

SAM DEVLIN'S QUEST TO DESIGN THE PERFECT BOAT

*Beautiful*

*Mind*

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY JONATHAN COOPER

Portrait of Sam Devlin,  
owner and founder of Devlin  
Designing Boat Builders in  
Olympia, Washington.

**Opposite:** The designer/  
builder's newest creation,  
the Kingfisher 33, during sea  
trials on south Puget Sound.



*Sam Devlin* sits in an office chair while we fasten a lapel microphone to his frayed Outback Oilskin vest. We are at the studio of Devlin Designing Boat Builders at the southern end of Puget Sound, a few miles west of Olympia, Washington. On his desk, twin wide-screen monitors stand by for Sam's next keystroke while the computer quietly chirps announcements of new emails.

The studio is one of about five buildings that surround a circular driveway at Sam's home-office property, a compound of boatbuilding sheds, storage barns, and his residence. Towering evergreen trees loom overhead, creeks run this way and that, the German shepherd puppy is all teeth and exuberance.

A new barn that shelters two boats has just been completed. One is an older Devlin design and the other a project soon to be disclosed. To access the studio, you cross a bridge with a creek underfoot and enter a space that recalls an outsized version of Owl's tree house in Winnie-the-Pooh. Walk through the door and settle into an overstuffed leather lounge chair. To your right, a wood-burning stove. To your left, an array of bookcases, drafting tables, a handmade stool. At first the overstuffed chair seems incongruous: too big for this tiny space and aesthetically out of place. After 10 minutes you understand why it's there. When Sam Devlin talks boats, you want to get comfy, grab a hot cocoa, and stay a while.

The studio's shelves are so stuffed with books that you couldn't find room to slide a sheet of paper between them. Subjects range from building wooden skiffs to Sam's current ruminations on the tiny house movement (read: tiny boat). Sam has fastened name boards from past boats to the walls and to the door, with names emblazoned in gilded script or serif fonts. Scattered among the bric-a-brac are CAD printouts spread out on drafting tables or rolled up like manuscripts unfinished, tucked into corners. The schematics offer a view into the soul of the boats that Sam designs, builds, delivers, fancies, dreams, or conjures from his raw and tireless imagination. He is always up to something.

Recently, Sam has developed an affinity and skill for building scale-model boats. Most are half-hulls and some are not even his own designs, but they all serve as reminders that his designs have been—always will be—inspired by the handsome, practical



**Left:** On this day, *Kingfisher* is getting fitted with a swim platform. **Above:** One of several buildings on site. It's difficult not to be charmed by Sam's office/studio, where the creative side of his brain is unleashed. **Top-Right:** *Kingfisher*, in process, is still upside down as the hull bottom is sheathed to an extra thickness compared to the rest of the hull. After building up to the correct thickness, the boat will be primed before she is flipped right side-up for finishing.



lines of work boats. Some models were constructed for amusement, while others serve as prototypes for his full-size builds. The latest creation is among the latter, a newly designed 33-footer called *Kingfisher*. It is a beautiful scaled-down model of the same cruiser that Sam's crew is building only 100 feet away.

## LOVE AFFAIR

Sam describes the exact moment when his interest in boats solidified. "In 1974, I was working on an old tug in southeast Alaska. I was off watch in the galley drinking coffee while reading the first issue of *WoodenBoat*. I remember feeling the warmth of the oil range, the strong coffee, and the sound of the engine beating away—something about that worked for me, and I could never shake it from my mind."

A few years later Sam started designing and building boats.

He became an early pioneer of the Stitch-and-Glue method of building wood boats by employing modern materials and technologies, including the use of advanced epoxy resins, fiberglass cloth, and computer-cut plywood panels. For the types of boats that Sam builds—always one-off, custom designs—he is able to maintain a small but efficient shop and doesn't have to worry about pressing a certain volume of boats out of a single expensive piece of tooling. There is no one in the industry I know

who cares more about the products he builds. One could say that Sam obsesses over them, constantly evaluating and re-evaluating them from both an emotive and a functional perspective.

