

Henry Kaiser's Hornet Raceboat "Flies" Again:

Back and better than ever

The art of wooden boat restoration

Photos and Story by Emma Garrard
Sierra Sun, egarrard@sierrasun.com
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Albert Weise polishes the
Hornet's fin.
Emma Garrard/Sierra Sun

It's early, AC/DC is blasting from the stereo and the crew at the Sierra Boat Company in Carnelian Bay is busy polishing the aluminum between a boat's rivets, sanding wood, varnishing, painting, wiring, cutting floor board and tuning engines.

Pat Bagan and Tony Fejer start the Hornet's engine in the marina at Sierra Boat Company.

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The mechanics and wood workers are getting an early start before the onlookers wander in out of curiosity and slow their pace. They have serious work to do a week before the opening of Concours d'Elegance, and Bill Hutchens of Granite Bay hopes his boat, the historic Hornet, will be judged for the first time in the show. As the event nears, craftsmen will pull all-nighters in the restoration shop.

When asked how many hours the Sierra Boat Company crew has worked restoring the Hornet, some start to laugh; there are too many hours to keep track.

The shop employs a dozen wood workers and another eight mechanics, and the staff increases during the summer months to work on boat restorations and repairs. The shop has been booked since October 2006 for restorations for this year's Concours d'Elegance boat show. "It turns out to be a much bigger project than anticipated," Hutchens says. "It's all about finding the right people who really know what they are doing, are passionate and have the time." The boat is much older than most of workers. The restorers base their work on experience with other vintage boats and from a few grainy reproduced photos. But as most people who have worked on an antique boat know, each is different. "Our goal is to do our very best to restore the boat to its

condition in 1939,” Hutchens says. “Down to every last rivet. We want to restore, not replicate.” Hutchens has owned the boat for three years but says it feels more like 30 since he took on the restoration project from the Hornet’s previous owner, Jim Koch.

According to Chris Brogna, the shop foreman, restoring wooden boats takes research, imagination and time to think. Restoration costs can range from about \$1,200 to more than \$400,000 depending on the type of boat and amount of work needed. A basic restoration including new paint and varnish will cost roughly \$17,000. “It depends on what you’ve got and what you want,” Brogna says.



Detail is important

But the high price of repairs is worth it to the owners, since several of the boats the shop has restored carry million-dollar price tags. Although they are restored to an immaculate condition, their worth is primarily determined by their unique and rare status. To Brogna, the boats are priceless.

“How can you really put a value on it?” Brogna says.

For a show like Concours d’Elegance, a lot more is required than making the boat run well and look authentic.

“It’s paying very close attention to detail,” Brogna says. “That level is much higher.” Not everyone has what it takes to be a professional boat restorer, Brogna says. The task requires skill, craftsmanship and most importantly, getting paid. “There are more professional baseball players than professional boat restorers,” Brogna jokes.

Bill Hutchens smiles as he heads back to the marina in the Hornet.

For Hutchens, a retired professor and business owner, restoring his boat to a good-as-new condition has become a full-time job, as well as for a lot of employees at Sierra Boat Company — a job that takes a lot of patience and a quest for perfection.

“I’ve had to learn the hard way,” Hutchens says. “It will be done when it’s done. The point is to do it absolutely right. The boat is too important historically to start cutting corners now.”



Pat Bagan, general manager at Sierra Boat Company, Bill Hutchens and Tony Fejer ride in the Hornet for the first time. Emma Garrard/Sierra Sun

A Piece of History
The Hornet is truly one of a kind. The hull is one of only 10, 28-foot stepped -hull hydroplanes built by Gar Wood between 1929 and 1934.

After losing the Lake Championship in 1938 to the Mercury, an aluminum boat, the Hornet's original owner Henry Kaiser took the boat to world renowned aviator Howard Hughes. A custom aircraft aluminum deck was constructed.

(The frame pieces were from the original Howard Hughes design, so all the new rivets and holes had to match the holes in the frame sections. It was said that the aluminum top side, aircraft type, race winning design, that Howard built for Henry, was completed before Henry Kaiser went into the aluminum business.)

“It was a wooden boat and he wanted it to go faster,” Hutchens says. “It’s now half boat, half airplane.”

The following year the Hornet won the Lake Championships in 1939 at Chambers Landing on the West Shore, setting the course record. The boat did not lose a race after its transformation and was retired in 1953.

“There are no other boats that won so many races in such a short time frame,” Hutchens says. According to Hutchens, the boat disappeared from public view before it was discovered in Tracy, Calif., by Tom Bredt around 1996 and later sold to Jim Koch. “It was pretty tired,” Hutchens says of the boat’s condition then. “We saved every piece that came off.”

Sierra Boat Company took responsibility for restoring the engine, finding a Packard V-12 model 1A-1237 airplane engine from 1922 believed to be the only one left. The restorers replaced most of the aluminum, but not all of it. When Hutchens told Bill Linderman, the Mercury’s owner, that his boat’s rival was soon to return to the waters of Lake Tahoe, Linderman was thrilled. The two vintage boats will meet again at this year’s Concours d’Elegance, ironically on the same weekend they competed 68 years ago.

“The first words out of his mouth,” Hutchens says, “were ‘We’ve gotta race!’”

Submitted by Evo Alexandre