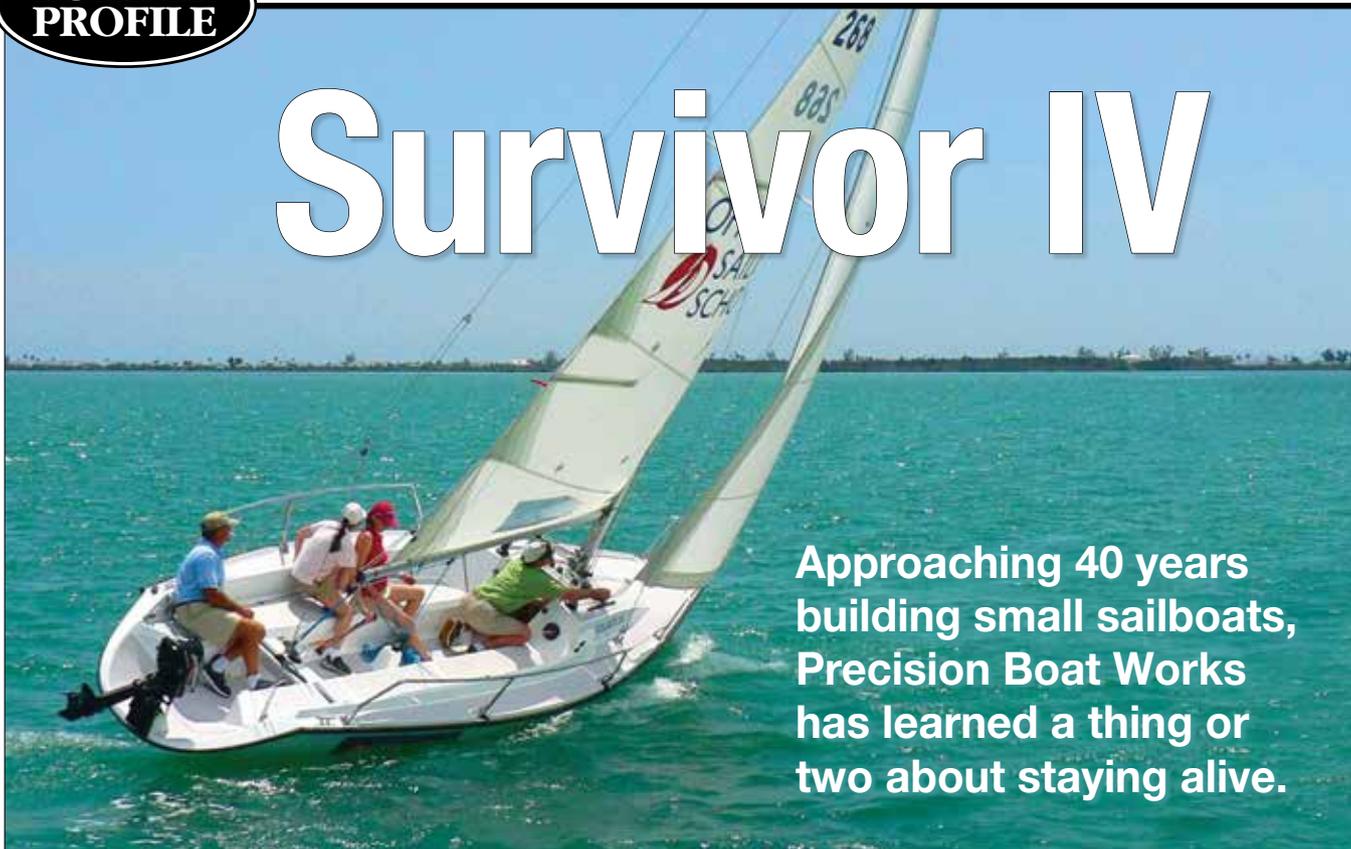


Survivor IV



Approaching 40 years building small sailboats, Precision Boat Works has learned a thing or two about staying alive.

COURTESY PRECISION BOAT WORKS

Since the Great Recession of 2008, we've profiled several boat builders who have managed to stay in business through ingenuity, hard work, and grit: Dennis Choate, "Survivor," Professional BoatBuilder No. 126; Jim Betts, "Survivor II," PBB No. 129; and Mark Bruckmann, "Survivor III," PBB No. 139. Long entrenched in South Florida, the Porter brothers further demonstrate that the strong (and sometimes the lucky) can survive.

by Dan Spurr

Here's the short version: Brothers Richard and Bill Porter grew up in southeastern Michigan, worked in the automobile plants, moved one after the other to Florida because it was warmer and cooler (climatically and culturally), found work with a succession of boatbuilders, and then, in 1978, decided they'd seen enough of the good, the bad, and the ugly, and learned enough about all three to start their own company.

