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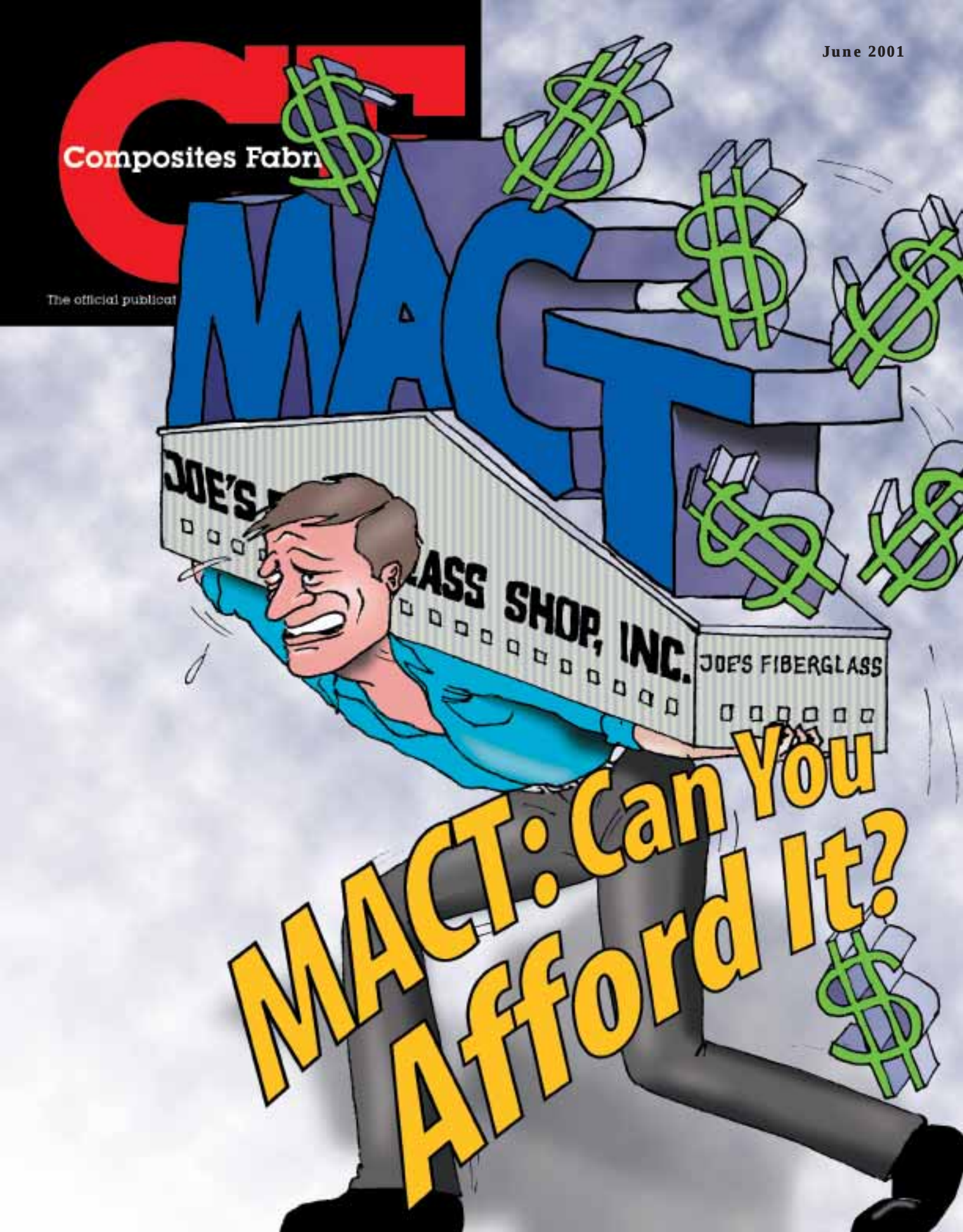


MACT: Can You Afford It?

fun in the Son

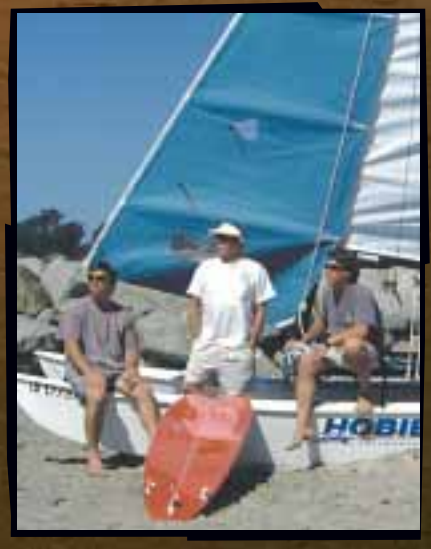
Hobie Alter drew on hard work, innovation, and parental guidance to form the image of a beach lifestyle forever linked to his celebrated name. Oh yeah, he had some fun along the way.

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

By Andrew Rusnak

I get it from people all the time. They say, 'I want loftings of some of your Hobie Cat designs,' or 'send me the engineering drawings.' I have to kind of smile and say they don't exist. The way this thing happened was so empirical. We had surfboard shapers. They'd make a shape, clone it, make the other side, go out and sail it. Did it work? Yes or no? No? Then they'd go and reshape it, add and subtract until it worked.

