

# a MOVING Tribute

By Eric Colby

Performance-boating's elite gathered to honor Eliminator Boats' president Bob Leach for his contribution to speed on the water.

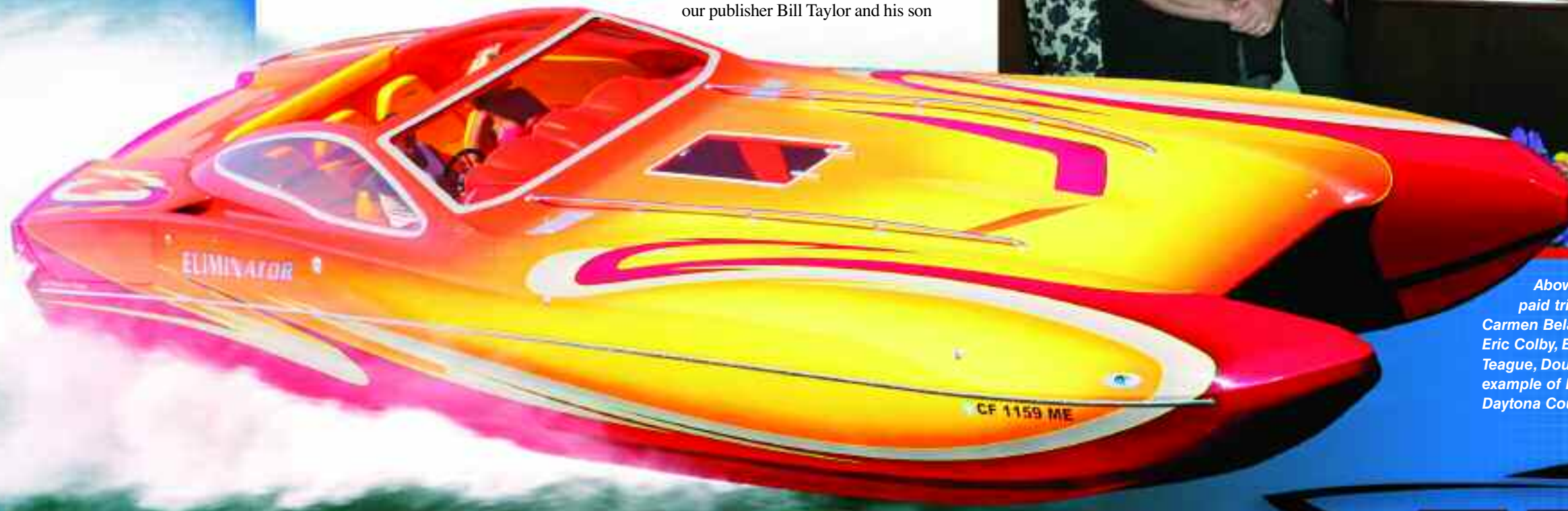
When Bob Leach walked into the Refuge Country Club in Lake Havasu City, Ariz., he thought he was in the wrong place. "I thought someone was having a private party," he said. Even when he looked around and saw friends he hadn't laid eyes on in years and they started clapping, it still didn't immediately click.

They were all there for him, to honor the founder of Eliminator Boats for his contributions to the high performance boat industry in an intimate, private tribute on April 28. Virtually every big name in performance boating was on hand, as well as Leach's family and personal friends. Everyone who spoke had a great story to tell.

"It was humbling, to say the least," said the 67-year-old Leach. "There were a lot of nice people, competitors and friends. It was kind of overwhelming."

Fortunately for Poker Runs of America readers, we were the only magazine given the rights to publish the events of the evening. I was honored to serve as the Master of Ceremonies and our publisher Bill Taylor and his son

“Bob Leach has been a pain in my butt for the last 20 years. Every time I built a boat, people asked if I could paint it all up like an Eliminator.”



Above: The best and brightest of the performance world paid tribute to Bob Leach (center). From left to right, they are; Carmen Belanger-Martin, Bob Brown, Greg Shoemaker, Bill Harris, Eric Colby, Brett Seber, Mike Murphy, Chris Davidson, Cliff Lotz, Bob Teague, Doug West, Peter Hledin and Jay Hooker. Left: A perfect example of Bob Leach's forward thinking, the Eliminator 36 Daytona Coupe is one of the most innovative boats on the market.



# BOB LEACH Tribute



Greg Shoemaker, owner of GS Marine, recalls the days when he worked for Leach at Eliminator.



Left: The inventor of the Air Chair, Mike Murphy, would have never flipped over the water if it wasn't for Leach and the Eliminator factory. Above: The emotion on the face of Leach's former racing partner Brett Seber was evident as he delivered a heartfelt tribute to his friend.



