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Fun in the Sun

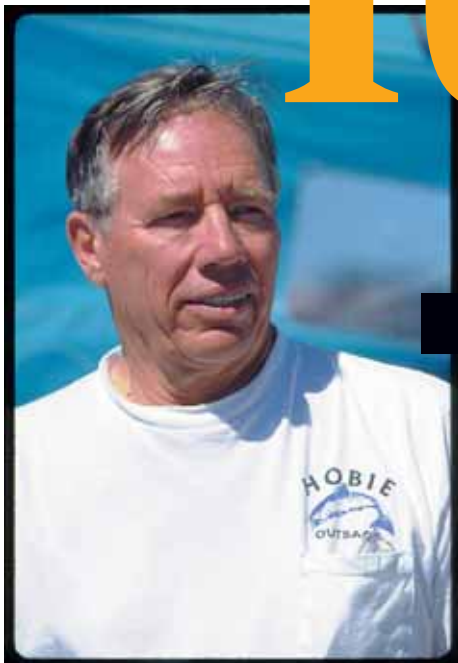
Shaping Hobie Alter

Mass Cast Tooling

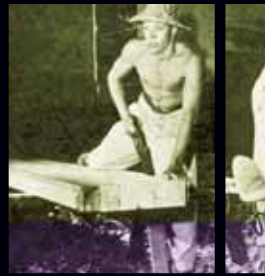
Workplace Violence

Testing Sandwich Structures

fun in the



Hobie Alter drew on hard work, innovation, and parental guidance to form



First of Two Parts

By
Andrew
Rusnak

Bill Baldwin, CFO of Hobie Catamaran, leaned back in his chair prepared to launch an answer. I'd asked him the obvious Hobie Alter question, the answer to which I already knew. Frustration is a good starting point. "From the outside looking in, when people think of Hobie they think about the beach lifestyle, living near the ocean, bathing suits, surfing, sailing, fun," he said. "And that's what we want them to think." Frustrated because I only knew Hobie like the rest of the world knew him—the spirited embodiment of mid-century Southern California beach culture. Sure, we followed him to the toy box, this scrappy enterprising kid who grew up curious with a gifted imagination and the mechanical flair to back it up. ('Beach bum makes good' is how the Southern California press themed it in the 60s and 70s.) He helped us pick out what was missing in our lives—surfboards and catamarans—and then coached us through that first, seraphic love affair with wind, salt water, sand,

son

the image of a beach lifestyle forever linked to his celebrated name. Oh yeah, he had some fun along the way.



sun... an endless baby boomer summer that still beckons in the dead of gray winter business meetings no matter where we are (Virginia), how old we get (43), or how hard we try to wave off youth.

“As a manufacturer, however, we think about innovation,” Baldwin continued. We were seated around a table at the Hobie Catamaran facility in Oceanside, California, CF Magazine’s Technical Editor, Bob Lacovara, Production Coordinator, Jessica Howard, Bill and myself, tracing, probing, gathering background on Hobie and his sand castle empire.

“So many of Hobie’s products were ahead of their time, like the Hobie 33 for instance. Take a close look at the innovative

ideas in that boat, the retractable keel, the whole geometry, long and skinny with a bulbed keel. After we discontinued production, some of the America’s Cup syndicates used them as trial horses for keel design when everybody else was building fat sleds.”

Better, inside looking out, but still frustrated because it’s still the Hobie featured in cocoa-buttery marketing brochures, pumped-up promo videos, and late morning anecdotal nostalgia dropped into regrets of blown out surf overheard at the local surf shop. *A restless high school student with time on his hands brings together his two loves, the ocean and woodshop! Dad backs the DeSoto out of the family’s Laguna Beach garage and Hobie Alter*

starts making surfboards, is what a new generation of crop-haired surfers paddling out on San Onofre reads on the back of giveaway tidal charts neatly stacked on the counter of the Hobie Sports store in Dana Point.

Like any challenged journalist, I wanted to write, to surf the Hobie behind the legend, to find that great, undiscovered, secluded peak on the ocean of his soul. Nothing tabloid, nothing grocery store checkout, and definitely nothing promo video or nautical shop carousel. I wanted something more profound, more Zen, the perfect wave safari metaphysical.

Several weeks later, however, after I shook his hand for the first time, I did my first 360. Legend and truth were inextricably bonded. "I skied 71 days last winter," was one of the first things Hobie, now 66, told me. "My goal is to ski until I'm at least 85." There was no escaping the beach lifestyle (even on the snowy slopes of an Idaho mountain), or the easy "brilliantly simple" description of Hobie's creations. I spun around, the view changed. I shredded the frustration, wanted something totally different. It was his fault, but that's why it was so much fun.

"I liked having fun," Hobie said, summarizing his life to date. During the interview he mentioned the word fun 30 times. "But it wasn't always as much fun as people thought. The image was I'd walk out onto the beach with a beer in one hand and a blond under my arm, but there was a lot of work involved. [Hobie mentioned work 71 times, more than a 2:1, work to fun ratio.] I tell young people, now I'm doing what I was always accused of doing in the past—doing nothing, playing, and having fun."

Hobie has put more people in the water than have all the Baptist ministers in the states of Georgia, Alabama, and the seven southern counties of South Carolina.