— Bill Baldwin, CFO, Hobie Catamaran



The other half of the Hobie 11 catamaran hull rides over an enchanting sea of ivy that forms a gate and leads into the company's manufacturing area. Inside the front office, we are met by Advertising Director Karen Hodil who introduces us to Bill Baldwin. Before joining Coast Catamaran as a quality control inspector in 1973, Baldwin shaped surfboards and sewed and finished sails for McKibbin Sails in Irvine. His wife Lauren, a Dana Point bank teller, heard from a customer of an opening at Coast Cat, which recently went public, and encouraged her husband to apply.

"One of my first jobs was driving a truck, shuttling equipment to the new facility we bought in Irvine," says Baldwin, an energetic Californian who turned his life's work into the same kind of fun he spirited ripping waves as a kid in Southern California. "In the very early 70s the company moved near the airport in San Juan Capistrano and gradually devoured most of the surrounding buildings. Because we needed more room to accommodate the mono cat project, and later, the Hobie 10, we purchased the one hundred thousand-square foot facility in Irvine where there was room to build vacuum-formed plastic boats. Eventually, when we got things going, it took a little under an hour to put a boat through the line."

On the table, Baldwin stacks a hefty collection of brochures, calendars, and videos, and slides them toward me. Expert archivist and another in the eureka state lineage of solar-driven engineers, he's trying to help, but the first promise of these commercial testaments to the history of Hobie and his flying catamarans strains my sensibilities. At best they'll

outline his tenure in the sun. My job, to cut through the glare, gets harder.

"What was the market like back in the early years, when the Hobie cat was being introduced and considered revolutionary?" Bob Lacovara asks Baldwin.

"Well, we were fortunate to be standing where lightening struck. When the 14 and 16 markets were evolving, potential customers asked themselves, 'Do I want a power boat or a sail boat?' Back then there were no sailboards, no jet skis. The two options in sailboats were nice, safe, slow drive, non-challenging, or something a little more exciting. This was the early 70s, the 60s are reasonably over, and the 70s were a wild and crazy decade where everybody's reinventing themselves. You're also starting to get into gas shortages and ecological concerns. Powerboats created pollution, everybody called them 'stinkpots' then. Sailboats were clean and fashionable. It's fashionable to do something fun and exciting. The whole concept of this casual, beach, California lifestyle, regardless of where you lived, caught on. People would look at those pictures of suntanned healthy people having fun on a bright, colorful Hobie Cat and want to be a part of it regardless of whether you lived in California or Iowa. It was kind of like a hula-hoop. We got a chance to really be a fad, and it was fun."

"It seems to me that some of the innovation for Hobie was that sailing became a go for it, hair on fire kind of sport, rather than just floating around on the bay," Lacovara comments, caught in a mnemonic rip tide. "I grew up on the water. I grew up sailing. I could go out and pilot a Viking around the bay and that was kind of fun. But a Hobie Cat was entirely different then. It was like ... old people don't sail Hobie Cats."

"Young people sail Hobie Cats," Bill replied.

"It was your hair on fire, that kind of thing," continued Lacovara. "How did that...?"

"That was promoted," said Bill, eager for an opening. "Hobie, when you get a chance to talk to him, is not a madman. He's not a wild man. He's very thoughtful and enjoys action sports. He doesn't like to sail on flat water. He likes to go fast. He likes surfing. Right off-shore from his house, there's a reef called 'Killer Capo.' When a south swell kicks in, it'll start breaking a half, to three-quarters of a mile off shore, kind of like the Outer Banks. They'd take Hobie Cats and ride long waves, and that's in our very first movie, picking up breaking ground swells in Hobie 14s and riding them for a quarter mile, going real fast. I don't know whether you've seen the movies, but we can certainly get you copies of them."

At this point, brochures and videos threaten reality, and I still want to believe there's a different story.

After about a half-hour at West Sound Marina, I start to get a little nervous. A man comes out of the supply store and asks me in what unit I served in the Civil War. We jump on manifold topics before his wife comes by to collect him home. As they turn to go, she asks me if I need a lift (one of several offers I receive from hospitable locals). I tell her thanks, I'm waiting for Hobie Alter whom she knows, adding "it's unusual for him to be late." We discuss an array of options. Maybe he got called away suddenly on business, or, perhaps an unfortunate medical emergency. I decide to wait at the marina. I glance a poster for a "Stranded Marine Animal Hotline," contemplate calling, then lie down to snooze on the pier using my laptop for a pillow. The chilly gray wind picks up swirls of fiberglass dust from the hull sanding project and shoots them my way. A big black long-haired mixed breed snuggles up next to me. I think about the Civil War, coming all this way, more than 3,000 miles and not getting a story. No brochure here, only a David Lynch movie. My return flight to Seattle in the Beaver is scheduled for 5:30. Then I'm booked for a red eye back to the East Coast.

After another hour, I make some phone calls and Hobie finally shows. He was playing retirement golf. I can easily tell when he falls all over himself with apologies that he doesn't forget often, and prides himself on quick recall. The intricate details he cuts loose during the interview leave no doubt, not like a game show contestant, but nonchalantly testing himself for accuracy. I'm just happy to get the story and partly blame

myself for not calling him the day before. Initial arrangements were made more than a month ago. I would've surely forgot myself.