## STITCH-AND-GLUE PROCESS, SIMPLIFIED

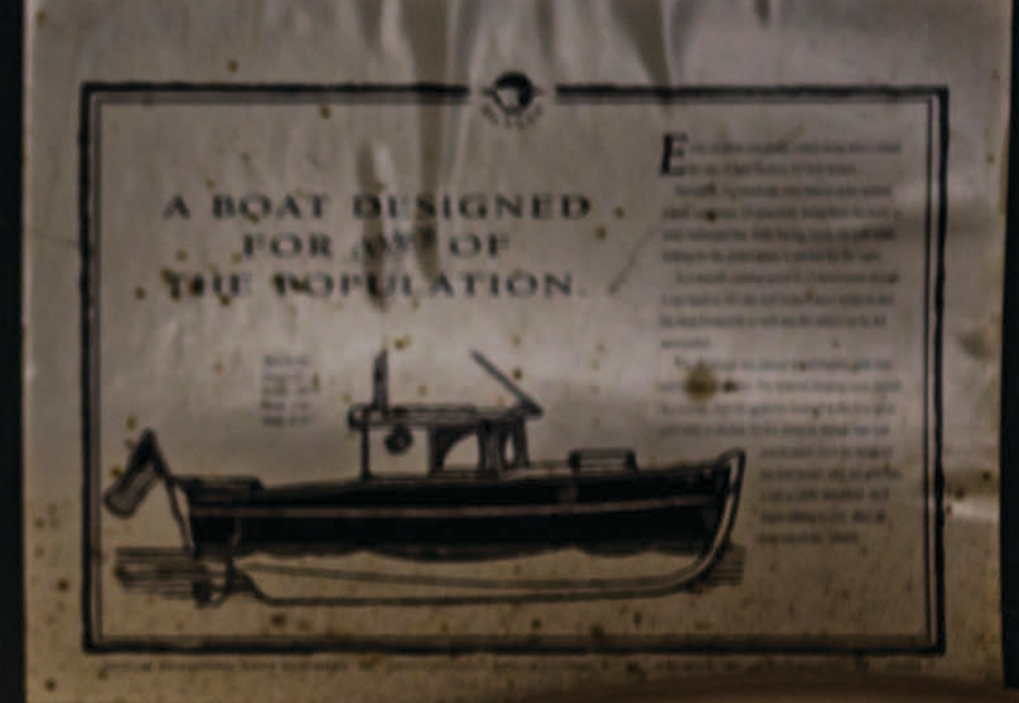
After the design is roughed out between Sam and his client, the CAD drawings are finished and all parts are ordered for delivery to his shop. Marine-grade plywood is cut at a CNC router shop that Sam knows and trusts. Once the plywood, resin, and fiberglass cloth arrive, it's time to begin.

Bulkheads are the first to be put into place. They are installed on a jig of 2x6s that sits on the floor and defines the location of each station. For the first half of her build, she is assembled upside down. Once the stations are in place, the hull is built with plywood planks that have joints designed to interlock at the kerfs like puzzle pieces: The joints themselves resemble 2-D cartoon-drawn ocean waves and, when interlocked with their mates, provide superior strength to dovetails or similar joinery. The joints are then reinforced with glass and epoxy and installed along the outside edges of the bulkheads, which naturally taper to form the shape of the hull. Working from the top (the boat's bottom since she is planked upside down), completing the first layer of paneling takes about a day on a typical 30-footer. Next, tabs epoxied to bulkheads form this first layer of the outer shell.

Once the tabbing and joints are glassed in, the hull is ready for initial fairing in preparation for cold-molding the hull sides and bottom. On Sam's *Kingfisher* 33, the hull's bottom is laminated with ¼"-thick layers of marine ply to a thickness of 1-½". Hull sides are laminated to 1-¼" thickness, but the process is otherwise the same. Twelve-ounce biaxial fiberglass tape is set over all the chines, and at each joint the cold-molding process continues until the total thickness is reached, bottom to top.

Once planked, two layers of fiberglass cloth are laid onto







**Left:** The saloon and helm on Kingfisher is designed for simplicity, with a straight galley and versatile dinette seating. Due to the size and number of windows and the painted white ceilings, the saloon and forward accommodations are bathed in natural light, essential for boating in Pacific Northwest waters.

everything else before the final paint is applied to the hull.