—Patrick McNulty, West Magazine

"I remember the day," says Bruce Kinzinger with a healthy spike of enthusiasm. Seated at his kitchen table in Fallston, Maryland on a cold, damp December morning, there is a subtle underlying streak of summer daring-do in his relaxed demeanor, a need-for-speed energy that competes with his reputation as a nurturing, methodical "people doctor" around the East Point Medical Center in Baltimore where he practices. "My brain was like jelly. I had not sailed for six years. When I graduated from MIT, I took another year's worth of chemistry courses. Then it was medical school for four years and a year of post-doctoral research in critical decision analysis."

When it was time for Kinzinger to explore residency programs, he wanted to relocate closer to the water. Four years of medical school at the University of Kentucky put him in range of "land lubber." As a young boy growing up in Potomac, Maryland, he listened to his father's Folboat adventures on the Delaware River, and he and his older brother Art spent summers at scout camps in Maryland and Virginia learning to sail the Sail Fish and Sun Fish, and eventually teaching young tenderfoot crews.

"We had a brief shore school every morning, going over water safety and sailing theory," Kinzinger continues of his scouting days, "but then I recall we went out on the water and were allowed to make our mistakes. My brother and I paired up and when we flipped the boat, we'd climb back up on the dagger board and get on

our way. It took us four or five times to understand that as the boat started to heel over, our instinct was to pull on the sheet to keep the sail out of the water, when we should've let the sheet out to slow the boat down."

The sailing bug went dormant now and then, but occasionally resurged in Kinzinger throughout his years at MIT. In between classes, he assuaged the rigors of a strict academic grind by jumping into a dinghy from a fleet the school's sailing clubs kept tied up on the Charles River, and going for a quick sail. One chilly October day, he took his first-time-out girlfriend for a ride, promptly slipped, and went for a spill in the drink. Other than a few summer vacation days in Ocean City, Maryland, where he and Art "field" tested Hobie 16s and were enthusiastically introduced to the world of multi-hulled sailing, Kinzinger never got serious about blow boats until that one fateful July day when the young resident suffered the perils of jelly brain.

"I was on my first rotation in the coronary care unit," he remembers of his days at Franklin Square Hospital in Baltimore, a short 20 minute ride to the closest Chesapeake Bay boat ramp. "No week was less than a hundred hours. I had two days off a month. My first day off, I rented a catamaran. It was a quiet day on the Chesapeake Bay, a five to ten knot wind, very meditative, the kind of day that made sailing what it is for me. It's a world apart, nothing can touch you, an experience where you can leave everything about your day-to-day-life behind. I didn't even bring a watch. It was a timeless experience."

A few more times that summer, Kinzinger rented the cat. He became hooked on the idea that stability is more fun negotiating a

"I liked having fun," Hobie said, summarizing his life to date. During the interview he mentioned the word fun 30 times. "But it wasn't always as much fun as people thought."

wide beam than a heavy hull. Succumbing to his childhood-diversion-now-turned-adult-addiction, and realizing that for the first time in his life he had a bit of money in his pocket, he purchased a Hobie 18 from Stansbury Marine, the same dealer he rented from. Kinzinger had a trailer hitch welded to his 86' Volvo 240 DL. During the winter he parked the cat in the driveway of a single home he rented with two other bachelors. Sometimes he

looked out his back window and saw snow cover the hulls. During the summer he squeezed everything he could out of the Hobie lifestyle. One of his brick layer roommates became an avid sailor. After work, on hot sweaty evenings, the two precariously raced the cat across the bay and back, pushing hard to beat an unforgiving sun before it disappeared and the green serpentine waves of the Chesapeake hissed into the pitch of night. (The promo brochure comes to life.)

On a brisk, partially overcast, Seattle morning, a taxi drops me off in front of Kenmore Air, the self-proclaimed “center of the seaplane universe.” Too early, the terminal is closed, so I head across the street for breakfast and think about the upcoming interview with Hobie, one nagging question being why has he taken up summer residence on Orcas Island in the Straight of Juan de Fuca where, as far as I can tell, there are no waves.

I’ll soon discover, however, for Hobie Alter it’s about the art of finding synergy in *all* nature’s secret corners, overlaps, and blasts of energy. Not to mention, retirement golf is a bit frustrating. A half-hour into the interview, I was ducking the spray of his many innovative creations and propositions, negotiating with my own humble reactions which ranged from, ‘Why couldn’t I think of that?’ to, hard-to-fathom but intuited to make perfect sense somewhere on the spectrum of tangent thought.

Well-tuned is a perpetual ‘notion’ pump in Hobie’s vigorous and festive mind ... gotta-do, gotta-do, gotta-do ... the modest hum of which, revved by spurts of creative fuel ... gotta-do, *NEW IDEA*, gotta-do ... quickly lures one into the safe wake of a pathfinder who



Bruce Kinzinger and future wife Kathy zip through the Chesapeake aboard a Hobie 18.

can build anything at anytime under any circumstances. And along the way, Hobie proffers risk as the kind of fun one should reach for while carefully navigating a frayed rope bridge tied over a gorge in a third-world rain forest. No doubt he could’ve built a better space shuttle, palm pilot, or high-speed train. Part of his anatomy is a tape measure he keeps in his pocket. It’s all on-the-spot instinct-engineering, tenacious trial-and-error go-for-it technology, all leading to

what Baldwin refers to as a high “fun to hassle ratio” for customers.