We scramble into Hobie's old white Suburban. "Orcas is a great place for the retired or the dead," he jokes. "There's not much public land, so we can't ride dirt bikes." I steal a look at his lithe figure behind the wheel and can easily see him tearing up a little motocross on his Honda CR250, which he stores in his Idaho barn. He tells me it rains here only 24 inches a year, compared to 44 in Seattle, but he also says at his winter home in Idaho, "it can't snow enough for me."

Dressed in a purple anorak, khaki pants, and leather slip-ons with Velcro straps, Hobie sports a pair of his own name brand sunglasses and (it's in the video) a Hobie T-shirt. Sometimes it's hard to understand what he says, words jam as thoughts jump way out in front of speech—gotta think, gotta think, gotta think. His placid eyes quickly make big functional pictures out of infinite stand alone details, everywhere at once, inside and out, all is in the now, the now is where ideas come hard wired.

The Suburban veers into the driveway of a beautiful home built into a hill overlooking Pole Pass. Hobie plans to have it all torn down this winter to make room for a bigger place. He wants a large recreation room with a (gotta constantly do) pool table. There is a 2300 square-foot building on another lot up the hill, Hobie's shop. While I introduce myself to Susie, the friendly family dog, Hobie goes out of his way to make me comfortable, offering me a turkey dog, which I refuse, and a glass of orange juice, which I accept. I set up the recorder in his kitchen and listen to a good chunk of the history of surfing in Southern California, and the glorious life of beach-launched catamarans.

"It *was* a glamour business and you could get a lot of mileage out if it," Hobie told me. "You still can."

Hobie was our first real surfboard manufacturer on the south coast. I ordered a board from him out of his garage in Laguna, and watched him tear up Brooks Street later that day. He was a big name in surfing almost immediately, exuding confidence and ability in anything he pursued.

— John Severson, Former Editor of Surfer Magazine

"Roger wasn't in a hurry, so we kind of experimented on his board first," Hobie says, smiling at the memory. "He wasn't a great craftsman, but he went after it. His board turned out to be one of the coolest I'd seen. But fiberglassing was a whole new story. This is 1950, we had a UV sensitive, yellow paste catalyst called garalyst. You could mix it up with polyester resins and leave it in the shade forever, a long time anyway, as long as it didn't come in contact with any ultraviolet light. Put it in the sun and it was gone in ten minutes. We got resin all over everything, it was a sticky mess, but we had a surfboard with a fin on it even though it wasn't very pretty."

"Shaving my first board was easy because I'd worked on models before and learned to smooth them out," Hobie says, his rep with a draw knife unchallenged. "We took the balsa log, drew it up, cut along the outline, and shaved it down. Then I was ready to glass."

Now it was Hobie's turn. He knocked on Hoffman's door to borrow the Simmons board and use it as a guide for shaping his own. Fortunately, as it turned out, Hoffman was building another board for a friend a few houses down from the Alters, a surfer named Hank Lass. Hobie stuck around. For the first time he witnessed glassing, and followed the hum of a grinder kicking up clouds of fiberglass dust. He began to understand finishing techniques.

"Shaving my first board was easy because I'd worked on models before and learned to smooth them out," he says, his rep with a draw knife unchallenged. "Balsa came in three-and-a-quarter-inch thick, nine-, nine-and-a-half-, and ten-foot pieces that had to be glued together to make a blank. We took the balsa log, drew it up, cut along the outline, and shaved it down. Then I was ready to glass, so I went down to where Walter was working. There were a whole bunch of guys in their bathing suits in front of a beach house they rented. I remember Walter sparkling with the glass, there in his trunks, working. They finished the second side and had it sitting on a trash can to dry in the sun when the old lady who owned the house said she and the gardener needed the trash can right away because they wanted to burn leaves."

With the old lady on a hell bent mission, Walter had to act fast. He propped the board on some chairs and quickly taught the Laguna surfer gang the ash swat strut—block, snatch, rope the deadly swirl of embers away from the drying glass. Flies to fly paper, an apt analogy—kick-out cinders. It got so scary, in fact, Hank offered to sell his board on-the-spot for cost. Frivolous pop scenes like this still define jaunty surf culture.

Free of air bubbles and maybe half a cut back lighter than the Simmons model, Hobie finished his board late summer and headed back to Ontario for his senior year at Chaffey High. It wasn't long into the school year before he started a redwood surfboard project in wood shop.

"I really got special preference," Hobie says, standing for the entire interview in his kitchen, non-stop waves of energy breaking into his fidgeting hands, arms and legs. "The woodshop teacher, who really wasn't a wood shop teacher, he taught something else, liked me, and let me come in for extra classes to work on stuff. He knew nothing about fiberglass. So, that first semester I made a

redwood board, it was heavier than the balsa board. All the older surfers told me a heavier board was needed when the surf gets up."

Although surfboard shaped, the redwood board turned out like a paddleboard but finned, with a wide frame, the edges shaved down. Next semester, as Hobie was shaping another board in wood shop, friend and neighbor Dick Davidson became interested in buying the first, true, balsa surfboard.

"Dick lived next door to me in Ontario, but his folks also had a place in Laguna three houses from ours," Hobie recalls. "I saw him more in Laguna. He offered me $60 for the board that cost me $40 in materials. I thought to myself, that's $20 profit, that's pretty neat."