### KINGFISHER 33

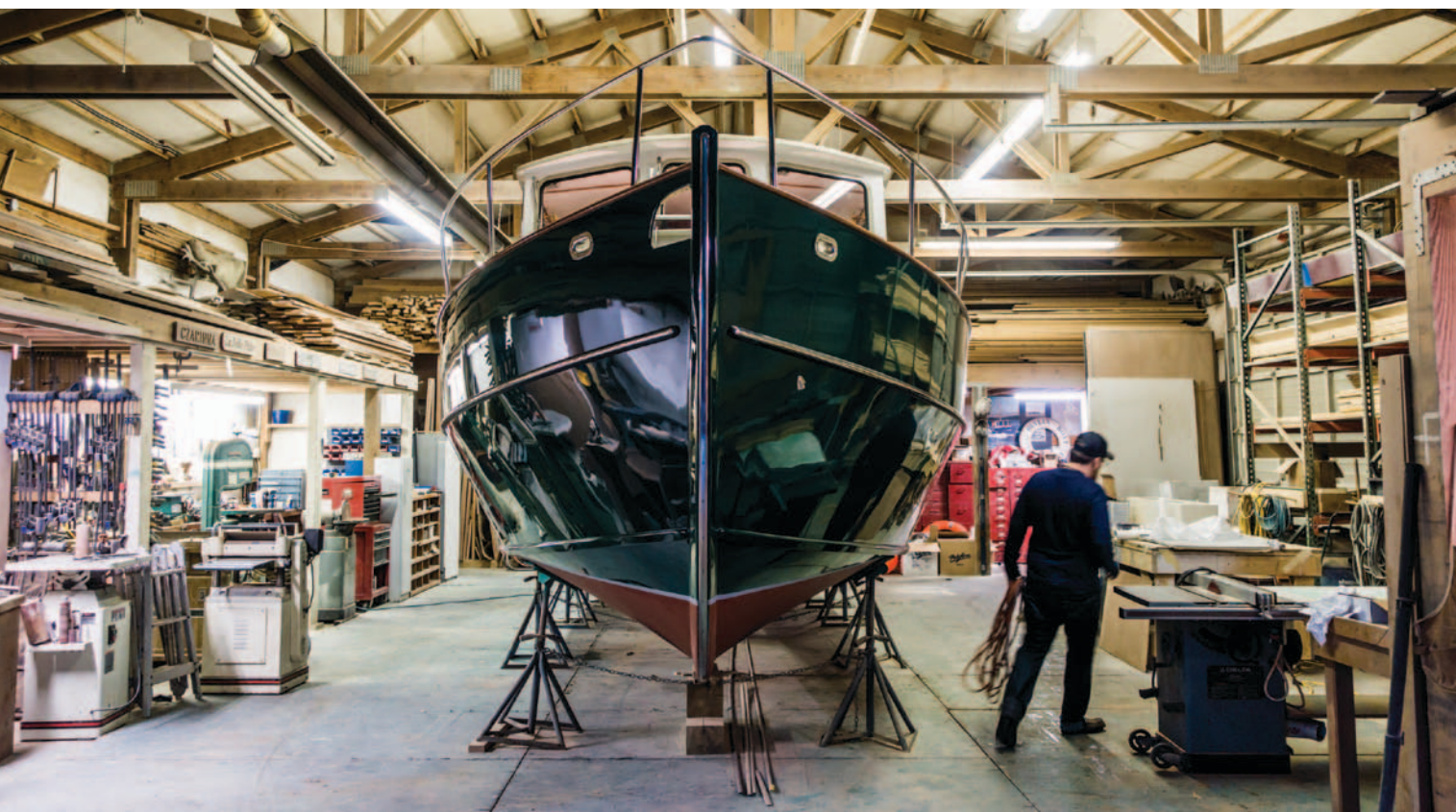
We first meet John Heater at Sam's office on our third visit to see Kingfisher's progress. This is John's sixth project with Sam. Over the 26 years that they have known each other, John has commissioned everything from a 23-foot tug, *Godzilla*, to *Driftwood*, a 31-foot Black Crown. Like Sam, John loves the process of designing and building boats just as much as he enjoys being on the water. The two have become friends over the years, so much so that they built Kingfisher's dinghy together in Sam's shop last year. John tells me: "We are good friends, and I truly admire [Sam's] innate abilities as a builder, an artist, and a plain-old good, down-to-earth personage."

After six months in the building shed, Kingfisher is well on its way to first sea trials when John expresses an unexpected desire for Sam to add a small flybridge to the sedan-style cruiser. Overnight, Sam pens a design that will work within the parameters of the boat without ruining its charm and functionality. John agrees, and in a matter of weeks, the flybridge is designed and built. Two months later, the boat, flybridge and all, launches in south Puget Sound looking like she was meant to have a bridge all along—a credit to Sam's skill as a designer. One only needs to be familiar with previous Devlin builds like the Black Crown, Blue Fin, or Sockeye to know that he is an expert in marrying aesthetic appeal and proportion to performance.

The finished product is a craft that is as suited for slow cruising as it is for planing at 18 knots. She only weighs in at

the hull and separately glassed into place. The final layer before adding the stem and keel is a course of polyester Dynel cloth, also set in epoxy. Sam is meticulous about mixing the exact ratio of epoxy to cloth as well as removing any air pockets in order to ensure a perfect paint-ready surface. Final sanding and fairing of the hull is followed by the essential step of sealing the surface before priming.

