

VENDOR PROFILE: GEMPLUX GEM OF A FIND

Already a Supplier to Valhalla Boatworks,
Gemplux Steps into the Sportfish Yacht Market



– Matt Bridgewater
Gemplux CEO

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Family owned and operated since 1980, Gemlux has become known in the marine industry for its high-quality, innovative hardware. Led by CEO Matt Bridgewater, the 45-strong team is dedicated to offering a growing portfolio of products that are easy to install, solve technical challenges and are delivered on time. Based in Jacksonville, Florida, Gemlux constantly looks for ways to improve its existing products and create new ones that result in better boating experiences. From its small beginnings as the “hinge company” to a world-leading stainless steel hardware provider, Gemlux is driven to innovate.

GEM Products Inc. was founded in 1961 by Carroll Godwin and James Metcalf, two marine industry sales representatives. The “GEM” was created by inserting an “e” between the initials of their last names. Matt’s father, Erle Bridgewater, bought GEM in 1980, and Matt quickly developed a passion for boats, fishing and the business, where he worked in the warehouse during the summers and on weekends. In 1994 Matt started working at GEM as an outside sales representative where he focused on building relationships with boatbuilders and suppliers and making a commitment to produce high-quality hardware that would last a lifetime. (The company name would later change to Gemlux, which initially referred to the scientific electropolishing process that results in the superior finish of Gemlux stainless steel products.)

Since the introduction of the Viking subsidiary Valhalla Boatworks in 2019, Viking’s relationship with Gemlux has consistently grown. The V Series utilizes many of the company’s products, from rod holders and cleats to thru hulls and carbon fiber outriggers and stainless-steel bases. Gemlux is committed to taking its company to new heights by diving into the sportfish boat market. And with their recent purchase of the Viking 46 Billfish *Gemlux*, they are certainly proving their commitment is a very serious one. *Valhalla* had a chance to catch up with Matt Bridgewater for an inside look at his company’s development, its growing relationship with the Valhalla and Viking brands, the shared philosophies that have made the relationship successful – and a whole lot more.

Q: As companies, Viking Yachts (and its subsidiary Valhalla Boatworks) and Gemlux have a lot in common. Can you describe some of those similarities?

A: We are family owned and are now going into our third generation as my daughter Mya began working in the Marketing Department two summers ago. We are committed to a family-owned business model and have no interest in selling. That family culture trickles down to our employees, who are extremely dedicated to the company; and many of our employee’s children have worked at the company for summer employment. We have very similar approaches to our businesses. Viking’s mantra is building a better boat every day. We’re dedicated to making boating better. Every day we are trying to build products that make boatbuilding and the user experience better. We’re focused on the user experience, which includes the manufacturer, the dealer and the boat owner. We want to make the experiences of all three of these groups better. Moving into the fishing product market, our goal has always been to give boat owners a better chance to catch more and bigger fish. Like you, we believe in investing heavily in the engineering side of our business. I have a full staff of engineers and craftsmen. When I first started working with Viking, I immediately noticed the commitment to engineering, technology and advanced materials. It is the belief of being on the leading edge that we share.

Q: Describe your growth from the “hinge company” to what you are today?

A: When I came into the company, we were predominantly a distributor of commodity parts, whether it was a five-spoke destroyer steering wheel, a stamped hinge or a standard cleat. Initially, we tried to find the best price for a hinge and introduce it to the market. It had nothing to do with design; the shape and function of the hinges or cleats essentially had remained unchanged for many years. To evolve as a company, we knew we had to put design and engineering first and focus on the user’s experience – not what the hinge costs. Let’s worry about the value our product adds to the user’s experience. How can we make the product better? That’s why our slogan is “Demand The Best,” even if that requires asking the



builder to change their tooling or assembly method. Cleats and hinges weren't flush with boat surfaces so if you stepped on a latch it would hurt. We knew we could do better.

Q: So you started using design and engineering, as well as feedback from owners and boatbuilders to design your products?

