



Eye for Design

The Sam Devlin Interview

Yacht designer Sam Devlin, proprietor of Devlin Designing Boat Builders, and a pioneer in the world of stitch-and-glue boatbuilding, sat down with *Small Craft Advisor* to review his career in boat design and construction and to talk about what might come next.

Were you involved in boats as a kid...and what did you do for a living before turning to boat design and boatbuilding?

My dad had a boatshop when I was 4-6 years old and he was at the time inventing the first jet pump for inboard-engine boats. He was just about done with refinement of the design when the money ran out and he went bankrupt in the process. It might seem a bit surprising I would remember the boatshop with fondness, as there must have been tension around at the time, but I mostly remember the feeling of the shop and the heavenly smells of wood, paint and other things. Also, right behind Dad's shop was Sweetland Archery, which had a patented process for making Port Orford cedar arrow shafts, so there was the pervasive smell of Port Orford cedar in the air. If you think maybe I've been chasing those childhood memories for many decades, you might be close to the truth. I learned to sail

in high school, cutting my teeth on a Thistle on Fern Ridge Reservoir near Eugene, Oregon. I worked my way through college by working summers aboard tugboats in Alaska, and had a short, not-very-successful venture building log homes in central Oregon just after college before starting my boat-building business.

We know your first official boat design was the 15'-3" Egret, an open sail-and-oar adventurer that's still going strong. Was that the first boat you built, and how did the design come about?

I had been building small-scale models of balsa wood and glue and had several different designs completed. I showed them to my father (then a contractor in Eugene) and he thought they looked good. He offered to supply the materials if I built him a boat, so the first one turned out to be the Egret design, and the second boat I built was a 16-foot canoe I'd designed. It's funny about the Egret: I've tried to redesign her several times over the years, and after doing the exercise I inevitably come back full circle to realize she's just fine...and a better boat than I might want to admit.

RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM— Lichen 20 scow sailboat; a drawing of the Lit'l Coot full keel motorsailer; and Sam's first boat design, the 14'-3" Egret sailboat.

Did the Egret immediately launch your career as a designer-builder, or did it take awhile before you started thinking of boatbuilding as your new career?

I didn't think there was any way to make a living building wooden boats, but still wanted to work in that direction. I built three small dinghies on spec and sold them through classified ads in the local paper. During the late winter of 1977, in order to support my boatbuilding urges, I bought a one-way ticket to Alaska that spring and immediately got a job on a crab boat out of Kodiak. At that time the crabbing industry was getting ramped up to start making some big money. We did a four-day trip and returned to town to offload and work on the boat. Without a place to stay, one of the deckhands offered to let me stay a few days in an abandoned school bus in his backyard. After sleeping for about 24 hours—having just worked virtually nonstop the previous four days—we got up, and while having breakfast, started talking about Alaska and life. It turned out he had a young family, wanted to stay in Kodiak and would need a little sailboat to help him explore local waters. I sketched up the boat and with the \$1,500 deposit check bought a return ticket to Oregon and started building him a little 20-foot boat. And the next 41 years could be summed up as me never quite catching up with a backlog of boatbuilding commitments.

When did you first start thinking of yourself as a designer, and what was the turning point?

I guess I've always thought of myself as a designer, but it was probably in the early 1980s when we started to get some attention from the public and boating publications started to notice what we were doing. It took awhile, but I gradually realized that the design side—versus just boatbuilding—might be where I'd develop a bit of a legacy.

Did you have some formal training, or did boat design just emerge from your experience boatbuilding?

No training at all, but I've literally spent my life looking at boats, trying to appreciate what works in them for me, or how I might reinterpret them if I was asked. I am a firm believer in the adage that, "If it looks right it most likely *is* right." Boats are nothing more than vehicles transporting us to our inner sense of whimsy, and the best designs shoot straight into the veins of the most addicted boat lovers. Many of us feel this way about the little boats we love to play with.