Several years ago, in between dodging moguls on the slopes, in the garage of his winter home in Idaho (three miles on a dirt road, no neighbors) Hobie built a 48-foot bridge (42-foot span) out of pressure treated two-by-six boards so he could get his tractor and horses over the river that cuts through his property—just another Sunday project. There’s a one-off, custom, 60-foot catamaran Hobie built in 1990—christened Katie-Sue in honor of his mother and wife respectively—tied up at the pier in front of his Orcas’ Island home. It pulls on dock lines like a monolithic beast eager to break through Pole Pass (so named for the Indians who used to plant poles with nets attached to catch migrating fish) and taunt the open waters of San Juan Channel. Later during the interview, Hobie, with a distant, reaching look, expressed regret his mother did not see her name on his boat before she died. He also regrets his parents weren’t alive when he moved to Orcas, a mystical Northwest retreat the family first came upon during a trailer vacation in 1940 when Hobie was seven.

An hour after breakfast, as clouds threaten to block eastern shards of sun breaking through the horizon, I yoga into the back of a seven-seat deHavilland Beaver floatplane. Woody, the Kenmore Air pilot has already sized up the five passengers, the two heaviest to the rear. A short, amiable, quietly competent man, Woody points to the safety features, hands out earplugs, and taxis over the chilly green waters of Lake Union. The Pratt & Whitney engine roars as the Beaver slides into take-off position. First stop is Rosario on the East Sound of Orcas, then on to West Sound and Hobie Alter.

Several weeks before meeting Hobie, on the last day of the 2000 SAMPE convention in Long Beach, Lacovara, Howard, and I pack up the rental car and head for a talk and tour with Bill Baldwin at Hobie Cat in Oceanside, about a 70 mile drive. Reportedly “tired of going to meetings,” Hobie is no longer involved in the business end, having sold Coast Catamaran back in 1976 to the Coleman Corporation. He now consults with sons Hobie Junior and Jeff who run Hobie Designs in McCall, Idaho.

An early lack of advertising dollars in the surfboard business meant having to build and nurture a signal word-of-mouth reputation, paramount to Alter’s eventual success, something he could only do by investing truckloads of energy into fabricating quality products. Short for Hobart, “Hobie,” (“like Bobby for Robert or whatever,” he casually referred to later), became the consummate metonymic association for consumers with sand between their toes, ala swoosh stripe and golden arches for beach goers, a marketer’s lesson in branding. Who hasn’t owned a Hobie T-Shirt, or at least thought of—if not fought off the urge to splurge—catamarans or surfboards when the name “Hobie” popped through a plate glass window during summer vacations at the shore? “It’s my name, but it’s a trade name, a commercial name really,” Hobie says. Now, Hobie Junior and Jeff run the licensing company and perpetuate a “fetishism of commodity,” appealing to that laid-back trace of Southern California in all of us. Hobie also has a daughter, Paula, who races cats, and now organizes communication symposiums in London.

Through the misty morning marine layer, we find Woody's Diner in Huntington Beach and stop for breakfast. A liquid-cool counter-service aura with vintage surfing photos and memorabilia rates Woody's as the breakfast shrine of Surf City. In between bites of omelets and hash browns, Lacovara, a nationally ranked surfer in the late 60s, lets on his early Hobie Cat experiences. This becomes the tale of how "The Cat Jumped Over the Moon," a lesson in cultivating the memory of one fateful day in Ocean City, New Jersey, a day when a man walked on the moon, a radio played at the bottom of the sea, Bob Lacovara was kicked off his surfboard by a 10-year old, and the first Hobie Cat arrived on the East Coast.

"Summers in Ocean City, New Jersey were always magic, but none more so than the summer of '69," Lacovara recalls fondly. "We used to wake up at dawn, peek out the window, and divine the interplay between sky and would-be surf. We could tell if ride-able waves were breaking. Before long, a group of shivering surfers huddled on the boardwalk to scope out the ocean. Then we'd slowly stampede into the shore break, satisfied that sleeping tourists were oblivious to what real 'locals' do at the beach."

July 20th of that summer is forever ingrained in Lacovara's memory. For some reason, he told himself to be hyper-aware that day and keep a detailed mental log of everything that happened. Around dawn he picked up his board and headed for the left break off the 12th Street jetty. An unexpected five-foot swell had arrived overnight—all glass, no wind, near perfect conditions. At 19 he was in great shape, attending Atlantic Community College, running a business he coined "Something Special Surfboards." Inspired by Hobie Alter, Greg Noll, Bill Bahne, and Mickey Dora on the West Coast, and Nat Young and Bob McTavish from Australia, Lacovara was living the endless summer dream, selling boards to George Gerlach owner of Surfers Supplies Surf Shop. Gerlach also dealt Hobie surfboards. "At a tender age, I wanted to make a living building boards," Lacovara says. "This is how I started to learn composites."

Synchronous incident number one, July 20th, 1969, freely associated by Bob Lacovara's memory: "As I waited for the next set, I heard a scream," Lacovara continued. "I looked over and saw a 10-year old on a board caught in the rip off the jetty. I paddled over, hauled him on my board and set about to deliver him to shore when he forced the board into an incoming swell. He kicked me off and proceeded to catch the best wave on the best day we had in a long time. As I swam to the beach, I debated whether to kill him or offer congratulations."