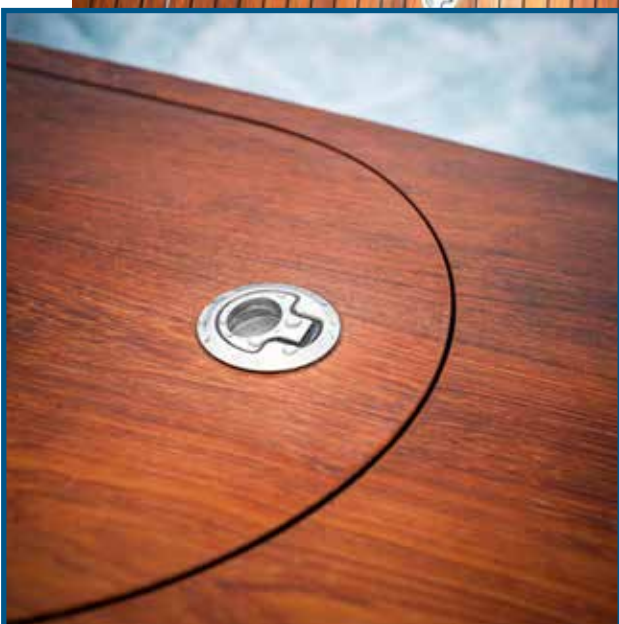
A: That's correct. There were some easy wins right out of the gate, like rod holders. They had these white liners inside of them, and the rod holders were chrome-plated brass. So, the rod butts would ding the chrome-plated brass and you could end up with green dots all over your rod holders. And then when you pulled the rod out of the holder, it was common to have the white nylon sleeve (often covered in mildew) come out stuck on your rod butt when you were fighting a fish. And I thought, "This stinks. What are we doing? We need to do better." That's how we ended up with our Bluewater Rod Holder, where the liner is integral. It's held in by the stainless steel. We got rid of the screw holes. We have it fabricated out of stainless steel, and now we're even doing it out of titanium! That's just one example of a whole catalog full of products that have been improved and streamlined. It starts with, 'Hey, we've got this existing product that's been around forever. How do we make it better?'

Q: Besides your commitment to improving products, what other company attributes are you proud of?

A: Our products are designed and built by fishermen for fishermen. Good example: I leave tomorrow for a week to fish with my entire sales staff so they get a hands-on experience of our products and what we're trying to achieve. I grew up fishing, started off in the ponds fishing for bass. I eventually had one of my dad's buddies take me offshore and I caught my first mahi – ended up with a dozen of them. I was probably 8 or 9 years old. I said, 'This is where I want to be. I just loved it.'

Q: What factors were key to moving your company to the next level?

A: Early on, it became clear that we needed to get to know the boatbuilders and the fishermen. So, I started competing in the kingfish tournaments, which at that time



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were huge. It was a chance to interact with our audience and learn about what’s working and what’s not. That’s how our latching products developed. They were failing on the tournament boats. The latches were made from cheap plastic and the cams were made of zinc, which is not a suitable material for saltwater hardware. We then developed the entire latch and cams system out of stainless steel. I’ll never forget the boatbuilders’ concern about pricing. I said, ‘Well, currently the ones you have break, and all your live bait flies out of the back of the live well, so you will be solving a huge problem.’ It took some time, but the industry soon realized the value of a better product. It was the same situation with flush slam latches, which were made of plastic at the time. Some boat builders shipped

a bag of extra plastic latches with each new boat because they knew they would fail. I thought that was insane. We started producing stainless steel latches; it was a tough sell because they were more than double the price, but the boatbuilders came to understand that boat owners would be willing to pay for the better latch that did not break.

Q: Could you name some milestone products for your company?

A: I mentioned the Bluewater Rod Holder and the flush stainless-steel latches. Both have been critical to our development. We also re-designed all our hinges, which led to friction hinges and custom hinges for almost every boatbuilder in the industry. Our philosophy has been we’ll engineer and design whatever type of hinge you

want, everything from the number of drill holes and the size and shape of the hinge to whether it’s flush or top-mounted. As long as you’re going to buy them and design them into your boat, we’re happy to do it. And that has been a very good mindset for us.

Q: How is your business model set up?

A: We design and engineer all our products. We develop our products and outsource the manufacturing to very trusted and dedicated suppliers who have worked with us for generations. Then we distribute our product directly. If you call our shop and you want to buy one hinge, you will have somebody answer the phone – and you will be able to buy one hinge. This was my dad’s rule. If somebody takes the time to call us, we’re going to answer the phone.

Q: When and how did your relationship with Viking and Valhalla begin?

A: I was connected by a friend to [Viking Design Manager] David Wilson about three years before Valhalla was a known name. David said: ‘Matt, I’ve been watching your company, and we want to work with you on a new project.’ I thought this was fantastic because I knew the company was very loyal to its suppliers. About a year later, David called and said he wanted to have a meeting with our team. About 48 hours later we were in New Jersey. Valhalla Boatworks was at the point where they needed to specify the hardware. The Valhalla product brought us together – finally! It was an honor to be working with Viking. I knew our business cultures aligned and we just couldn’t connect previously because we had always been focused on center consoles.