Davidson's interest, however, waned and he mysteriously dropped out of sight. Befuddled and disappointed, Hobie kept working until Dave Monahan, a friend of a friend, quickly matched the defunct offer. Hobie was ready to sell only Davidson somehow found out, re-approached Hobie and rushed to close the original deal. It was Hobie's first sale—later, in 1961, after establishing himself in Southern California, he opened a shop in Honolulu, Hawaii, and sold his entire inventory of 17 boards the first day—and his first lesson in customer relations. Monahan grew agitated. To appease him, Hobie offered to make him a new board, then made sure Monahan had borrowing rights with Davidson so he could scratch an itch that started to spread over Southern California. Like thousands of his kind over the years, he *had* to go surfing. Simple as that. *Vintage images of modern surf genre begin to go phenom, a new beguiling language whispers through the night, dawn siren sounds from the direction of the beach, surf and sky read aloud, a gathering of shivering pirates, drop in on a parody, Surf Fever, the brochure is born, life jumps in the back seat, fun drives.* Still a long way off shore, the industry starts to swell.

Hobie planned to build another board for himself, so now he had two to make. Three more orders came in and the price of a Hobie surfboard jumped to a well calculated $65. The Laguna garage got busy. Hobie's father advised him to buy more balsa, which was fast replacing older redwood shapes. More trips to San Onofre to scout designs. Hobie ended up building 15 boards in the summer of '51. He experimented, searched for his own voice, integrated and adapted details that appealed to him in current Simmons, Kivlin, and Quigg motifs. He put a spoon nose on Monahan's board.

"I'd say most of the early models, I tried to copy, or I adapted something I saw somewhere else," says Hobie, now on a full memory roll. "Every surfboard had a shape that left it wide open to do anything you wanted. Kivlin dropped his rails down in the nose, Quigg was a little more conservative, but I tried them all. I probably filled a notch between Quigg and Kivlin. All these guys worked out of their garages."

For the next three years Hobie attended Junior College, worked the ski patrol at Mt Baldy and fabricated and sold 20 surfboards a summer, mostly balsa nine- and ten-footers. He also collected, much to the annoyance of the Alter clan, a scattering of balsa shavings and coagulated resin deposits in the family's front yard. It was that not quite limbo time in his life, before commitment (it's still not clear in the annals of surfing history whether Hobie ever owned a suit or a pair of dress shoes), when decisions are way too easy and way too hard, fortuity knocking on the front door, dad answering.

"I didn't know how I was going to make a living," Hobie says. "One morning my father came to me and said, 'You should go in the surfboard business.' That was something, coming from him, cause he didn't know anything about surfing. I think he was tired of me building in the garage. He was very conservative, and he wouldn't have said anything if it was not worth doing."

Hobie wondered about business for the long term. After building 200 boards for all the surfers on the coast, then what?

"Was there enough there?" Hobie questions. "I could always build paddleboards for lakes and lifeguards, and I could always build furniture because the same materials are used. I was really trying to find excuses not to do it. The idea was good, but I don't think I had the guts to do it on my own. So when my father suggested it, then it was like ... well ... it was his fault. At least he couldn't point to me. I could say, 'Dad, you told me to do it.' It's what my kids are doing to me now."

Hobie laughs heartily at the memory and the irony of generations. During the fall of '53, things happened fast. Hobie and his father explored the coast for a suitable location to set up shop. First choice was Laguna, but the only building available turned out to be too expensive.

"So we went down to Dana Point," Hobie says. "There was nothing there. The town was developed before the Depression when it went belly-up. There were big wide streets, old street lamps, a tourist resort. There was a hotel, the Dana Villa, at the bottom of the hill where the movie stars used to go. But this was back in the sticks. We found a lot on Coast Highway for $1750. My dad talked them down to $1500 and all of a sudden I owned a lot. I had some money saved from smudging, and my grandfather left $3000 to each of the kids. And with that, it was enough to buy the lot and build the building. This got me in the business with no overhead. There were still plenty of guys working in garages even way before I started in mine, but this building was the first ever constructed to build surfboards."

People laughed, first at the idea, then when Hobie's L-shaped Surf Shop, with show room, double door garage, and 2000 square-foot workshop, went up a short skid off PCH. Desolate or not, Dana Point caught much coastal traffic north bound from San Juan Capistrano. And, thanks to merging road configurations, "if you lived anywhere in the Valley, from Riverside to Pasadena, there was a good chance you were gonna come by," Hobie remembers. In the early 50s, all California roads eventually led to the Pacific, and if you had a good reputation, to your front door.

Location eventually synced with quality with timing with the end of laughing. Jammed, sometimes orders backed up more than two months, Hobie did all his own work in the beginning, "the first of '54," shaping and glassing 10 to 15 boards a week, starting with board #100 (he'd fabbed 99 in the Laguna garage). A strong work ethic kicked in. His own surfboard left in the corner, he couldn't fail, embarrass his parents, fear of. He did wax up the stick on big wave days, got someone to watch the shop, but "I needed to make it look like a real business because my parents taught me that way."

Hobie's Surf Shop, even with its initial $12,000 investment, wasn't all about fathering a guilt child either. Hobie got fun. Hobie got guts. Hobie got in with a lightweight balsa board, one that appealed to all the "kids," while the old inveterate surfers ("at least two years older!") stubbornly clinged to heavy redwood models. "The old guys said, 'wait till the waves get bigger.' Well the waves got bigger and we rode them better on lighter boards and that was the end of that. Pretty soon everybody switched to balsa."