Precision Boat Works builds small sailboats in the outlying countryside of Palmetto, about an hour's drive south of Tampa, on Florida's west coast. There's a long history of fiberglass boat building in this general area: Morgan Yachts, Island Packet, Wellcraft, and many others, including Durbeck's, where both brothers worked for a while in the '70s.

I visited their Precision Boat Works

shop last winter. The brothers share office space with sales manager Barton Bleil. Nine or 10 others build the boats in the 15,500-sq-ft (1,440m²) warehouse facility. In a small business, just about everyone has to be able to do more than one thing; cross-training sounds too formal for how tasks are organized at Precision, but it happens and it works. A 2013 news article quoted a 26-year employee as saying, "We do whatever we have to do to get the job done." Loosely arranged, Richard and Bill handle purchasing, tend to the equipment, and oversee the shop. Bleil sells the product and is the main contact with retail customers and their authorized Precision dealers.

Coming into Florida

The Porter brothers are playful with one another, engaging in respectful repartee usually initiated by Richard's

Above—In addition to its half-dozen models of trailerable sailboats, Precision Boat Works, in Palmetto, Florida, builds the Colgate 26 (7.9m) for Steve and Doris Colgate's Offshore Sailing School as well as for the U.S. Naval Academy's sail-training program.



DAN SPURR

Precision's founders, Bill Porter, left, and his brother Richard, grew up in Michigan, working in automobile plants, where they learned early on about production and assembly of parts. They moved to Florida separately in the 1970s.

Starting Up

In the late '70s, Steve Belack was building a 22' (6.7m) sailboat called the Seaforth, a Steve Seaton design. Seaton, better known today for his classically styled motoryachts, had also designed 13', 14', and 16' (4m, 4.3m, and 4.9m) daysailers for Belack. Richard had worked at Seaforth and Bill had worked for the company that built Belack's tooling, so when the brothers deemed it time to strike out on their own, a partnership with Belack seemed sensible. In 1978, the new business was capitalized with just \$5,000. Before long, they bought out Belack and continued on their own. The brothers estimate they built 120–130 Seaforths over the next few years.

"We were the only two people there," says Bill. "We cleaned the bilges and cleaned the toilets."

When it was apparent that they needed more models, they contacted Seaton, who not only had designed the Seaforth but was well known to them as the designer of the Durbeck custom trawlers and the 46' (14m) ketch they'd helped build. After Seaton, the Porters

dry humor. In the mid-1960s Richard worked at the Ford Wixom Assembly Plant. "I started at \$2.71 per hour and got a nickel raise up to \$2.76 and that pay rate lasted forever. I moved down to Sarasota in 1970. There were few companies around here that had more than 12 employees at that time. One was Tropicana orange juice, one was Miller Trailers, and one was Wellcraft Marine. I just happened to end up at Wellcraft. Bill moved down a year later, also to work at Wellcraft. We both liked working in the boat business.

"Bill worked as a final finisher for \$2.25 an hour. Best I've ever seen. I was a rigger because I could use a hammer and a saw."

Richard made supervisor, earning \$200 a week, but put in so much time he figured he made pennies an hour.

"We were building 15 boats a day," he says. "Dick Genth managed many powerboat companies around here [including Wellcraft at that time]. He was an amazing character. You stayed until the fifteenth boat was done. Dick was in the building before you got there and was there after you left. Not only a great businessman but a great