Did particular designers provide inspiration during your formative years? (Has that list changed or expanded over the years?)

I remember running across a little yawl in Alaska designed by Jay Benford that, at the time, epitomized what I thought a small and smart little sailboat should be like. Jay certainly has



the eye, and I have appreciated his work over the years. The best of us in the design field, though, was Bill Garden. His eye was the most artistic, and his drawings still literally transport me to a higher sense of consciousness. I've had the pleasure of knowing many designers over the years and can say plainly that some have the eye, while others seem to struggle with it. It's the designers who have the eye—who nurture it, develop and practice it, that I respect most. It's actually a pretty small list and I am truly not sure if I am in those ranks or not...but I certainly keep trying to sharpen my own skills to develop that eye.

Many of your early designs were for small rowing and sailing boats, but you gradually broadened the portfolio to include larger cruising boats and you upsized your shop and built a lot of amazing larger boats. But not long ago you returned to your smaller shop—does this suggest you might be returning to your small-boat roots?

Smaller boats speak to my own energies more than anything else. And yes, I think the market is going to get “small” again, and I certainly don't mind thinking about what I might contribute to that small-boat market. I spend a lot of time following the markets, and like others, I do what my customers want. I have felt the trend toward smaller boats since 2008 and the economic downturn that changed it all, and simply am trying to respond. I used to puzzle over the trend of designers who work on larger and larger boats. I even quizzed Bill Garden about it one day, worrying that his work on a really large design project literally took a couple years of his life. I felt he could have given us so many more smaller designs that would speak to more of an audience than just that one large project. But what I've come to realize is that as designers we're simply responding to a couple of situational factors. First, we must make an income to survive and design again, and sometimes that's not an easy thing to do. And the second, we become intellectually involved and intrigued with the scope and scale of those larger projects. They force us to think out of our comfortable box and confront the really scary part of the design world, where mistakes might cost us our careers or certainly might compromise our livings. But, stretching our brains is not all that bad and even the dimmest of us needs to exercise the stuff between our ears.

In three categories—rowing/paddling, sailing and power—can you identify some of your personal-favorite designs? And what are the boats you personally use most often these days?

The truth is that my favorite design is literally and always the latest one I've been working on. For me to do the best job I can on a design, I literally have to sell myself on that boat. All those hours working with the lines and the shapes are burned into my brain, and in the end there is inevitably a time when I realize the boat is perfect for me, and I want one as soon as possible. The best critique I can apply on the new design is simply that if I

want it, then perhaps others might, too.

I haven't been sailing as much as I wish for several years, so I'm finishing one of my Marsh Wren designs (*a 20-foot gaff-rigged daysailer with fixed keel*) for my own use. I also have a new canoe cut-out and ready-to-assemble, since I'd like to do more canoe camping. And I have my little Candlefish 13 power skiff that I use frequently, a 19-foot Bill Garden-built power launch with a tiny diesel engine, and my old troller *Josephine* that I've cruised several times to Southeast Alaska. A 28-foot Beals Island Lobster Boat gets used fairly often, and one of my Surf Runner 25 power launches also gets thrown into the stew...so I'm not exactly lacking when it comes to boat options.

When did you first get involved in kit production, and what trends have emerged in the kit field? Are more customers going for kits, vs. plans-only?

I originally didn't want to do kits as I felt it was asking too much to be a designer and builder, and add the kit thing to a slightly productive business. But I had a couple of workers who'd retired from our boatshop and wanted to try their hands at the kit thing, so they talked me into it. Now I realize that it's simply another leg to the stool of making a living in the boat business, and that the kits are attractive to the person who might never buy a finished boat, or build one from scratch. The kits give them really accurate parts for the start of that experience, and diminish some of the early intimidation factor of building a boat. I observed years ago that there is a type of customer who appreciates the journey far more than the destination, and those are the ones who buy plans and kits and build their own boats. For them, it's truly is more about that boatbuilding journey than it is about the destination of using the boat.