By January of '58, Hobie was up on a wave of accomplishment, a perfectly timed take-off as Gidget (1958) and a rush of other surf films inspired bands of valley boys to go for the ocean, purchase a ten-foot, three-inch thick, balsa board for $75 ($85 for four inches), hop the wild surf, and wax up a little innocent nonconformity somewhere behind a rock under a beach blanket. Hail the Great Kahoona, test the mores of Ozzie and Harriett, one wind-tussled sun-tanned version of American youth rebellion now underway. Hobie sold thousands of tickets to a new, redemptive, breakout way of life. Business was so good, he had trouble keeping a steady supply of balsa in stock.

"Balsa was getting hard to find," said Hobie. "I had to handpick it, and it always was a bit too hard, not soft enough. There's only about ten percent of the tree that's good for making boards and the rest is used for balsa core. If they're not selling balsa core, they're not going to cut the tree down for your ten percent. I did get in with a guy in Anaheim who made model airplanes for a while and we got a better grade, but it was still hard. Not to mention 35 pounds of shavings fell to the floor with each board we made."

One chilly Friday night, Reichhold resin salesman Kent Doolittle wandered into Hobie's Surf Shop, leaned against a counter full of hot selling Hobie diamond logo decals and pulled out a chunk of foam. He handed it to Alter and asked him what he thought. Hobie had already proved lighter was better, but many early shapers tried using Styrofoam without success. It absorbed water. "We tried sealing it off with weldwood glue, then tried epoxy," Hobie remembers. "This was all pre-1958 and epoxies weren't easy to use in those days. If you glassed it, you had this thing that rattled around in a glass shell like peas in a pod. We had a lot of good laughs at the shop." The foam sample Dolow handed to Hobie wasn't Styrofoam however.

"It won't absorb water," Doolittle said confidently.

"OK," Hobie replied. "But what about polyester resins?"

"Nope."

"No way! Let me see that." Hobie's curiosity peaked. He stuck the sample in acetone ... nothing happened. He painted resin on it ... nothing happened. The material was hard, about a six-pound density, with a thin veneer. He could barely make an indentation with his fingernail. "The resin adhered like crazy, this is magic, I couldn't believe it."

"I know," Doolittle swaggered. "I thought you'd like it."

Excited, Hobie went to a party that night at surfer Dave "Keyhole" Thompkin's house, the Friday night beer brigade. He bragged a little, showed off the sample. "This is how surfboards are going to be made from now on," he proclaimed.

Of course, it didn't turn out all perfect slow rolling peaks. Hobie knew nothing more than he had a chunk of magic water-blown urethane foam the size of a baseball. Several months later the chunks weren't getting any bigger. He took a belly board mold up to Reichhold in Covina and the urethane poured out a little bigger. Basically, he was told the foam could not be controlled in the size he wanted. He discovered more problems with trapped air and a sticky mold that didn't respond to wax and mold release.

"At that point we really weren't getting anything," said Hobie, still standing in his Orcas Island kitchen. "I don't know if there was a bigger, rigid piece of urethane foam around, between Reichhold and American Latex, but nobody was showing it to us. We went to Douglas, but they couldn't help us either."

Despite formidable technical obstacles, Hobie reached for some garage can-do, always in reserve, and decided to build the surfboard mold anyway. His hands do most of the explaining: "So I built half a board mold. If your surfboard is outlined this way, cut it in half this way and turn it on edge so you're like that, then you can pour down there. Seemed like it'd be an easier way to pour it in and keep from trapping air."

Well... Gotta-do blew out a wall in the garage, took some hot air from an angry dad, then destroyed a couple more molds before Gordon "Grubby" Clark stepped in. Clark, one of Hobie's glassers , had a chemical engineering degree from Claremont up his sleeve. He admired Hobie's tenacity when he took on formidable projects. There was no way anyone was going to tell Hobie no way. One might say Doolittle's little block of mystery foam kicked off surfing's Cold War, spy novel period. At stake was fabbing the first polyurethane foam surfboard, moving it into high volume production, and winning freedom capitalist style—millions of boards made the same way all over the world ever since—a kind of polyurethane foam/fiberglass imperialism. The name is Bond, *Hobie Bond*, shaken not stirred, because there were other shapers, like Dave and Roger Sweet, working for the other side, racing to become first.

Subterfuge was key and Clark knew a good thing when he saw it. He made a deal with Hobie to work the foam project for free, help him get it going, and when (if?) it took off, figure out an equitable financial compensation. Hobie didn't have money to pay him anyway, but the two couldn't resist settling their intuition and insatiable curiosity on Doolittle's mystery foam. Under cover of darkness, the two sneaked off into the Laguna Canyon and rented an old shack.

"It was a terrible thing," Hobie says, "across from the Laguna Festival of Arts grounds. We blacked out all the windows, called it the secret shack, hired off-duty firemen to keep an eye on it, and started working on the foam. What we needed was to pour some lower density stuff, then contain it. Build a mold and stop. Of course, with water-blown urethanes there's lots of pressure. We didn't have the freon-blown urethane then."

