards ranged from disinterest to absolute reverence for the soulful incorporation of natural themes and materials.

Flexible Flyers. We put these boards through their paces as cruisers, commuters, sliders and general funhog utility rides,

over the course of several months. The predominant characteristic of these decks is certainly the flex: even our lightest evaluators experienced a high degree of vertical compliance on the Flex 4, something we came to call "the Loaded ride". Some skaters love flex, if only on principle, others less so.

As with the majority of the decks that we abuse, the Vanguards were pushed, bombed and maneuvered through the treacherous paths of Ocean Beach, in San Diego. From the smooth pavement of Del Mar Avenue, where speed runs and sliding reign supreme, to the potholes and cracks of Bacon Street and the salty, sandy, crowded "people slalom" known to tourists as the Boardwalk, the Vanguards performed well. The compliant decks and Gumballs accommodate rough roads and facilitate both pumping and insanely tight turns or slide maneuvers. One road warrior writes, "[t]he random drop offs, where construction workers chose not to put a curb ramp, weren't so bad a night. The Loadeds power over the gaps and cushion the falls." The ease with which the skaters can pump the Vanguards into a deep flex, quickening the steering angles on the Randals, made them popular for slashing and turning on small banks and sandy walkways. The Vanguards hit the university campus for commuting, more human slalom and a few mild speed runs. Once our crew became accustomed to the behavior of the flexy boards, we learned to pump the deck for speed or extension while cruising. It's just plain fun, but important that you're mindful of the flex-profile being ridden. A few of our skaters found the flexy nature of the boards not to their liking for commuting or hard pushing. More than once, heavier riders skipped the center of the shorter, flexier Vanguard off the pavement or complained that the stiffer version would "bound around". Keep your feet in the sweet spots and this is really not an issue, however. Pump your legs into the sweet spots, and the Vanguards turn on a dime. One run on the famed Boardwalk was marked for those following the Vanguards by the bobbing head of one skater that used the flex and "Loaded ride" to pump and torque the big boards around throngs of tourists and amazed mall-board riders. We just saw his head, up and down, left and right... The first large multi-rider session with the Loadeds took place at Banana Bay, our 7-level, waterfront parking garage. Our riders found their "fits" with the two boards, based mostly on weight rather than dimension. The sweet spots are large enough for varied foot placement in hard, low cornering and the incorporation of the Gumballs to this board make the Vanguard perform well for drifting turns on the concrete slopes in parking garage races. Taking the decks to high speeds is a matter of being compliant, but these are not "speed boards". They're great and very controllable at the speeds found in even the fastest of our parking garages, but the cambered, flexible design is neither intended nor really appropriate for real bombing. Nevertheless, we did both with each board on Del Mar and in the controlled confines of the Pump Station Hill and university campus. Stability is a function of the skater's smoothness, wide stance and resistance to putting deep flex into these highly maneuverable boards. Of course, the thicker deck was found to be more reliable on the top end, with far less effect from road aberrations upon. Taking the decks to speed also provided an opportunity or four to test the bamboo's durability. A poorly-timed slide led to a serious truck-crunching slam into a solid concrete wall. The trucks took more damage than the deck itself, which barely deformed and did not delaminate at all. Similar punts or rail-slams into pavement left us with some scuffs (the boards, too) but no real damage. The Vanguards get high ratings for durability!

Coupla Gripes, because that's what we do... Other than some riders' lack of affinity for the flexible nature of the Vanguards, we really only heard one other complaint and that was about the clear grip system. Now, our boards have had dozens of feet and several months of hard riding on them, but we've managed to wear down the grip on both decks. When new, the clear grip is very nice, but now we'll have to re-grip with tape applied over the top of the remaining grit. Loaded suggested to us that we use conventional grip tape, in no larger than 3x3" pieces. So there ya have it. The Consortium Says: regardless of which "build" you select, the new, bamboo Vanguards are high-quality, dynamic decks with a unique, stoked ride. The "Premium builds", themselves, are high-performance rigs, perfect for skaters that understand and enjoy well-designed flexible boards and know how to ride them. We've been on the oaken Loadeds; these new "boos aren't just environmentally sustainable, but are more responsive and more durable than ever. If your preference to date is for solid or stiff decks, then you'll either find the Vanguard to be something to pass by or an eye-opening experience in sustainable stoke. Post Script: What's up with Bamboo? When we discuss bamboo, what we're actually talking about is a woody grass comprising a family of over 1,500 species. It's the most prolific of all grasses and has a longevity that's exceeded only by its insane growth rate. There are plants that grow several inches, per day! The stuff grows like a weed, and this makes it very sustainable... chop it down and it grows right back, quickly. A sixty-foot tree maple tree might take 60 years to replace, but a bamboo tree (called a "culm") will take a mere 60 days! Several varieties of bamboo have a higher tensile strength than steel or iron. There are over 1,500 documented uses of bamboo and its multifunctional nature has given it many names "Wood of the Poor" in India, where bamboo covers more acreage than any other place on earth; "Friend of the People" in China, where it has long served many medicinal purposes; and "Brother" in Vietnam. In Japan, this tough little weed was the first greenery to punch through the atomized soot at Ground Zero. Now, bamboo has "arrived" in the USA, for cabinetry, flooring, architectural lumber, cutting boards and... skateboards. It's durable, looks good and represents a truly "sustainable" alternative to hardwoods. There's way more to this wood product than trendy skins for mall boards. Check it out.

Bonus Material. If you want to see some UNREAL action of the Loaded Style in the hands of trained riders, you can check out some killer videos. Here on the 'fish, some of you may have seen the footage by Luis Pilloni when he entered the 30 Second Video Contest -- this kid's got skills for sure. He even made it into the Evolutions II DVD Silverfish segment. See his complete video, [here](#).

The early Adam Colton video, "The Soul Of A Vanguard Carver Lives On..." is still one of our personal favorites. It's a feel good flick (although bit tragic) and well worth a peek. Now, check out the mind-blowing stoke bomb that's their most recent work, Loaded board control action at its finest. Enter Adam2. The newest video online is Loaded's, "Get Loose".