Q: How did that first meeting go?

A: I’ll never forget it. We brought up a full case of samples – and they liked all of it. But in general, they wanted to make changes to almost every piece, and ready in just two months. And I said, ‘Why do you want to change this rod holder – it’s been successful for a long time?’ They explained their reasons, and I said, ‘You’re right. Your suggestions are going to make our parts even better.’ And we made the changes. We opened the tooling; we changed the designs;

we met the deadline. And when the Valhalla center consoles were announced, they were covered up with Gemlux hardware. And that’s when our relationship gelled, and it has just grown from there.

Q: Can you name a few of the custom items you made – and continue making – for the Valhalla brand?

A: We make a dual-purpose rod holder that doubles as a cupholder with a screwless installation. There are two Rod Holder/Cup Holders on the forward lounge of the Valhalla – one on each side. Initially, the cup in the Rod Holder/Cup Holder sat crooked because the bottom where the cup

sits was designed to be on a flat surface. But Valhalla had tooled their Rod Holder/Cup Holder with an angle, so we redesigned the bottom of the cupholder so that the cup sat perfectly level. It was a better way to do it. We also custom-designed a skene chock because the Valhallas feature a teak toe rail, and they didn’t want the lines rubbing on that toe rail. But they also didn’t want the chocks to be proud, but to be flush – to maintain that clean look in the running position – and angled so a line wouldn’t get caught on it. So, we had to handcraft and polish those in our fabrication shop to meet that deadline. But that product’s awesome.





Q: Talk a little bit about the importance of your product. Do people overlook its significance in the building of a boat?


A: It's the hardware that holds the boat together, and if there are problems with the hardware, you're going to have problems with the boat. Take a cleat, for example. You really don't need a super strong cleat – until there's a hurricane or you're trying to get through a storm on anchor. If your cleat fails, then your boat's very likely to sink. Same goes for the plumbing of the boat – the thru hulls and other plumbing fittings need to be reliable. All of these parts must be very functional and meet several standards and specifications, and in our case we always try to exceed those specifications. In addition, they must be beautiful! A lot of engineering time at Viking, at Valhalla and at Gemlux goes into pieces like that.

Q: Gemlux recently took delivery of a 46 Billfish. What's the story behind this purchase?

A: We developed carbon fiber outriggers and all their associated attachment points and accessories for center consoles. My passion is billfishing. As we were able to more effectively pull dredges from center consoles, we were fishing more like the big sportfish yachts. We took center console fishing to another level by developing the collapsible dredge booms and other products using carbon fiber, stainless steel and titanium. But there's just no doubt there are advantages of fishing on a big inboard boat, especially in a rough sea. Not only from a comfort standpoint but it's generally considered they raise more fish. When I started fishing with friends on their sportfish boats, they always suggested we

take our outrigger designs and introduce them to that market. That got me thinking. We had already proven to the center console market that moving from an aluminum to a carbon-fiber product was better. I knew that taking our internal outrigger design and scaling it up to a convertible sportfish size boat was the next logical step.

I kept trying to get people to let me use their boat as a test platform. It was a big ask. People are reluctant to have you rip their outriggers off their boat to test a new product. We had to have our own boat to be able to go down this path. My friends in the sportfishing industry – guys like Captain Karl Anderson and Captain John Brownlee – kept saying you've already proven your relationship with Valhalla, now you need to get with Viking on this project.



Q: What was your next move?

A: I called Ryan Higgins, who was in support of working with us on a demo boat for us; he reached out to Pat Healey who was all in and wanted to know how Viking could support this project. The boat is going to be a testing platform for the first year. That's the bottom line. We're trying out hardware, drilling holes and remodeling fittings. It'll be a year of product development before we even offer these products for sale.

Q: What are the main products you are testing on the 46 Billfish Gemlux?

A: The internally rigged sportfish carbon fiber outriggers. They are obviously just a much bigger version of our internally rigged outriggers that we have on the center consoles and the engineering is very similar. The advantage is you eliminate all the stay wires. Our design criteria was to make the outriggers strong enough and stiff enough that they did not need support cables. That's not easy to do once you're getting into 30-, 40- and 50-foot outriggers. So, it was a lot of engineering to build them to structurally do the job. In addition, you need hardware that is much stronger because we wanted to be able to pull anything from the outriggers.

Q: Explain the benefits of the carbon fiber outriggers you're testing?