Synchronous incident number two, July 20th, 1969, freely associated by Bob Lacovara's memory: Later that morning, as the tide rolled out, waves settled into mush, so Lacovara gathered his crew of five and went to work shaping boards. Something Special fed Gerlach a steady supply of popular designs, which he quickly sold to a growing population of East Coast surfers. Usually, in Lacovara's busy shop, as everyone scurried to meet demand, Jimi

Hendrix competed with the air compressor, but not this day. Apollo 11 was in lunar orbit, about to make history. "By afternoon, we turned off the compressor, shut down production, and listened to the news," Lacovara recounts. "We were all T-shirts and sandals around the radio. 'Houston, the Eagle has landed.' I still get goose bumps."

Synchronous incidents number three and four, July 20th, 1969, freely associated by Bob Lacovara's memory: Later that day, as the tide crept back in, reports from the beach brought news of another round of irresistible waves. Lacovara cut his crew loose, threw his board on top the car, and headed back to the 12th Street jetty. Believe it or not, staring at perfect sets of five-foot peaks, he was torn. For at the same time he divined the heavens and knew history was in the making. Somewhere up there footprints were to be made, the first lunar trail cut. A dilemma for sure, but history



This becomes the tale of how "The Cat Jumped Over the Moon," a lesson in cultivating the memory of one fateful day in Ocean City, New Jersey...

also has taught us never underestimate the power of a surfer's ability to innovate. After borrowing a transistor radio, he pulled plastic sheet and duct-tape from the trunk of his car, sealed the radio, and paddled out to the surf line with the whole package between his teeth. An hour of great rides went by. Then, at 4:18pm, six surfers paddled into a circle, sat up on their boards and listened to a somewhat muffled Neil Armstrong. Hoots, hollers, and wet fists filled the air after, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." On the very next wave, Lacovara dropped the radio. He's convinced, through the murky depths, it played to benthic gills until the batteries died. (Another twist of irony and synchronicity occurred 24 years earlier when, as Drew Kampion reported in an internet story, another surfer gang waited for waves on an historic day and debated the rants of legendary shaper Bob Simmons. "On the day the Atom Bomb was dropped on Japan, he was heard exclaiming, 'They'll ruin the world with this bomb!' He reportedly ranted all day in the lineup at Malibu, which had great surf on August 6, 1945." www.swell.com.)

Final synchronous incident, July 20th, 1969, freely associated by Bob Lacovara's memory: What does all this have to do with Hobie Cats? The waves that day lasted longer than the lactic acid in Lacovara's biceps. It was time to hit Surfer's Supplies Surf Shop, hang out, and swap wave yarns. Tucked between racks of surfboards in one aisle were two long boxes. Gerlach told Lacovara, "Hobie sent me something new, something like a sailboat." Hobie's initial strategy was to sell sailboats through his surfboard distributors. Gerlach's was the first Hobie Cat, a 14-footer, to arrive on the Jersey Shore. "The next day we assembled it," Lacovara recalls. "Two pastel, yellow, banana hulls were connected to some slick aluminum fittings and a trampoline. The asymmetrical hulls didn't need a centerboard, and fold-up rudders allowed it to be launched from the beach. I didn't really know what I was looking at, but it appeared fast and that's all I needed."

The assembly team dragged the "banana boat" down the beach and sailed a stiff offshore straight out about a mile before realizing

they didn't know how to come about. "It took another half mile before we figured it out," Lacovara laughs. "There was a point when we joked about becoming material for a *Reader's Digest* survivor story." Days later, during a nor'easter, a small Coast Guard surf-boat backed down a wave after attempting a rescue and jammed its props into a low-tide shoal. Out playing around, the new Hobie 14 crew spotted the trouble, offered to help, and dragged the surf-boat to deep water. Lacovara found, "a sheeted in Hobie Cat definitely has power. Memories of my first Hobie Cat experience are forever linked to the first Apollo moon landing. I can't think about one without thinking about the other, both radical departures from the norm, both part of history."

Hobie quickly realized surf shops around the US dealing his now-famous surfboards weren't equipped to sell catamarans. "They were the first guys I hit," he said, thinking quick access adrenaline addicts like surfers, motorcyclists, skiers—any after-work adventurer questing a two-hour rush—would go for the new renegade watercraft first, more so than traditional sailors who, Hobie felt, were locked into blue blazer, brass button dissertations on sailing. "A few of the surf shops took a boat here and there, but we really didn't get much action. I remember Bob Holland in Virginia Beach took one, and I left one with a dealer in Miami, Dudley Whitman."

When locals get the itch and can't find waves in their own neighborhood, it's time to hit the road. Gotta-do, *NEW IDEA*, gotta-do... So Hobie traveled the country, taking the vacuum cleaner, encyclopedia, door-to-door approach to pump up interest in his new toy, a pretty amazing effort in and of itself considering the overall success of Hobie Cats and the fact that Hobie admittedly knew little about sailing to begin with.

Since initial production of the Hobie 14 started in June of '68, Alter and business partner Art Hendrickson put themselves on a mission that would change the world of boating forever. First stop was the November, off-season boat show in Dinner Key near Miami. The two cats they displayed quickly sold, but success wasn't always that easy. Catamarans, historically, have fought for positive influence in the public eye, suffering strong resentment from the blue blazer set. Hobie remembers seeing a vintage 1890s magazine article that

completely "disgraced" the two-hulled vessel. Although in retrospect he found it humorous to track photos of a sailor on the ride of his life, wrestling a bucking out-of-control catamaran, the cat eventually breaking into pieces and littering the shore, Hobie ran into similar bias almost 80 years later in his bid to lasso dealers. During cross-country ventures to market the Hobie 14 at boat shows where sales were generally good but only to individual buyers, he'd occasionally stop in what he hoped would become strategic locations throughout the south to invite dealer interest.