An epoxy primer is applied before the boat is rolled right-side up using a custom-built jig that is strapped to the hull. Then comes the nerve-wracking process of lifting and rolling, performed by double-crane trucks, forklifts, and patience. Once the hull is upright, Devlin's crew gets to work installing the decks, superstructure, motor, electrical systems, finish work, and



**Top:** Both of Sam's sons are boat builders. Cooper, shown here, is working epoxy into the hull seams. **Right:** The Kingfisher scale model helped guide changes on the real boat, such as the bulwark height.

14,300 pounds, so the single straight-line shaft powered by a 260-horsepower Yanmar diesel spins enough power for top-end speeds and superb fuel burn at the low end. Early estimates put the boat at a 4- to 5-gallons per hour fuel burn at cruising speeds. As you would expect, turns are nimble and soft; one of the highlights of her plywood construction and single Yanmar is that noise underway is insignificant.

*Kingfisher's* moss-green hull, accented by her brick-red bottom and white boot and waterline stripes, rises gently out of the water as the throttle is pressed forward. The entry is fine, and as she hits planing speed, spray strakes knock the water down just at the beginning section of the trunk cabin. Her running angle is a few degrees bow-up. *Kingfisher* rides confidently, as if she's skimming across the water rather than pushing through it. Aft the house is a cockpit perfect for a group of at least four deck chairs. The same space might also appeal to the ice-chest-and-angler sort who desires ample room for reeling in king salmon and crab pots. The original design actually featured a fish box in the middle of the cockpit, but it was eliminated to reduce tripping opportunities. Sam wanted a flush-deck experience from the transom to the steps leading down to the fo'c'sle.

Interior space is functional and well considered within the confines of the small but useful house. To starboard, the straight galley sits across from a two-by-two dinette. The backrest of the forward seat can flip around to provide support as a copilot's chair. The helm features a tidy display of engine controls and a single Simrad touchscreen. Although it's warm on the day of



the sea trial, it is difficult to imagine that the saloon's beautiful Dickinson Lofoten oil heater isn't up to the task of warming the entire space. *Kingfisher* has a full diesel heating system installed.

Belowdecks you'll find a wet head with composting toilet as well as a separated V-berth with exposed bulkhead stations painted brilliant white. The net effect is a comfortable yet contained cruising boat with wide-ranging performance characteristics, and an interior that features utility of space, superb visibility, and plenty of natural light.

After several months of ownership including a shakedown cruise to the San Juans, John commented on the experience of building a boat with Sam: "It is sort of like being allowed into Michelangelo's studio to sweep up chips and occasionally comment on how the pose might be. I did have substantial input, and in all cases I feel the result is pretty nice."



## SEARCH FOR PERFECTION

There are few people like Sam Devlin. He is an artist and a perfectionist, a dreamer caught in the profession of boatbuilder. But he is also highly analytical. He first gets to know each customer personally, and then figures out exactly how the customer will use each boat.

Sam is constantly searching for the perfect cruising boat design: What does she look like? How long? How does she cruise? How much should she cost? Because of his idealism, I'm not sure Sam will ever feel that he's designed the perfect boat; he's always finding flaws, even minute ones, in the boats he builds. When we ask him if he thinks *Kingfisher* is nearly there, he hems and haws, and chooses his words carefully. "I'll need to see her once more to fully understand that."

Months after launching, when we ask him if he has a favorite design, his answer is simpler: "Part of the process, for me, of doing a proper job of designing and building a boat, is that I picture myself in that boat. Over the course of many days and months, I am envisioning what it's going to be like to use that boat. How am I going to cruise it? How will it make my life more fun or more enjoyable? And painting that picture—painting myself in that picture—is such a vital and important thing. I really have to be in love with the boat I'm working on right now, in the moment."

Sam is one of today's pre-eminent thinkers about boats—about how people cruise, why people cruise. He is constantly aware of how boating trends move the needle in today's fast-paced world. He believes that if boatbuilders design for simplicity of purpose and aesthetic, more people will be drawn to the lifestyle. Here John's Michelangelo reference seems appropriate. Sam has helped develop the perfect method to design and build boats to suit his client's preferences. No one has the same needs from a boat, so Sam starts with nothing but a blank slate each time. But instead of marble or fresco, Sam's media is plywood, resin, and glass. ■

**Above:** Running at 12 knots, *Kingfisher* burns an economical amount of fuel, but is equally comfortable at 17 or 8 knots. **Below:** The forward cabin is painted brilliant white, making it light and airy.