You're well known as a stitch-and-glue proponent, with your designs mainly being built in plywood. Are other newer boatbuilding methods or materials on the near horizon, such as foam board, carbon, or...?

There's tons of new ground here with new materials coming on-line; we've even had builders stitching and gluing—or should I say stitching and *welding*—aluminum boats about the same way we would with plywood and epoxy. We're now stapling hulls, which streamlines the stitching side of the stitch-and-glue method. I see no end to the refinements, and look forward to these maturations of the method. It's exciting and I love that I've been able to be a part of it.

If you can step back, how would you describe yourself as a boat designer? What are you best known for?

I'm a niche builder and designer. I have developed, over the



ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP—Devlin's newer Surf Scoter 22 design; Chinook 21, with small diesel inboard; and a Sooty Tern 25 sailboat.

years, a tiny knack to see where the production market is not present, or not doing a direct enough job. Those are the design and building areas where I excel and thrive. But having said that, there's an old adage among designers that we hit on a type and style and just do larger and smaller versions for the rest of our lives. There is more than a bit of truth to that saying and I need to be honest in recognizing there is certainly a look about a "Devlin" design and, for better or worse, I have to live with that look.

I have a story that might help to illustrate this idea. Years ago my grandmother was moving back to an area of Oregon where she and my grandfather had lived about 40 years previously. Grandfather had passed away and she was moving closer to one of my aunts who lived in the same town. While searching for a home to buy, with my aunt and a real-estate agent driving her around the town, my grandmother kept seeing a for sale sign on the lawn of a little yellow house, and each time they passed she would tell my aunt she wanted to stop and look at that house.

My aunt would reply each time with “Mom, you can afford a better house than that little crackerbox, let’s keep looking for something really nice for you.” Grandmother would relent and off they’d drive to another viewing. But after a couple of days Grandmother insisted they stop at the little yellow house and after entering the front door she declared “this is the house—this is my new home.” When they did the title search a few weeks later they found that the original builder was my grandfather, some 43 years before. Not one person in the family had remembered Granddad building that house, and my grandmother was simply responding to the look and feel of the house my grandfather had built so many years previously. That look and feel was unique, and somehow spoke to Grandmother about the sweat, blood, joy and cursing of the homebuilding experience Grandpa had so many years earlier. She felt at home, and that was that.

Are there some new small-boat designers, in the U.S. or elsewhere, who’ve gotten your attention in recent years?

I am really quite jealous of John Harris of Chesapeake Light Craft—he is a clever guy and will in my opinion make a significant stamp on the world of boats and boat designs. There are others, but again, remember my statement that there is really just a very small list of those who have the eye. I am not sure if it has to be born into you, or if it can be trained by looking at boats and boat designs for years. But I think we all know it when we see it, and that is one of the true joys of living at this time when we can still play with these little floating bundles of joy.

What changes do you foresee in the future of small-boat building and sales? Fewer sailboats, more powerboats? Hybrid propulsion systems, or...?

The market is going smaller for sure, electric propulsion is coming into its own and will soon take over major parts of the market. Sail will come back (yes, it is down at the moment); solo boats or shorthanded boats will again become more common, stand-up paddle boards will go away, houseboats and shanty boats will come on as housing gets so very expensive. All just predictions.

If you were starting out in the boatbuilding and design fields today, would you recommend a course different from the one you’ve taken? What do you see as the future of boatbuilding and design—especially the future of small boats in the global marketplace?

With computers proliferating, designers no longer need to become skillful at hand-drafting, and the science of yacht design has now become more like the press of a key. But while the science part is vastly easier, there is still that eye that has to be developed. If you don’t know where you are going with a design there is no artificial intelligence that will help you make a good boat design. So while things have changed, we still see fundamentally the same issue. Familiarity with computers is the rule now, and yet still the nurturing of that stuff between the ears needs to be done. So the path has changed for sure, but basically the same bases need to be crossed to get to home plate.