Success is even more elusive when it's cloak and dagger. Hobie and Gordon found a new vendor in American Latex, but it was still difficult to get a good pour, control expansion, and achieve the right density. Overflow cured to the mold causing skins to tear. Hobie also wanted a finished surface, a completely shaped board right out of the mold, one he'd just glass and put up for sale. It could all be so easy, he thought. The art of shaping would fade, become a chapter in the technological evolution of the surfboard. Fortunately, it was winter and there were not many orders for balsa boards, which he still shaped. Extra time, and even then some, could be spent on the secret foam project. Hobie got serious, worked day and night, spent all his money on materials, lived on beer and self-generated hope. He came up with whacky experiments; the ball drop test to measure impact damage, then painted boards black to attract the sun and hoisted them to rooftops all over Laguna Beach where they baked into a variety of alien forms.

"Suddenly, the right mixture came together and we got a usable surfboard," he said. "But I had to shape it, I had to take the skin off. So we gave up on a finished board and had to go for a blank that we made a

little oversized, then shaped it how we wanted. It was all serendipity."

Enemy agents, however, were hard at work in Santa Monica, sweating the same basic but torturous process. Similar to what Hobie initially was after, Dave and Roger Sweet came up with a handsome hard shell blank, code name: "pop out." Unfortunately, the market quickly turned toward a more aerodynamic shape that "flew," with customized rocker effects. This meant Hobie's thwarted desire to build a fresh out of the mold and into the saltwater model paid off. New life breathed into the art of shaping. It was far easier to skin a foam blank than a stubborn chunk of balsa, although balsa was still used as a stiffener in the early foam boards. The wall started to come down, a small measure of dÈtente ensued, the Laguna ring's system prevailed. Treaties were signed with air bubbles and small voids until Harold Walker started blowing freon foam blanks that looked like aesthetic miracles. Shapers who bought blanks from Walker were producing prettier boards, but Hobie was convinced he had the better foam, even though, at first, his boards wore a funky pastel color to hide the repairs.

By 1961 Hobie and Gordon decided it'd be best to split up so Gordon could open his own foam blank business and sell to other shapers. This, in turn, would drive the cost of blanks down for Hobie.

"I was so busy building boards and Gordon was running the foam shop," Hobie said. "I told him I didn't want to put money into a bigger shop. He really needed enough business so he could afford an assortment of molds and compete against Walker."

The two worked out a deal. More than 250 "Speedo Sponges" and "Flexi-Fliers" rolled out of Hobie's shop every week, and Gordon eventually built the largest surfboard foam blank business on the planet. Hobie brought Joe Quigg over from Hawaii to work as a shaper. Quigg, along with Walter Hoffman, were two self-made engineers Hobie idolized most, "two of the biggest reasons I got into this business, two whose work I admire." And his business exploded in 1958. Surfing took off on the East Coast and in Florida. Hobie set up dealerships, and the low intensity warfare that marked the birth of polyurethane foam blanks in the world of surfing faded to video noir. It was competition as usual.

"At that point I started getting off into the boat thing," Hobie says. "Building surfboards wasn't fading out, it was still growing. And there wasn't any real giant in it, but the best boards are built by the younger surfer type who works out of his garage somewhere."

Hobie walked me down to the docks to catch the floatplane back to Seattle. He apologized again for being late. I slapped him on the chest to reassure him it was OK, and if anyone was to blame it was me. We stood there immersed in small talk—his Honda dirt bike, my Harley Road King; his desire to visit New England with his wife in Fall to see the leaves. "Too many pines around here," he complained. Watching him there, shuffling, fidgeting, chatting, gotta-doing, he was the quintessential, non-corporate garage guy who made it big, wrote his own rules, followed his own whims, but followed them hard and deep into the spine of American enterprise.

"Fortunately, I only did that once," says Kinzinger, eyes gleaming as he relives pitch-poling the Hobie 18 in his kitchen. "No one got hurt. The whole Hobie experience is fantastic. Literally, I remember coming back across some of the swells, being hiked out on the trapeze, flying a hull. Even the hull that was in the water, when we went over a swell, three-quarters of it would come out and crash back into the next swell. I mean sometimes the whole boat was in the air."

(Brochure, Page 3.)

By 1967, Hobie ... gotta-do, NEW IDEA, gotta-do ... grew restless. He'd mastered the surfboard trade, and the bristly impulse to find a parallel dimension to surfing and lift the intensity of beach life several degrees became paramount.

"One day a guy stopped by my surf shop in Dana Point," Hobie tells the tale, contemplative eyes in a slight but permanent squint as if always guarding from the sun. Personal history for him is like a shop project, a few measurements more "fun"-ctional than show. "I don't remember his name, but he said he was hooked up with a guy named Art Hendrickson He said he wanted to talk to me about buying the surfboard shop. I don't know why, it wasn't up for sale or anything."

"How much you want for it?" the man asked.

Not interested in selling, Hobie came up with an outlandish figure. "Well, I guess if you gave me a quarter million dollars I'd have to take it and run."

"I might be able to do that," the man said.

"Whoa," Hobie was taken aback.

The two men continued to talk. It was the kind of conversation in the kind of time that could've easily gone nowhere or everywhere, but expectations on both sides were at the ready. Purchasing the surfboard business became, "What else can you do?" asked the man, looking around.

"Well," Hobie thought, "I think there's a need for small catamarans."

"What else can you do?" a question that echoed challenge to Hobie through the years—inspiration to build more valuable than experience. And Hobie had little experience with sailing. But there were luminous events in his past, romantic rendezvous with curvaceous catamarans, that figured into, "I think there's a need for small catamarans," a response that soon married Hobie's finesse with tools with the world of sailing.