MerCruiser sales rep Bill Harris recalled Leach's generosity with one of the most memorable speeches of the evening.

and vice president of sales Todd Taylor were both on hand. The tribute was coordinated by Carmen Belanger-Martin of Aeromarine, which makes canopies and windshields for many performance-boat builders and her fiancé Rick Wimp of Arneson Industries.

The event was the second annual such tribute. The first was held last year for Douglas Marine president Peter Hledin. When he presented to award to Leach at the end of the evening, Hledin joked, "Bob Leach has been a pain in my butt for the last 20 years. Every time I built a boat, people asked if I could paint it all up like an Eliminator."

In addition to Hledin, the best and brightest of the performance-boating community from both sides of the country were on hand to honor Leach. Traveling the farthest to be in attendance was Michael Fiore, president of OuterLimits Powerboats in Bristol, R.I. Engine builders on hand to honor Leach included Fred Kiekhaefer, president of Mercury Racing, Ian Hawkins from Ilmor Marine, Mike D'anniballe, president of Sterling

Performance, Bob Teague, owner/president of Teague Custom Marine and Greg Shoemaker from GS Marine, who originally worked for Eliminator before starting his company.

From the West Coast custom builders fraternity were many people who had also worked for Leach directly or indirectly, including John West, president of Ultra boats, Dave Hemmingson, president of Dave's Custom Boats, Debbie Christensen, president of Advantage Boats, Cliff Lotz from Caliber One (who spoke), Scott Conrad, owner of SC Performance/Spectre Powerboats, Ron Moyes of Sleekcraft, and John Stoker, the

legendary builder of Stoker tunnel boats. That Leach even made it to the dinner was an achievement. "I spent the day before that all day in bed," he said. "I was miserable."

After a fine meal and opening statements by Belanger-Martin and myself, the floor was given over to the speakers who have known Leach best through the decades.

First came Bob Brown, owner of the advertising and public relations agency that handles advertising for Eliminator Boats and many of the West Coast Custom companies. He's also a former editor of Powerboat Magazine and a

contributor to Hot Boat Magazine. He estimated that he's tested more than 50 Eliminators through the years and that he's continually been amazed at the innovations Leach and his company have made through the years.

Following Brown was one of the longest-standing publishers in performance-boating today, Chris Davidson, of Hot Boat Magazine and he basically set the tone for the evening when he said, "I thought this was going to be a roast, but there's nothing bad I can say about him."

Time and again, the speakers touched on Leach's generosity and phil-

There's only one boat appropriate for former NASCAR champion Darrell Waltrip and his crew chief Jeff Hammond to cruise around the lake at Daytona speedway, an Eliminator 28 Daytona.



When Leach and his wife and friends entered the Refuge Country Club in Lake Havasu, the Eliminator president was caught off-guard by the sight of his friends applauding for him.



# BOB LEACH *Tribute*

on the Los Angeles River with many other California builders looking on. "That's the boat that put Eliminator on the map," said Leach as he smiled at the memory.

When he wasn't building boats, Leach raced drag jet tunnels and then

growing a company. One of the partners and close friends who helped Bob along the way was Doug West. When he took the podium, West was so overcome with emotion that he could barely speak. When he did, however, the words were powerful. "You're my best friend," he said, choking back tears. "I love you." While Leach's daughter Brandie has taken a role at the company's apparel line, his youngest son Bryant works for a surfing products company in La Jolla, Calif., and his other daughter Brianna is attending college at Loyola Marymount University. Leach's oldest son Brent has started his own boat company, Next Boats.

But in Leach's eyes, his family extends far beyond his bloodlines. He sees every employee at Eliminator as his extended family. His generosity with them is the stuff of legend. When one worker needed a set of tires on his truck to get back and forth to work, Leach bought them. Another used a company vehicle until he got his home life straightened out. The loyalty goes both ways. Some key members of the company have been with Bob for more than 20 years.

I had the opportunity to see Bob's generosity firsthand. About 10 years ago Bob and I were talking about the then-inaugural NASCAR race at Fontana, Calif. I mentioned that I was a fan. The next thing I knew, a few days later, a pair of tickets landed on my desk when I was still the editor at Powerboat. Of course, these weren't just any old tickets. Bob had worked it out with his friend, Wayne Minor for my wife and I to see the race from their luxury box. The only downside is that now that I live in Maine, there's no way I'll ever get her to watch the race from the grandstands at Loudon, N.H., but I still have fantastic memories from Fontana. When Factory class competition was just getting started in offshore racing, Bob Leach knew it could be a good way to show folks around the country that Eliminator's were good in the ocean. He and Brett Seber won the first Factory Three world championship at Biloxi, Miss., in a 33' Daytona powered by twin HP500s.