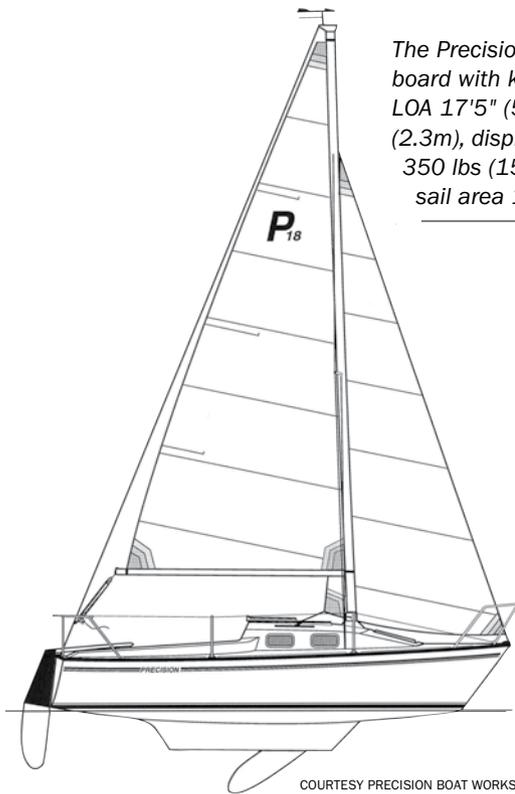
storyteller as well. A lot of guys followed him around from company to company. Then we went to Durbeck's, the custom builder in Bradenton. Mainly built custom trawlers. He [Win Durbeck] came to Florida and started with Morgan Yachts. He was a casket maker in New England and had all the woodworking tools. Bill and I worked for two or three other companies before starting our own."

Richard says that while at Durbeck's, in addition to custom trawlers, they made multiple boat plugs and molds for other companies such as Tartan and CSY. That experience gave them the skills needed to create plugs and molds for their own boats years later. The brothers continued to browse the area builders, including Hidden Harbor in Sarasota, and Seaforth, which was later to become their entrée into a business for themselves.



DAN SPURR

Precision has occupied the same building outside Palmetto nearly since the company's inception in 1978. The crew is adaptable: tooling a 100' (30.5m) custom project required removal of the back wall to get the mold out.



The Precision 18 features a stub keel and centerboard with kick-up rudder. Principal specifications: LOA 17'5" (5.3m), LWL 15'5" (4.7m), beam 7'5" (2.3m), displacement 1,100 lbs (498 kg), ballast 350 lbs (159 kg), draft 1'6"-4'3" (0.45m-1.3m), sail area 145 sq ft (13.5m²).

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decided to work with designer Jim Taylor, beginning with the Precision 18 (5.5m) in 1984-85. Over the next four to five years they eased away from the older Seaton designs and began adding Taylor's designs exclusively, next being the Precision 15 (4.6m) in 1989. Richard explained what they liked about Taylor: "He designed the new Starwind 19 [5.8m; built by the sailboat division of Wellcraft, called Starwind]. We were watching the progress with that boat and

saw it being tooled up and really liked the boat, the way it was designed and built. All of Taylor's boats sail so very well. He's the best designer to work with because even when he says you can't have *that*, he will explain why you cannot do something as opposed to just saying no. But he will then work with you and your ideas to add in even more features than you had thought of. You go back and forth until you agree. Jim is easy to work with, and he always delivers more than you wanted."

Layup and Assembly

Focusing on assembly, Bill countered: "We liked the Starwind 19 design, but the way it went together was *difficult*, so we thought we could be competitive in that market building a slightly smaller boat less expensively. All our boats go together really well."

Richard: "A lot of thought goes into how to build them efficiently. The hull



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Above—A prewired deck is suspended by overhead chain hoist before it is lowered onto the hull. **Right**—A shop crew member with a buffing wheel details a hull before moving the boat outside and onto a trailer for delivery.



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liners are structural. A lot of people are building furniture and then stick them together and hope it supports the boat. Part of our scheme is Jim Taylor and part of it is us.”

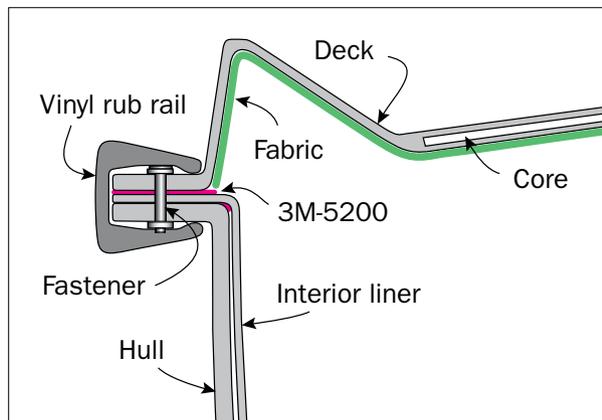
Bill: “The liner is also incorporated in the hull-deck joint. No trimming of the liner when you drop it in. We save all of that energy. With our system there’s only one way it can go in. You

can push in the side of a bare hull, but once you put the liner in, it’s like a tank. It’s like pushing against the side of a building. When you put the deck on it’s really strong, and then you bolt

the hull, deck, and liner altogether at one time. It doesn't leak, it's strong, and really light."