"We went around to all the little sailboat dealers and they wouldn't give me 14 minutes worth of time to show my 8mm movie," Hobie, enjoying the last laugh, recalls of several attempts made in the Houston area in '68, his memory acute on dates, places, and names from as far back as 40 years. "They said, 'Oh, we don't like them down here.' That's exactly what they said. Catamarans had a very negative image." (The movie shows the cat jumping waves, crashing into surf, guys having the most fun one can possibly have with a bathing suit on. What did you expect?)

Undeterred, Alter pushed ahead, already intimately acquainted with that species of adversity that affects successful entrepreneurs. "I only made \$50,000 the best year I ever had building surfboards," he laments. "My employees probably made more than I did." During that fall of '68 and through the winter of '69, while hustling opportunities via the boat show circuit mostly in the Southern US, Hobie recalls, "We were actually building as many boats as we could, but we weren't flooded with orders. We were trying to sell them as we picked up dealers, and it was kind of working."

There were a few early success stories, however humble. Hobie remembers three airline pilots who "did exceptionally well" selling Hobie 14s in Miami, Irvine, and Newport Beach. Challenger Marine, in Miami, took a calculated risk. "You needed guys who liked the boat and would go out and hustle it, cause it was something new."

Part of the strategy was to sell the Hobie life style (it's in the video!) at a reasonable cost. Those targeted surfers, dirt bike riders, and skiers with nothing to do on a Sunday afternoon would hit a boat show with no thought of buying anything—saunter along, browse the peripheral entertainment, size up a future adventure fix in case the alpha

reflexes atrophy early. There'd be Hobie and Art, the alluring film splashing along—tan, water-glistened sinew and color-popping gel goat, real challenges not far from the breaking 'home surf.' And the beguiling price tag on a trick Hobie 14 catamaran would read \$999, a considerable savings from what the average day sailor paid for recreational watercraft at the time, usually around \$3000. "A couple of them would say 'forget it, my wife will kill me,'" Hobie says, dramatizing the whole scene before issuing a short laugh. "Others would say, 'no let's get one, we have to get it now,' cause we'd only have two in our booth at the show."

Outside Southern California, Hobie's first significant break came when he went back to the Houston Boat Show in the fall of '69. As usual, he had two cats flown in, assembled and displayed in the trade show booth that was, fortunately, located next to a big small-boat dealer Hobie hoped to impress. "The guy I really wanted came over at the end of the show and said, 'OK, I'll be your dealer,'" Hobie retells the tale. "I said, 'Great, how many boats do you want?' And he said, 'One.' I told him, 'I just sold nine in front of you. How many did you sell of anything?'" This particular dealer refused to preview Hobie's 8mm promo flick a year earlier.

Enter Uncle Bernie, host of a local kid's TV show. He and his son, who owned and operated a music store, happened to be picking through the boat show that day. Hobie made a bigger impression on Uncle Bernie who wanted to set his son up in another business. Uncle Bernie took seven boats to start and he and his son ended up selling more than 35 their first year, an excellent mark at that time for any kind of sail boat. Seven other of the nine individual buyers at the Houston show also got involved with Hobie Cats. Some became sales reps, others dealers.

The business started to grow. Hobie went to Oklahoma, sold one boat at a show, but couldn't unload the other. Catamarans weren't "legal" sailing on Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, the closest recreational body of water. The attorney brother of the man who bought the first boat tried to strike a deal with Hobie. "He said, 'Leave me the other boat, and I'll get the ordinance changed,'" Hobie recalls. In a hurry to get to New Orleans and another show where two more 14s waited assembly, Hobie left the cat. Often he had to rush off and leave loose

ends. “He got it legalized,” Hobie said. “along with the small Scorpion sailboat. We did sell boats there after that, but it wasn’t a giant deal. Tulsa was bigger, then Miami started to catch fire, the whole gulf coast all the way down, along with the whole East Coast.”

Somewhere in the 1890s article Hobie read, there was a comment by the author that, “We’ll never see catamarans again.” Slowly, in the very late 60s, the idea of a light-weight, beach launched cat that zipped through spongy Caribbean surf in blustery Florida crosswinds caught on; from there, small placid lakes and the twisted, metal-gray currents that run along the eastern seaboard. In Marina Del Ray, two Hobie 14s collected dust in the back room of the largest small boat dealer in Southern California, until Hobie and Hendrickson decided to finance a hustling young salesman who, in three years, became the largest dealer in the US. Small segues started Hobie dominos falling in Europe and Australia. Denny Keough, whom Hobie met at the World Surfing Championships, wanted to build Hobie Cats down under, where they’re still manufactured today. Hank Palou, who worked for Hobie shaping surfboards in Dana Point, found himself in a love-fest with a French General’s Daughter, got married, moved to the South of France and started pushing the new-concept cats into the deep psyche of French single-handed sailing. John Whitmire, leading surfboard manufacturer in South Africa, also started producing Hobie Cats. “I can come up with stories all over the place,” Hobie said. “But what really made it all work is we’d put on regattas, buy some guys a couple beers, and go out and have some fun. We’d talk it up, get friends involved, teach people. Later, it stabilized down to the guys who were legitimately in business. I’m amazed today when I go back to a regatta and hear the same names I heard back in ‘68, still racing.”