Hobie took his first ride on one of Woody Brown's beach cats for hire off Waikiki in the early '50s. Woody Brown, Hobie acknowledges, is the father of the modern beach catamaran and the asymmetrical hull. He also sailed with Carter Pyle, designer of the Pacific Catamaran, or "P" Cat, and Phil Edwards, top ranked surfer in the world and Hobie surfboard shaper, who built a few catamarans in the mid-60s as did Joe Quigg and Tim and Sandy Banks. But it was the Newport Beach to Ensenada race in 1964 on Sandy Banks 20-foot cat when Hobie "really went for a ride and got excited about catamarans." At the time, dual hauls weren't legal entries, but Hobie and Banks drifted outside the official line and took off with the rest of the field, against 500 of the fastest mono-hauled sailboats Southern California had to offer, a kind of illegal immigration in reverse.

"It turned out to be a famous race," Hobie says of his foray into breaking the hard fastened rules of the yacht club elite, a move he later created a huge market for as Hobie Cat sailors wrote their own less stuffy guidelines for regattas. "We were with the group of oddballs racing outside. We reached the Coronado Islands, about halfway to Ensenada. At sunset we got out in front a little, and then Rudy Choy's AIKANE [Hawaiian for "friend"], a 40-foot catamaran, cut just across our bow near San Diego, and put us second. At that point it was pretty thrilling. We went on through the night when the legal boats came outside to get more wind. Towards the end of the race, we had to turn the corner to get into Ensenada Bay. All of a sudden there were 75 boats ahead of us, all tight together, not a mile between them. Then, an offshore wind

came out of nowhere. Catamarans really get going, reaching down the beach in an offshore. Well, we started doing 20 knots, and the rest of the field only did seven or eight, maybe nine or ten at most. The guys on the mono-hauls were screaming at us as we went flying by. We didn't go for the finish line, but we were fourth to cross outside, and then the wind died. Later, the boats that were bubbled up had to start their engines to stay away from each other."

The Newport to Ensenada race cranked up Hobie's interest. In 1965 he purchased an 18-foot, 600-pound P Cat, a frustrating trailer launch, an even more aggravating push through the sand into the surf. Once afloat, however, it was a fun ride, and, Hobie admits, "how I learned to sail." He went "up and down, back and forth, in and out," and ended up "not a great sailor." But the design challenge is what really nagged at him for the next two years—"one person out in the surf, chill, have some performance and fun. There's that fine line between something that works and something that doesn't, and there was nothing single-handed out there I felt worked."

"What else can you do?"

A little more than week after the puzzling conversation on selling the surf shop, Art Hendrickson came by and told Hobie his business wasn't worth $250,000, but, "I am interested in those cats."

"It'd be fun to try and build a small one," Hobie acknowledged.

"Would you consider going into that separately from the surfboard business?" Art asked.

Hobie thought it over. Next to the surf shop he had an old Quonset hut where he kept his dirt bikes. He could pump air in from the surf shop, keep it all legal that way, and set up a work area. He was getting "a little bit done" with the dirt bike scene anyway. (Emphasis on "little bit." For Hobie, outlets for his enormous bank of energy cycle and recur. I haven't even mentioned his flare for fly fishing, radio controlled model planes, horse racing, or skate boards for which there's a separate brochure and video for each.)

"So we each put five thousand in the bank and were in business overnight," Hobie says. "Art was a bright guy, not a craftsman, but he knew finances. He handled the business side of it, which I could do, but didn't really want to, and we started building boats. The first one took six days."

Hobie told himself he had to do better than Joe Quigg's California Catamaran, the "Cal Cat," "the first little boat that was actually pretty," or the entire venture wouldn't be worth it. So, he bought two to serve as models. One was used as a precedent for performance standards during sea trials, the other was pillaged for parts, the rig used for the six-day prototype. The very first Team Hobie Cat—

By 1967, Hobie ... gotta-do, NEW IDEA, gotta-do ... grew restless. He'd mastered the surfboard trade, and the bristly impulse to find a parallel dimension to surfing and lift the intensity of beach life several degrees became paramount.

Hobie Alter, Sandy Banks and Mickey Munoz, surfers itching to harness a new rush —then took "six-day" out and chased the Cal Cat off Dana Point. It performed well, but didn't tack as sharply as Hobie wanted.

"We went through a quick trial-and-error period because I didn't know what I was doing," Hobie admits. "All we wanted was to get a boat in the water and try it, and sometimes we came out bleeding. Much of the test hardware was welded angle iron. In the first five minutes we knew 90 percent of what we'd ever know about the boat."

Back in the Quonset hut, Hobie struggled with ways to go after a flying wing concept, instead of a trampoline, but found the added weight too prohibitive. He also had to learn the art and science of casting. Metal, (more precisely, aluminum) although by now a traditional construction material, represented a whole new concept, foreign to new wave fiberglass surfboards. Hobie hooked up with a caster in LA to fab runners and arch bars.

The excitement of the project grew. Alter, Banks and Munoz —local hot-on-the-trail fury contained on one pinhead in the natural-turned-commercial universe—kick-up rudders operated with one hand, tooling, molds, asymmetrical hull, trampoline, weight out, cost down.

"It was around Christmas time," Hobie remembers." After four sets of hulls, we said, 'This is it.' I did a little tweaking, and the rudder and the boat seemed to come together. At the same time, I'd made a lot of little foam sandwich panels, just testing weight to strength ratios. I had a little press and we'd push down on the panels to see when they broke. Well, we got down to making the first foam core boat and I chickened out."