If starting over I would take one of the year-long design classes that the boatbuilding schools are promoting and I would become intimate with 2-D and 3-D computer programs. And working in the boatbuilding industry would help immensely with development of the design side. One of the main things I’ve always have had to face with my own design work is that because I’m a builder as well as a designer, I have to design things that can actually be built. Sometimes that is a bit of a chore and I can spend as much time on a design trying to figure out how to build it efficiently and quickly as I do with the hydrodynamic shape of the boat. Those two disciplines are crucially linked together. Without one you can’t have the other, and it’s a tough task at times.

People seem to have less time for recreation these days, as families find themselves driven harder to keep up with busy lives, increased work pressures, and other distractions. And yet we seem to be witnessing at least a modest surge in the number of homebuilders...and kit sales appear to be on the rise.

What trends have you noticed in these areas? Can “ordinary families” afford bigger boats these days, with ever-more-expensive purchase costs, moorage and maintenance fees, and other costs of owning larger pleasure boats?

The boomers don’t seem to want to have all their chips in one basket; they have many things and interests and don’t want most of those to be only in the boating side. This is one of the trends that is driving the smaller-boat theme in the industry. The other issue I see, even in my own life, is that most likely I will be doing more solo boating in the future. My wife Soitza loves boating and supports me very well in it, but with grandchildren, gardening, and aging parents that need tending, I can see the handwriting on the wall. If I want to spend time on the water I will need to do a lot more of it solo. And while I may be a somewhat unique on the boat-use spectrum, I remind myself that I’m nothing more than my own demographic and if this trend is hitting me then it may be hitting others. Figuring out what boat designs will help make that easier, safer, or more rewarding can and will be a whole new batch of fun.

During the recent Lake Union Wooden Boat Festival you talked about how some boatbuilders have been cannibalizing themselves via the sale of used-boat models they’re still building...and how with some builders the race has been on to bring out new models that aren’t available on the used market. How has the “cannibalizing” effect hit your company, and what are your general views of the future of boatbuilding—with special emphasis on smaller boats?

I am worried about our markets. It feels much like the early 1980s and I don’t see leadership in the boating community with a long-ranged vision to take us to the next plateau. It’s no secret that these are very confused times in the world politically and environmentally. My impression is that there is, more and more, a tendency for each of us to screen out the external and go inward as a reaction to this confusion.

RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM: Sea Swift 19 sailboat, and Pelicano 20 outboard camp cruiser.

Boating plays a bit to that trend, helping us to smooth out the lumps of life with our time on the water. But the expense is conflicting and challenging. And is it healthy for us to escape to the water, perhaps at the expense of doing what we can to make the world a better place? Not sure about the answers, but many issues need attention in the marine industry. All markets saturate and plug-up with the acres of used boats. So as a designer and builder those can either be seen as opportunities for new niches or we can go fetal in our own reaction to a rapidly changing market. But it's all about energy, and the fostering, expending, and building of that energy...and as I mature the handling and management of that energy becomes more and more important to my daily pursuits.

We know you have a passion for fly-fishing in distant places, and cruises up and down the Inside Passage to Alaska. Any other things you'd like to do away from the office...and have you started thinking about some retirement goals?

I love building boat models and want to move to more modeling of boats and new designs. It's a fairly simple thing to CNC-cut scale models for these designs, and I would like to work more with those pursuits. I am most certainly getting "not younger," and while I can feel some of my own dreams for great voyages and adventures on the water become more faded in desire and drive, I still may have a couple of tricks up my sleeve in terms of some neat boating ideas and adventures.

Who knows. I just need to remind myself that I am driving this ship—no one else. And also to keep in mind most designers don't peak till their mid-seventies or eighties. I might have another 20 years to my career. Who knows what will happen? Thanks for the time.

Devlin Design Boat Builders, based near Olympia, Washington, is at www.devlin-boat.com