In 1968, the first anointed regatta took place—six early locals riding prototype 14s in front of friend Wayne Schafer’s house in Capistrano Beach. Dana Point hosted the first Hobie 14 National Championship in 1970. “The Cat That Flies,” a *Life* magazine article (Robert Redford on the cover) hit the news stands that same year. With the Hobie way of life as a backdrop, photos of the 250-pound joy-ride-on-a-trailer splashed from the pages into mainstream (otherwise known as tourists) consciousness. August of ‘70 saw the introduction of the Hobie 16, the standard by which all catamarans were soon measured. Nearly 100,000 cats later, in 1980, before many of the sailing events and products of the next two decades continued to perpetuate Hobie culture throughout the world way after he got out of the business, *SAIL* magazine crowned him “Sailor of the New Wave.” “Ten years ago, Hobart L. Alter barely knew a sheet from a halyard,” the *SAIL* article leads. “*SAIL*’s readers have voted him the individual who by accomplishment and example has contributed most to the advancement and popularization of sailing in the last 30 years.” Four years later, in 1984, the Hobie Cat reputation was good enough for a 60 Minutes interview with a somewhat skittish Harry Reasoner who was finally coaxed into going for a ride.

Dr. Bruce Kinzinger scouted out the spot beforehand. Protected by a breakwater and a few granite jetties, a scattering of pine, maple, and elm lounged between two open bodies of water. Picture a small beach, a pier, an old house, picnic tables. It was, after all, the favorite spot to launch his Hobie 18—Rocky Point Park in Middle River, Maryland—back down the boat ramp, launch, and

immediately pick up the bay wind.

“I proposed to my wife Kathy there,” he says breaking into an easy laugh. “We went down there one night when the park was closed. The sunset was beautiful. We met at a Christmas Party at the hospital during my residency. By spring, we were sailing the Hobie Cat. I proposed in July and we married in September.” (Brochure, page two.)

After breakfast at Woody’s, we jump on Pacific Coast Highway and take the scenic route south. Only intuition can verify a phantom Catalina Island off the murky coast, but Hobie had no trouble finding it in 1964 when he surfed the wake of a motorboat 26 miles from Long Beach into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

We pass Corky Carroll’s Surf School, an impromptu trailer set-up for neophytes. Carroll started surfing in first grade, right about the time Hobie opened his first shop, and was the first to ever collect a paycheck riding waves. He eventually surfed on the Hobie competition team and became a Hobie shaper with a mix of other legends of the wild surf—Phil Edwards, Reynolds Yater, Ralph Parker, Dewey Weber, Mickey Munoz, Terry Martin, Don Hansen, the Patterson brothers.

Fifteen minutes later, we cut through Laguna Beach—peaking floral slopes on one side colliding with bewitched rampant shore breaks on the other. Not exactly a surfer’s paradise these days, but, ironically, this is where the sea first cast its spell on a very young Hobie Alter. “I learned to body surf before I could swim,” he recalled later. “We’d just throw our bodies into the waves in shallow water.”

In the early 1920s, usually in late spring, George and Lilly-May Laidlaw, Hobie’s grandparents on his mother’s side, climbed into their horse and buggy, said goodbye to Ontario, California near the foot of Mt. Baldy, and set out for Laguna where the couple had purchased a lot and house for family summer retreats. Navigating the Prado Basin and Santa Ana Mountains took them two days, to make the 50 miles. The Laidlaw’s owned orange groves during a time when oranges and other citrus rode frail waves of scent over Southern California desserts, flirting with the state’s future agrarian-based economy. As a boy, Hobie ‘smudged’ his father’s orange groves, earning \$3,000 one year, enough for part of a down payment in 1953 for a lot on Coast Highway where he proudly admits constructing, “the first building in the world ever built to manufacture surfboards.” To keep oranges from freezing, Hobie lit oil filled smudge pots at night when the temperature dropped to 29 degrees. By morning he was covered in black. Little did the Laidlaw’s know that their search for seaside R&R would lead to a prescription for beach life around the world, starting with construction of Hobie’s Surf Shop just off PCH in Dana Point.

“When my grandparents first had the Laguna property there were maybe two houses actually on the oceanfront and their house was one of them,” Hobie said. “It was a little hut, practically, on a nice beach. There were a few houses behind Coast Highway, which was a dirt road.” By the time Hobie was born, his parents, Hobart and Katie, made the one-hour car trip from Ontario regularly to escape the heat, and Hobie had a summer hangout that shaped his life. The bottom floor of the house, which he remembers as “ugly with its green gravel stucco,” had a small apartment with one entrance that opened on to the beach. “So I grew up on the sand. It was perfect

for a kid. My grandparents had picked a great spot on Oak Street. There's maybe three good surfing spots in Laguna, Thalia Street, Brooks, and Oak, all within a couple blocks of each other."

Despite the draw of the Laguna surf and its infinite summer promise, a different inland culture back in Ontario challenged Hobie's fledging solo sensibilities during the school year. "I was a midget," he says when asked about sports at Chaffey High, where he graduated in 1951. "I wanted to play football, basketball, baseball, and all that, but I was a little guy. I think there was only maybe one girl in town who was even smaller than me in my class. I probably went out with more girls from Laguna High, went to their dances more than I ever did at Chaffey. I wasn't fast either. I wanted to do team sports but couldn't. It was a very big high school, around 500 in the graduating class. But this left me open for skiing and surfing. We were right next to Mt. Baldy, it was only 20 minutes to the hills. I also made the swim team and water polo team, so I got a letter in that. I guess it was probably my senior year when I finally grew."