The liner is locked into the hull vertically by the hull-deck joint and horizontally by indents. Richard: "Drop the deck in, drop the pin through the hole, and it's all lined up." The Precision 28 (no longer in production) had a companionway that locked into the hull. "Some liners [made by others] require shifting and shims," says Bill. "Our parts only go together one way."

"Bill and I did 99% of the labor on the first 75 or 100 boats we built," Richard says. "And a lot of conversation in between. Like accommodation compromises inside and out." They'd taken a hard look at the Starwind 19 tooling and believed they could improve on it, specifically to expedite assembly and thereby reduce man-hours. "It doesn't cost us anything to make a better build," Richard says. "It's



ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY PRECISION BOAT WORKS

Left—The hull, liner, and deck are fastened together and covered with a vinyl rubrail.

Right—A pin inserted into holes in the flanges locates and aligns all three parts prior to fastening.

easier and less expensive."

Bill: "For the hull-deck joint we through-bolt the hull, the deck, and the liner. All three of them. This system is simple and strong. No way to break the joint; you'll break the boat first. We use 3M 5200 all the way

around the hull and deck. Then the hull and deck joint is covered with vinyl rubrail. We purchase the rubrail from Prototype Plastics in Clearwater. We own the dies for all of our rubrails. Our rubrail...we stretch the hell out of it. Held at two points with screws at

the stern. No intermediate fasteners or adhesives. Three guys pull it tight to stretch it firmly against the hull-deck joint. It has to be stretched to stay.”

The hulls (solid fiberglass) and decks (PVC closed-cell foam core with plywood inserts) are a hand layup. “Never had a chopper gun in our operation,” says Richard. “Low-tech, high quality. Nothing exotic. We’re not doing anything now we didn’t do 35 years ago. The materials have improved though: the polyester and vinylester resins, mat and woven roving. About 15 years ago we adopted vinylester resin for the hull skincoat. Straight vinylester. No blend. We’ve had no blistering problems.”

Strategic Decisions

One can extrapolate from the above the first of the Porters’ maxims for survival, *their* survival at least: low tech, high quality. What follows from that early-on decision is the size of boats Precision builds.

Richard: “We started with the 18, 21, 23, and built up to the 27 and 28, which was a really nice boat, but we couldn’t get enough stocking dealers to make it a long-term success. We built the 27 and 28 during the winter months, when small boat sales were slower. The boat was a bit different for us with its inboard power, wheel steering, pressure water, and shore power. We were used to building 15-footers and all of a sudden we’re building a boat with *systems*. While the 27 and 28 worked well for us, it was just too expensive for our dealers to inventory without hurting their efforts in small-boat inventory and sales. We decided trailerable boats were what we were known for, and what our dealers could sell.”

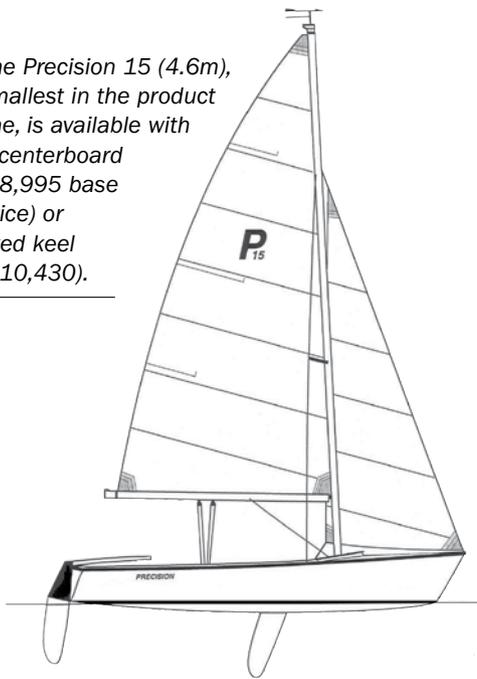
They also decided to resist the feeling they needed to continually develop new models. “We’d like to replace models quicker but the economic reality is . . . you spend x dollars developing a model and what does it actually do to your bottom line?” Richard asks. “Does it really improve us? We’re building the same boats, though we

have made many updates over the years. Our newest model is the 185, and it’s 13 years old. It’s not like we have 15,000 Catalina 22s to compete against. We only have 500 Precision 23s to compete against. We do look at our competition every year with each of our eight models and evaluate how we stack up. So far, we feel we still have

