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CUSTOM IMPRINT

Bob Leach wasn't trying to change the world of West Coast custom boating when he founded Eliminator Boats. He was just doing what he loved—and still does.

STORY MATT TRULIO



PHOTO BY TOM NEWBY

Near the end of the classic holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life," there's a scene that's been known to turn life-hardened men to putty. You know the one, it's near the end of the movie when Harry Bailey proposes a toast to his self-sacrificing brother George and calls him, "the richest man in town."

Harry measures his brother's wealth by his number of loyal friends, and though Bob Leach, the owner and founder of Eliminator Boats in Mira Loma, Calif., has none of the financial woes that plagued the fictional George Bailey, his wealth, too, could just as well be measured by the multitude of people who call him a friend. That's particularly telling given that many of them are his competitors.

"He's been a great asset to our industry," said Nick Barron of Hallett Boats. "I like having him as a competitor."

"When Harry (Christensen of Advantage Boats) disappeared, Bob volunteered his airplane to help search for him," said Bob Sepulveda of Advantage Boats. (Christensen was later found dead.) "He said, 'We're competitors, but first we're friends.'"

In the nearly 40 years he's run Eliminator, Leach has guided and inspired a generation of West Coast custom boatbuilders, including Dave Hemmingson of Dave's Custom Boats and Chris Camire of LaveyCraft Performance Boats. Leach also has captured the respect of builders who never spent a moment working under his company's roof, such as John West of Ultra Custom Boats, who called Leach the "Godfather of West Coast custom."

Said West, "He defined the West Coast custom-boat industry as it is today."

The ever self-effacing Leach is reluctant to take credit for the growth of the market.

"It would have grown without us," Leach said. "Someone would have taken the banner and run with it. I'm sure we had some impact, but someone could have done it without us."



Since starting Eliminator Boats nearly 40 years ago, Bob Leach has introduced many V-bottoms and catamarans.

From the Ground Up

Leach came to Southern California from Saginaw, Mich., in the 1950s with brains, ambition and not much else. He took junior college courses at night while he lugged slabs of beef for a meat company during the day. He also worked as a trainer at a gym before becoming a sales representative for Chun King, eventually moving on to become a district manager for food-branding giant Kellogg's.

He married and started a family—two major reasons for anyone with an intimate knowledge of the custom-boat business to stay far away from it and stick with a solid job with a very solid company. But in 1969, Leach didn't know what he didn't know, so he walked away from a good income, cashed out his pension to the

whopping sum of \$6,000 and started a custom go-fast boat company in an old gas station.

By the mid-1970s, Eliminator was building around 40 flat-bottoms a year. But drag-boat hydroplanes had struck Leach's fancy so much that he commissioned Ron Ehde, the hydroplane guru of his day, to design a 19-footer for Eliminator. On its first test run, the boat topped 105 mph—a huge number at the time—and captured the attention of Leach's customers and competitors alike.

"I had no idea how popular that boat would become—none whatsoever," Leach said. "But it performed so well and it was a great looking little boat. Occasionally, we'll build one today and people can't believe that it was designed 30 years ago."

The 19-footer represented more than the birth of Eliminator's Daytona line—it was the birth of the West Coast tunnel-boat genre. Leach and his team added to the line, which now has models from the original 19-footer to 36 feet. In later years, the company introduced its Eagle series of V-bottoms, which includes models from 28 to 43 feet.

Color that begins at bold and ends somewhere past audacious is another key component in the West Coast custom powerboat genre. Eliminator didn't invent gelcoat graphics, but the company did continually push the art form to higher levels.

Keeping Ahead

Eliminator reportedly builds 300 boats a year at its Mira Loma facility. That doesn't just make the company the largest custom-boat builder west of the Mississippi—it makes Eliminator the largest custom-boat builder period. And Leach remains deeply involved, as in 12-hours-a-day involved, with running the company.

"He carries a gigantic load," said DCB's Hemmingson, who rigged boats for Eliminator and remains one of Leach's friends.

Though Eliminator's primary customer base remains on the West Coast, the builder has expanded its dealer network to the Southwest, Midwest and East Coast. No other West Coast builder has been able to bridge the gap so successfully.

"We're offering what they seem to want back there," Leach said. "I can't say we've done a 'great' job of penetrating that market, but it's just a matter of putting in the time. We did sell a couple of Daytona 36 Coupes at the (Fort) Lauderdale show in 2006 and Miami in 2007. That was interesting."

But growth alone wouldn't have been enough to attract considerable attention from Fred Kiekhaefer, president of Mercury Racing, who calls Leach a friend. Eliminator has debuted a number of Mercury Racing products such as the HPS25EFI engine and Sport Master lower unit on its boats.

An Eliminator 30 Daytona was even the first boat to break 100 mph on twin MerCruiser 496 Mag HO power. Kiekhaefer has kept close tabs on Leach and Eliminator for more than 20 years.

"Bob has done some of the best work on the West Coast delivering unique products the West Coast wants," Kiekhaefer said. "But a lot of his product has universal appeal. I'm quite impressed with what he's done with that company."

Chris Camire, one of the brothers behind LaveyCraft, said, "Whether it was a new prop, a new stern drive or something else, if it was a first in the industry, it was usually at Eliminator first."

Without question, Eliminator's offerings have been everything from imitated to outright ripped off.

"Bob always does seem to be the one who gets copied," Kiekhaefer said. "To me, even though that's frustrating at times, that's the greatest testimony you could have."

Leach acknowledged that his products have been knocked off, but isn't troubled by it. "Certainly, our products have been imitated," he said. "What's the expression? It's the sincerest form of flattery. That's just human nature. I don't let it bother me."

Never one to sit still, Leach has raced catamarans offshore and tunnel boats in marathon events. Somewhere in between, he found the


time and gumption to race aluminum jet boats on whitewater rivers. Leach also served as president of the Pacific Offshore Powerboat Racing Association for three years. He has four children: Bryant, Brent, Brandie and Briana.

In addition to adding a new 30-foot twin-engine deck boat and taking on production of a 43-foot stepped V-bottom noted designer Larry Smith originally created, Leach has big expansion plans for the 50 acres he purchased in nearby Perris, Calif.

In addition to increasing Eliminator's production capacity in a new facility with a showroom and a display pool, Leach plans to build 480 storage units from 40 to 90 feet long. Also slated for construction on the property are five tilt-up industrial buildings that Leach plans to lease to other companies.

Leach did not invent the West Coast custom market. To say that would be unfair to the exceptional builders who came before, many of whom are still in business. But by all accounts, he helped the market grow to levels it might never have reached on its own. Even his competitors will tell you that.

Friends, especially those who also happen to be in the same business, don't need prompting to praise those they respect and admire. And respect and admiration for Bob Leach—the winner of POWERBOAT magazine's 2007 Publisher's Award—is industry-wide. Like the George Bailey of Bedford Falls, he is the rich man in town. And that has nothing to do with his bank account.

"Most of my friends are people I've met through Eliminator," Leach said. "I feel unbelievably fortunate to be in an industry I really enjoy. I never expected to be where I am today." 

"CERTAINLY, OUR PRODUCTS HAVE BEEN IMITATED. WHAT'S THE EXPRESSION? IT'S THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY. THAT'S JUST HUMAN NATURE. I DON'T LET IT BOTHER ME."

The 30 Daytona is one of 10 catamarans offered in Eliminator's Daytona line.