Intuition kicked in. Hobie couldn't explain why. He tried to stiffen the hull without success. He'd made the glass shell and tried to support it with tubes, but it was no use. So he asked Gordon Clark to blow some slabs of foam. They were re-soldered at a quarter-inch thick to make a foam sandwich and vacuumed in.

"I don't know of anyone making vacuum foam skin at that time," Hobie recalls. "They were certainly doing balsa core. The boat's keel line was solid glass because that's where the rub is. We didn't vacuum the second lay-up, we came back and did that by hand, but it all worked. So, a large degree of the boat was foam sandwich. We got the rigidity and strength we needed. Then, we started to hit the boat shows."

But Hobie, the video said you and Sandy Banks squatted in the sand and diagramed the cat out, "with full batten main, kick-up rudders, and asymmetrical hull." This bolstered the myth you know.

"Well, there is some truth to that. We used it in one of our commercial videos."

Ha! But no fun in vindication, legend and truth are inextricably one.

Videos, brochures, and glossy calendars full of beautiful people are more than parenthetical irony to Hobie's life-although he (surfer's attitude rules!) may not think so. Past the branding, many wildly successful entrepreneurs are humble almost to a fault, unable to

feel comfortable in the spotlight. Hobie's one of those, only as good to himself as the ideas that race through his brain and finish with his hands on the next project. It seems he's uncomfortable with resting. "I always got to work," he says simply, adding with a hint of guilt, "I wouldn't want anything fancy, though I've gotten that label a little bit."

Bill Baldwin escorts Lacovara, Howard, and I on a tour of the catamaran facility in Oceanside. The shop is buzzing with a new project, the Hobie Mirage Kayak, "innovative sit-on-tops that are stable and fast with dry, comfortable cockpits," according to the brochure. The kayak features the Mirage-Drive (patent pending) pedal system designed by Hobie Design Veep, Greg Ketterman, whom Hobie refers to as "the brains down there."

"Hobie has always been an idol of mine," said Ketterman, who also is responsible for designing the world's fastest production sailboat, the Hobie TriFoiler. "He has a lot of technical know how, intuitive insight, and is a great stylist. I love to get together with him and brainstorm. He took the Mirage-Drive and put it on his float cat so he could trawl while he fished."

Baldwin feels the small sailboat market is coming back following a steady decline since the mid-80s.

"Decline, decline, decline," he laments. "Our zenith for fiberglass boat sales was the very early 80s, but then we went into decline. Unfortunately, holding a significant percentage of the market, we had to suffer like everybody else. We went from 400 people down to fifty. But we stayed in business, we found new directions, and now we're growing and busting at the seams again. It's a cyclic business. It's pleasant to see boats being sold in high numbers again."

Back on coast highway we head for Dana Point and Hobie Sports. The sun is still struggling, though most of the marine layer is gone. It is as spring as spring can be in Southern California. More surfers have hit the coastal breaks since morning, for the evening rush. Inside the Dana Point shop, resembling a small military parade ground, rows of surfboards, upright in their racks, march in unison. Several museum pieces, old Hobie boards among them, stand tall on a balcony, overseeing the proceedings. There is a nostalgically shaped long board with an even luste—just right for the top of a retro Chrysler PT Cruiser—propped up near the counter, promising a new wave of technology, something about wood and epoxy saturation. "I don't know how they do it, but that's a hot item coming on," Hobie said. And on the counter is the stack of giveaway tidal charts with the condensed Hobie myth.

"Through successive owners [of Hobie Catamaran], they all felt it necessary to nurture the Hobie image, the Hobie name, the Hobie lifestyle, even if it shifted gears a little," Baldwin said. Maybe it's the way H-O-B-I-E takes off with a modest blast of air in the back of the mouth, follows a natural tubing motion towards the front, and ends in a defiant "B," or, more precisely, "BE" blasting off the lips. But, how long? How long preserved as a viable market strategy? Hollywood isn't exactly pumping out Gidget knock-offs, and this is the post-modern age of one hit, indeterminate wonders.

"A lot of catamaran sailors still use that 'Hobie way of life' expression," says Hobie Alter Jr., of Hobie Designs, which licenses the illustrious moniker for clothing, sun glasses, skate boards, water skis, body boards, and surfboards. "They still spend their weekends travelling all over the country to regattas at a lake or the ocean, camping, being with their friends, sailing, having fun. It's got a little bit smaller since the big years, but it's still strong. There's a regatta this weekend in San Felipe, Mexico, and there will probably be 100 to 200 boats. That regatta has been going on for thirty years, and maybe 20 percent of the group has been doing it for more than 20 years, so there's new people and people who've been there forever."

I caught up with Hobie again in Las Vegas at the COMPOSITES 2000 convention in September. He agreed (mostly out of guilt for leaving me hanging at the dock that day on Orcas Island, a story he says he still tells) to participate in a round table discussion with other pioneers of the composites industry in front of a large audience. I convinced him, and his wife one day when I spoke to her on the phone, that he wouldn't have to give a speech or wear a suit. He told the famous catamaran story, made the audience laugh, waxed philosophic with Everett Pearson, Wes Hoch, and Ed Norris, who didn't wear suits either, and the whole thing was video taped.

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