Like many who pursue individual sports, Hobie feels lessons got can be used throughout life, more so than any gleaned from team endeavors. Surely, in his case, the sparks of mechanical ingenuity and entrepreneurial skill were inserted in early adolescent compromises between the mind-body-spirit trinity and the capricious but romantic force we call nature, between balance and powdered snow, reflex and folding water, insight and spontaneous style. So, it's not about beating others so much as knowing, then overcoming, one's limits as an eternal pioneer in the world of wet and windy. "I like competing against myself. I don't necessarily want to go out and beat others, even when I play golf. I want to beat myself more than anything else."

Acts of individuation coupled with a young but immutable fear of letting his parents down when Hobie did venture into business, parents he admires as mild, easy going people who never fought or quarreled. "I can say that was the biggest fear I had, and it helped me when I got into business. My parents were very conservative, and lived a quiet, simple life. I had no excuse to do anything wrong as a kid, and if I did, I worried about embarrassing them. I couldn't fail. My father made money by not spending it. I had three friends who, on three different occasions for no reason in particular, told me that my dad was the most honest person they'd ever met."

Back on freeway five to Oceanside, but not before we pass Hobie Sports in Dana Point and plan a stop on the return run. There aren't many surfers out today, no swells, only a few well-dispersed diehards with the ocean playground to themselves. Anticipation of summer is frozen in the vapor stratum suspended above us. The marines are on maneuvers at Camp Pendalton. Even as Cobra helicopters cut the air into wedge-shaped chunks that drop from the sky, I wonder about Hobie's ostensible influence on Southern California culture, beach culture everywhere for that matter. First sightings point to some magical blend of fragrant variables: oranges, balsa shavings, hand tools, storms hundreds of miles offshore, a growing population in a sub-tropical dessert-irrigated-to-garden, imagination, resin, risk, waves, foam, the way the western sun angles up the wet sand in mid-afternoon that preserves it in memory (as well as videos) as distinctly Southern Californian, not to mention baggy shorts, long sun-bleached hair, brown skin and bikinis. It all smells ... well ... like the spontaneous fun found in "brilliantly simple." Past the cliches, the videos and brochures, I bet it still is. Not exactly Gidget, but not far from it. And the cat jumped over the moon.

Born in nearby Upland on October 31st, 1933, Hobie, a self-admitted "spoiled little boy," and two older sisters grew up in a three-bedroom house on Rosewood Court in Ontario. There was a concrete basketball court in front of the garage out back, a high school up the street, and orange groves a mile away.

"I really wasn't going anywhere," he says of his late high school and Chaffey Junior College years. "At Mt. Baldy I was on the ski patrol for a season. I got to ski free, pack down moguls. They had a small rope tow. I only really had to take care of one guy who broke his leg, and he was an orthopedic surgeon from Pasadena. We had cardboard splints and I didn't know how to put them on, so he gave me instructions. Said I was doing fine. I wasn't spending as much time in school then as I should have even though I thought about becoming an architect, because I liked to build. Then I thought about making a living somehow out of surfing or skiing. I almost leaned more toward skiing."

Skiing for Hobie was immediately accessible. There was a mountain, snow, and skiers, unlike surfing where there was an ocean and waves, but no surfers. By the early 50s, even though he summered at his folk's beachfront bungalow in Laguna, Hobie had yet to spot his first real surfer. Standing up on a plank and riding a wave to shore existed only in the foamy parts of his imagination, fed by word-of-mouth yarns and post cards from Hawaii.

"There's was always this little wave, some guy riding it, and a guy and a girl standing there," he mirths over the memory of the postcards. "I don't remember seeing anyone surf [in California] until maybe just about the time we started riding paddleboards. Then everyone started riding paddleboards or the heavy redwood and balsa boards, and a lot of them were without fins. There were a bunch of older surfers that I didn't know, never saw. We'd hear about them in San Onofre, but I never saw them surfing out front [in Laguna]."

One day a couple of surfers did chance by, lofting their heavy boards through the sand while Hobie and a friend fluttered around on paddleboards. One of the surfers, Walter Hoffman, invited Hobie to try his state-of-the-art, Bob Simmons, Styrofoam core surfboard. Hoffman, a stocky, outgoing, playful guy two years Hobie's senior (he called Hobie "kid"), lived in North Hollywood, but his parents had a summer home on Crescent Beach in Laguna, a few miles north on the coast highway. "Hey kid, I used to ride one of those," he told Hobie, pointing to the 55-pound paddleboard. "It spun tail right away."

On his first recorded ride, Hobie caught wave and epiphany on Hoffman's board in a Brooks Street shore break approaching high tide. "We were inventing surfing as we went along because we'd never seen it," he says. The washed out ride pumped enough excitement for him and his friends to throw the 12-ft paddleboards atop a friend's old Model A and chug down the coast to San Onofre, even then a well known hot spot. Sometimes Hobie pulled the back seat out of his '47 Chevy coupe and replaced it with a mattress, good for sleeping or toting boards around. "To a certain extent, we could ride the paddleboards" he recalls. "In fact, when we got to San Onofre the ocean was a big, flat plane, and the waves broke for a long ways, so riding them was easy." Shape wise, vintage surfboards differed from paddleboards. The old redwood and balsa boards were what Hobie refers to as "boat shaped, with a V in the tail and no skeg." New on the scene were boards with dropped rails, an elliptical rail in the center, and fins for control while riding.