Eliminator continued to prove itself on the racecourse with Leach campaigning a canopied 36' Daytona, and he even spent some time at the helm of the

whitewater jetboats with former magazine publisher Wiley Poole. While most teams ran aluminum-hulled boats that could be pounded out with a sledgehammer after a crash, the duo used a 20' Eliminator fiberglass model.

On his desk, Leach has an unusual picture of the boat being picked up off a riverbank by a crane on the side of the road 200' up. The boat had been damaged by an underwater obstruction. "We were in the middle of nowhere," said Leach. "And it was either leave it on the side of the river or get it picked up, so we called the crane."

Part of what has made Eliminator so successful is that he didn't just focus on performance boats. As water skiing gained popularity, he brought in well-known skier and designer Mike Murphy to consult on a ski model for Eliminator. Murphy also wound up working on what would be his greatest invention, the Air Chair, at the Eliminator factory. When he spoke at the tribute, Murphy said that Leach gave him a "real job," and helped him and many people live his dream.

As many boatbuilders in this room can attest, it never hurts having a business partner who can help you out with some financial support when you're



Bob is surrounded by his kids Briana (L), Bryant and Brandie, at the end of the evening.



Poker Runs America publisher Bill Taylor provided critical behind the scenes help to event organizer Carmen Belanger-Martin.

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# BOB LEACH *Tribute*



Last year's recipient, Douglas Marine president Peter Hledin (R), presented Leach's commemorative trophy with an entertaining speech.

**“I’m still having fun”**

Pacific Offshore Powerboat Racing Association. And if there's any doubt that his love of speed hasn't been passed on to his kids, recall the time in 2000 when Brandie raced with her dad in the canopied Daytona and the two proved they were a potent combination. Last Thanksgiving out at Lake Havasu, the two went for a 160-mph ride in a 36' Daytona Coupe. "If we could go 180, she'd be happy," said Leach.

Today he flies in another way, in his airplane. Leach has a multi-engine pilot's license.

But he's not away from work long. "If I'm not out of town, I still work 6 days a week," he said. Currently he has 100 people employed at the Mira Loma, Calif., factory, but soon it will be replaced.

A new facility in Perris, Calif., was expected to be completed in the fall. He's partnered in a 50-acre commercial development that will include seven acres for the new Eliminator factory. He's partnered in the other 43 that will include storage buildings and business properties that he plans to lease. The new boat manufacturing facility will be housed in a 90,000-square-foot building that will also have 460 individual storage units in 40', 50', 60 and 90' sizes that are all 12' wide and 14' tall.

Once the new site is opened, Leach can get back to building the boat he's been wanting to make available to the public, a tall-freeboard 40' Sport Cat with a full cabin and an enclosed salon/cockpit area. The first one was built about five years ago and was powered by twin Yanmar diesels with Arneson drives. But in true Leach fashion, he's thinking faster.

A lot faster, actually. He's considering Mercury Racing HP 1075 SCis with Dry Sump Six drives that would push the boat to speeds exceeding 100 mph. "To have a boat like that running 100 mph would be pretty incredible," he said. Leach added that he thinks a like the 40 Sport Cat that's chock-full of

amenities would also appeal to more wives than traditional low-profile go-fast cats with little or no creature comforts. "Do you think their wives really like those boats?" he asked.

Additionally, Leach is thinking the 40 Sport Cat with big motors would be a great candidate for attempting to break some current endurance records.

On the V-bottom side, he has a licensing agreement with longtime designer Larry Smith on the 43' Scarab molds. Eliminator is planning to do a Euro-style deck with a built-in swim platform and a classic flat deck with a straight-up transom. In the last two years, one of the first 43-footers has been the first to the card stops at the Southern California Offshore Powerboat Elite poker run, which takes participants for long runs in the Pacific ocean. While Leach knows that poker runs aren't races, he also understands the impact that it has when his new model runs well in the ocean in front of a whole bunch of other go-fast boaters.

Another guy who understands how important exposure is happened to be at a recent event with Leach. His name is Reggie Fountain. "Reggie came over to me and Cindy and gave me a big hug and told me how much I respect Eliminator," said Leach. "I was shocked."

He's 67 and frequently says things like "I'm no different than anyone else I put my pants on the same as anyone else," and like most patriarchs at the helm of their own companies, Leach has no intention of retiring.

"I'm still having fun and if I lose the enthusiasm and enjoyment I get out of building boats, I'll motor on," said Leach.

It's doubtful that he'll ever lose that passion for building boats. Bob Leach may have thought he walked into the wrong place when he strolled through the front door of the Refuge Country Club that night in April. The truth is that nothing could be further from the truth. He is a most deserving recipient of this tribute for his life's work. 🍷





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