A: They open up many possibilities. The captains and the mates are going to have a platform to fish the way they want to fish. Suddenly instead of having to just pull the dredge from one angle or pull the teaser from one part, you can pull the teaser or the dredges from anywhere on the outrigger you want, or you can pull multiple teasers and dredges. And for kite fishing enthusiasts the lack of stay wires to snag kite lines is a true game changer!

Q: How did Viking help you prepare your boat for the prototype outriggers and other products you wanted to test on the 46 Billfish?

A: With our partnership with Valhalla, we developed a very strong relationship with the engineering team at Viking. Our engineers know your engineers, and so it made for a natural transition into the sportfish arena, where there was already a base of trust and respect. We were able to have conversations before the boat even

went into the mold about where we were going to position the outriggers. And they were able to help us develop a product that worked right out of the gate through 2D and 3D drawings, conference calls and many visits. With the 46 Billfish, we're getting drawings of all the strong points that are laid up into the fiberglass. We knew exactly what we would be bolting onto. If you bolt onto a surface that lacks strength, it doesn't really matter how strong your outrigger is, right?

Q: What other factors were critical in making this installation a reality?

A: On every outrigger system there are three mounting locations. We needed a bigger footprint for these locations and Viking was more than happy to accommodate us with larger strong points.

Q: What other products are you showcasing on the 46 Billfish?

A: We're building out an entire product line of halyard locks that will accept 500-pound and 600-pound mono, which is what the sportfish industry uses. The center console captains use 300-pound mono. So, our previous halyard locks were for 300 pounds. This has grown into the development of 400- 500- and 600-pound halyard locks.

It's not a sexy product line, but we're continuing to build out our below deck plumbing fixtures and systems. Our products consist of composite ball valve and plumbing fittings as opposed to the traditional bronze. They are immune to corrosion and electrolysis and are truly lifetime ball valves that won't ever seize.

Q: We understand that many of the Gemlux parts on the 46 Billfish were manufactured using 3D printing technology. What role does 3D printing play in your product development?

A: We have more than 50 active projects in development using 3D printing. We employ printers for prototyping, fitment testing and for functional production parts. We have a dozen 3D printers running 24/7, and we print with multiple materials. We can include strands of carbon fiber in almost every print. Further, we can use layers of carbon fiber in between the composite materials. Without this technology, we would have never been able to get the outriggers



installed on our 46 Billfish. In fact, when the boat left New Jersey, just about every single fitting on the outrigger system, including the mounts, were 3D printed nylon with carbon fiber. We ran the boat to St. Augustine, Florida, in mid-March with 3D printed parts. Since then, we've been converting many of the parts to billet aluminum, but we are doing all of our open-water testing with multiple 3D printed parts. A Valhalla-specific part that comes to mind is the skene chock. It is a modification of our pull-up cleat, and some samples and initial production orders were satisfied by using 3D-printed bodies (the plastic body that supports the cleat and touches the deck). Other 3D parts you might find on a Valhalla include dredge boom attachment rings and some of the internally-rigged outrigger components like tips and halyard guides, depending on the model.

Q: Sounds like you've got an excellent relationship with our company now, share a lot of values, share a lot of philosophies and goals. Just look toward the future, how do you see continued growth with Viking and Valhalla?

A: Honestly, I think this relationship is just getting started. It's something that really inspires me and gets me excited about the industry. I think we're going to help Viking fulfill its goal of building a better boat every day. The fishing equipment, the stainless steel hardware and the plumbing fixtures

are key components to the user experience, the owner's happiness, and the crew's overall perception of the vessel. We've set out to help anglers catch more fish. We're really focused on that fishing segment and giving them a platform upon which they can build.

Q: Can you throw us any new ideas that are on the horizon?

A: I envision all sportfish boats having custom and adjustable outrigger systems that are designed for the different waters they are fishing in. If you're fishing in Costa Rica, then you're going to want an outrigger that will lay farther down because the ocean's flat and you want a wider spread. If you're fishing in the Dominican Republic, where it's generally rough and windy, you want to be able to adjust your outrigger more vertical so the tips don't touch the water's surface as the boat rocks in the trough. I think we'll also enable captains and mates to make quick changes to their entire system with different pole kits for different conditions and fishing styles. As an example, if a captain wants to pull live baits from his riggers he might want a more flexible tip. If he is pulling lures from his riggers then he might want a stiffer tip. If he wants to pull two dredges from a single outrigger, then he can insert a stiffer section and accomplish this easily. It's all coming within the next 12 to 18 months. I am excited. The whole company is excited. 🐟