Fused to the long soft breaks in front of the craggy cliffs at San

Onofre, some ancient protean energy sparked Hobie's desire to build. In between sets, he started paying attention to surfboards, and learned the names of the predominant shapers in the business—Matt Kivlin, Joe Quigg, and Bob Simmons—who first served a growing population of surfers in and around Santa Monica. Not long after San Onofre, Hoffman offered to build Hobie a surfboard, or tell him where to get materials to build his own—resin, catalyst, balsa.

"I told him I'd like to try and make my own board," Hobie said, of his chance meeting with Hoffman. "We went up to my folk's house, grabbed a pencil and paper and wrote down the names of General Veneer and Thalco Fiberglass on, of all places, Hobart Street in Los Angeles. I told my dad about it, and it was the kind of thing where if I promised to follow through on it, he'd buy the materials for me."

Hoffman, who became renown for his beachwear fabrics, also told Hobie he'd lend him his Simmons Styrofoam core board to use as a template for the balsa core board Hobie wanted to build. Several days later, Hobart senior picked up his son, Walter Hoffman, and another friend, Roger Belknap, in the old Buick and headed off to purchase supplies. Belknap, killed in a plane crash ten years ago, also expressed interest in building a surfboard. Unfortunately, he was broke. That is, until Hobie's father spotted him the cash.

Perhaps the senior Hobart intuited sparks of mechanical ingenuity and entrepreneurial savvy in his young son. Maybe he'd seen Hobie excel in wood shop at school (because, Hobie remembers, "My father knew I wasn't spending much time in class."), then heard or read something about surfboards. It was 1950, a year before Hobie graduated from Chaffey High, and in the age of popular mechanics, California ranked first in heading out to the garage after dinner and building new worlds. And that's exactly where the Alter-Belknap team set up shop, in the garage at the Alter shore home in Laguna. "This was a great thing," Hobie says. "We were really lucky, but we didn't know what we were doing."

We exit off Interstate 5. A couple miles down Oceanside Boulevard, past Ralph's, a Red Roster, village square and the Gorilla Equipment Rental, the usual suburban amenities without coastal flavor, Hobie Catamaran sits off to the right past the Oceanside Commerce Center. The company sign is one half of a Hobie 11 catamaran hull.

My first phone call was to Hobie's son, Hobie Junior at Hobie Designs in Idaho. "I'd like to do a story on your father for our magazine," I said. "We're running a series on pioneers in the composites industry."

"What magazine?" he asks abruptly.

I could sense Hobie Junior was a bit protective of the famous moniker, and his father's reputation. I got the same skepticism when I called the Oceanside facility to request an interview. Maybe a few inaccurate lines somewhere in the past sullied the reputation of journalists. Once I explain the nature of the article, Hobie Junior loosens up and eventually puts me touch with his father on Orcas Island. When I talk to Hobie to set up the interview he's full of energy. "It'll be fun," he said, leaving me with the impression I'd just made plans with an old friend to wax up the long boards and hit the rights breaking off the local jetty for old times' sake. Maybe even watch some girls.

Clouds take over the horizon as the deHavilland Beaver pushes toward West Sound. From the air, the islands in the San Juan chain are crisp, inviting, arcane. Kelp sways in the green waters below as sunlight, tattered by a low cloud deck, gives the Straight of Juan de Fuca a milky roll. It's easy to imagine how ports in the Northwest become socked in.

When I finally met Hobie, I quickly discovered it's hard not to be influenced by him. What I ended up wanting out of this assignment turned out to be ... the brochure ...the T-shirt ... the gotta-do, the kind of "simple" hiding just on the other side of complicated. I wanted to know him already (the amiable celeb next door) with words that were faster and could do more tricks, plucky words that jump off the page like liquid glitter from the bow of a boat, impossible words that burn toward the eccentric and explode into lifestyle enhancements sketched in the sand. Most of all, perhaps, I wanted fun words, good vibration, throwback fun words and ideas—big steering wheels, linearity, cranked up Jan and Dean in the old Woody, adjectives, cruising chicks, cause and effect, bitchin, stoked, more adjectives (Where am I?), go for it, rad (later), surf naked (later still?), air drop, barreled—Hobie Alter, pushing a story's fun factor. Let's face it, I was a reckless kid again, grabbing a surfer magazine off the rack of my grandmother's store in a rural East Coast town, trying to

ride all those words that hissed and zipped like fireworks all over the page, jumping into aqua clear photos that curled in their flat white plane before promising escape from the mucky cow ponds I swam in.

The deHavilland Beaver powers to the dock of a small marina. Several passengers are greeted by those onshore. One man holds a sign with a name on it far from any busy airport on this remote island where it seems everyone should know everyone who visits. Two men scrape and sand the dry-docked hull of a sailboat, prepping it for bottom paint. I stand here for a few moments until a man approaches. "Hobie?" I ask. "No," he looks at me queerly and smiles. I walk up the gravel drive to the parking lot, scratch up Sparky, one of the marina hounds, walk back down to the docks, and sit down to wait.

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Editor's Note:

This is another article in CF's series to celebrate pioneers in the composites industry and the history of their accomplishments. The challenge in this series is to go beyond chronological documentation to explore personalities, and examine the cultural, historical, and personal circumstances that nurtured these pioneers and set the conditions for their success.