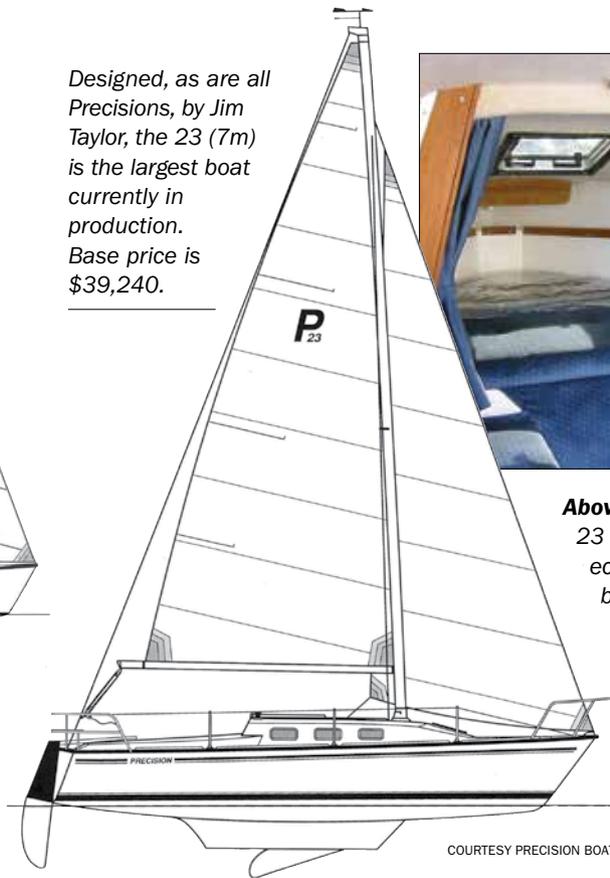
some great boat models that have withstood the test of time.”

The Porters have taken on some specialty and one-off projects over the years, such as tooling a 100’ (30.5m) Ron Holland design (to get the mold out of the shop, the end of the building had to be removed), and tooling for Wellcraft, Starwind/Spindrift, a

The Precision 15 (4.6m), smallest in the product line, is available with a centerboard (\$8,995 base price) or fixed keel (\$10,430).



Designed, as are all Precisions, by Jim Taylor, the 23 (7m) is the largest boat currently in production. Base price is \$39,240.



Above—Interior of the Precision 23 reveals the emphasis on economy and ease of assembly: liner with berth flats and hull sides, bulkheads fitted to liner and bolted to deck beam, and fabric overhead.

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Swedish 11m (36'), and a one-off 42' (12.8m) trawler. But this sporadic work has never led them too far astray from their small sailboat foothold. Stick with what you know and are good at—and can sell.

A periodic constant, if you will, has been building the Colgate 26 (7.9m) for Steve and Doris Colgate's Offshore Sailing School, which commissions the boat for several schools it has in Florida (headquartered in Fort Myers), New York, and New Jersey. The same boat is employed by the U.S. Naval Academy sail-training program in Annapolis, Maryland; in fact, Precision had just delivered 12 to the program prior to my visit. That yields a total of 42 Colgate 26s at the Naval Academy, and 15 at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut.

Selling only through its dealer network over the years has become increasingly problematic. Richard

laments that it's difficult to get stocking dealers: "We could have as many dealers as we want if we want 'brochure dealers.' If you have the requirement that they have to buy a boat or three boats to be a dealer, it gets harder and harder. But we and the dealers know, the dealers that have boats to

show are the dealers that actually are selling boats. We don't sell factory direct, but we are very involved in assisting the dealer with selling a boat. Originally we didn't want to have that much direct conversation with the potential buyer, as that is what dealers do. But now find we have to be much

The Colgate 26 was developed specifically for teaching beginners how to sail; it features a ballasted keel, a large cockpit, and a simple rig with 100% foretriangle jib.



COURTESY OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL

AD SPACE

The Precision 185 (18'5"/5.6m) is built of hand-laminated fiberglass with a vinylester resin skincoat for improved blister protection.



COURTESY PRECISION BOAT WORKS

more involved to assist the dealer and boat buyer.”

All details of the sale, however, including the actual transaction, are handled by the dealer. Most dealers are located in the Great Lakes region and Northeast, with others ranging as far west as Texas, but none on the West Coast. As Richard points out, shipping from Florida to the West Coast adds a bit more to the final cost of the boat. An additional issue in appointing a stocking dealer out west is the higher cost of display space.

Scheduling

Despite their many years in business, the Porters find it difficult to anticipate consumer/dealer demand. Richard says, “Ideally, in this business you’d like to build the same number year round. Everyone wants their boat in the middle of April. We used to keep a fair amount of inventory—up to 50 in December and zero in April. But the market’s not that big anymore.”

During my February/March visit he said they still had 15 to 20 in stock. “We don’t necessarily follow the trends. We don’t know why. We’re such a tiny part of a tiny market. This time of year, when we start building boats for stock, we always guess wrong what’s going to sell in the spring. Last year it was little boats, so you start building little boats, but the dealers want big boats. No logical pattern to it. Fortunately, while the model mix changes, the dollar volume stays about the same. As the dealers

have cut back on their stock boat inventory, we have stepped up our finished and in-process inventory to help the dealer and retail buyer take delivery of a new Precision in a short period of time. This is a large additional cost for our company, but it is something that had to be done to react to the current market situation.”

Vendors

Precision works with a core group of suppliers and tries to keep the number few and manageable. Though boat model sizes range from 15' to 23', there is a lot of commonality between models. For example, the same cleats, from the same hardware manufacturer, are fitted to all models. Same for windows and other parts. “So,” Richard says, “purchasing is relatively easy, considering the complexity of the business.” He estimates that 10 suppliers provide 95% of what Precision buys: Almost all hardware is from Harken (Pawaukee, Wisconsin); Seco South (Largo, Florida) for running and standing rigging; sails from Rolly Tasker (Phuket, Thailand), except for the more performance-oriented Precision 185; trailers from Magic-Tilt (Clearwater, Florida); and for decades, masts and booms from Dwyer Aluminum Mast Company (Branford, Connecticut).

A Changing Market

The brothers say they've never done much national advertising. But in the 1980s they exhibited at four to five national sailboat shows, and supported their dealers at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland. That show, the country's largest, no longer draws as many small boat dealers from around the country. Meeting potential new dealers is no longer common, Richard says. “Years ago, we had a dealer in Pennsylvania that would charter buses and bring their customers to Annapolis.”

Miami and Chicago were also on their short list of shows attended as a factory effort.

“We used to spend \$10K a year on brochures,” Richard says. “You don't

do that anymore. Everybody's online. That's been a good thing for cost containment. You used to go to Annapolis and see your brochures lying all over the ground. People would grab them and throw them. I'd say, 'There's 50 cents, there's 50 cents.'”

“We started at the top of the market back in 1978. We started during the

Arab Oil Embargo, when people couldn't afford gas to put in their powerboats. We had a Sarasota dealer who'd sell 13 daysailers in a weekend. Those days are gone. The embargo was great for sailing, but then the next year they discovered they couldn't water-ski behind their sailboat or fish or get to their restaurant in half an hour. But

with our low overhead and ability to react almost daily to the market demands, we supply our dealers and retail buyers promptly. Most of our current boat buyers tend to be 50 years old or older and are either getting back into sailing after a long absence from the sport, or they are just now fulfilling the sailing 'dream' now that they have more time."

Cruise Control

It's not difficult to see why Precision Boat Works is still in business 38 years after starting at the top of a market that then went south. The company has no debt; it has no "huge fixed costs." No heat. No A/C.

The workforce is experienced, with zero layers of management. "We don't really need a supervisor on the shop floor," Richard says, "because everyone knows what they're doing. They all come to work."

Teak boards are cut and planed to the specified thickness in the wood shop, located at one end of the building. All crew are capable of performing multiple jobs.

Warranty claims? "Over the last 10 years, we've spent less than an average of \$600 per year for legitimate and processed warranty claims encompassing hundreds of boats. While we are all human, when an issue arises, we put in a process to eliminate that issue in the future," says Richard.

"We can survive where a lot of our competitors can't," he adds. "Some won't survive in this market. We'll survive as long as we want to survive . . .

as long as they can wheel us into the factory." **PBB**

About the Author: Dan Spurr is Professional BoatBuilder's editor-at-large.



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