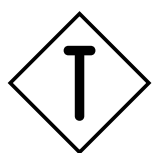


# Thunderbirds are Go!

SAILING A NORTHWEST CLASSIC

*The inside story of how a plan to market plywood gave birth to a racing legend*

◆ BY WENDY HINMAN ◆



“Those blasted T-birds!” You hear it all the time on the race course. In the middle of the action, these stalwart sailors are mixed in with Melges, J-boats, and all the newest, fastest, sexiest designs that money can buy. “For God’s sake, the Thunderbird was designed when Eisenhower was president!” people say with exasperation as a T-bird sails past the hot new fiberglass racer they dropped a hundred grand to buy. A competitive T-bird can be had for under ten thousand dollars. Many are built of wood and have been actively sailed for nearly sixty years.

In 1958, the Thunderbird was originally designed as a marketing ploy for the Douglas Fir Plywood Association. Tom Sias, a Tacoma sailor who worked for the organization, thought it made sense to market marine-grade plywood to sailors with dreams of building a boat. He convinced his colleagues to hold a design competition to create a family-friendly boat that a novice could build in the backyard from—you guessed it—marine grade plywood they wanted to sell. Sias circulated specifications to naval architects around the country that called for “a racing and cruising boat ...to sleep four...be capable of being built by reasonably skilled amateurs...be powered by an outboard auxiliary...and out-perform other sailboats.” Most who received the design request shot it straight into the round file, considering it overly ambitious.

Ben Seaborn, a Northwest naval architect who earned his chops designing all manner of sailing yachts as well as Liberty ships during WWII, gave the concept more than a cursory thought. Son of a Northwest shipwright and yard foreman, Seaborn designed his first yacht at age 17, the 54-foot *Circe*, which gained him notice by winning the 1934 Swiftsure Race. Seaborn went on to forge a strong relationship with Blanchard Boat Company, for whom he designed many fast sailboats. With this design challenge, he proposed a slightly larger boat than Sias originally specified to better satisfy the requirements. The boat Seaborn sketched was based loosely on his Sierra design but added a hard chine to make it easier to build with plywood panels.

Ed Hoppen, a Gig Harbor boat builder, had always wanted to try building using plywood

molds and stringers the way one would build a model airplane. Starting with a profile drawing showing the chine location and an interior arrangement that Seaborn provided, Hoppen set to work figuring out how to create a building method an inexperienced builder could use to craft his own vessel from a set of plans.

## A FLEET IS BORN

Although the original design was for 26 feet, Hoppen shortened it a couple of inches so the boat could be covered under the average homeowner’s insurance. Unlike most keelboats of the day, this design featured an efficient tapered fin keel and a fractional rig that allowed for a wide range of sail adjustment to meet all types of weather. The reverse transom and engine compartment configuration allowed the boat to be powered by an outboard motor that could be easily removed and stowed. The boat’s narrow (7 ½ foot) beam made it possible to haul it by trailer without special permits, so that one could easily launch it for storage or transport to long-distance racing or cruising destinations. These aspects of the design would suit a growing demographic of post-war sailors of modest means.

Through trial and error, Ed Hoppen crafted the first few boats, and from them created patterns that the average handyman could use to craft a complete boat in his backyard. The design needed a name. Bob Price suggested “Thunderbird” in honor of the boat’s Pacific Northwest origin, and Walt Hanson of Tacoma designed the clever Thunderbird insignia displayed on every mainsail.

Ben Seaborn transformed Ed Hoppen’s final templates and instructions into plans that prospective boat builders could buy for \$2.00 per set. After an article appeared in *Popular Boating*, interest in the Thunderbird spread worldwide. The design revolutionized affordable sailboat building, and more than 25,000 sets of official plans have sold over the years.

## A BUILDING BOOM

Ed Hoppen’s boatyard built 14 Thunderbirds to completion. Meanwhile, hundreds of first-

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time Thunderbird boat builders set to work in earnest. Flooded with requests for advice, Hoppen had to schedule special workshops on Saturdays. Eventually builders banded together to share information.

Besides making the boat easier to build, the Thunderbird's hard chine lends the hull stability that makes it handle well—perfect for a family boat and those new to sailing. Many organizations chose the Thunderbird for sailing lessons. The Center for Wooden Boats currently has several in its fleet of vessels for rent and the Northwest Maritime Center in Port Townsend relies on the Thunderbird for its keelboat instruction. Don Nutter finished *Nutter Butter* (hull #1015) from a skeleton he bought while his wife was away for the weekend. Don lured friends home after work, promising them beer if they would help him flip the boat over onto mattresses

in his driveway so he could finish the other side. He set up a playpen in the middle of the boat so he could watch the kids while he worked. Though initially perturbed, his wife Jan—who'd never stepped aboard a sailboat before—forgave him and ultimately became his most reliable crew.

The T-bird's easy boat handling appealed to Jan Nutter, along with the community that the fleet offered. After launching *Nutter Butter*, the Nutters cruised throughout the Pacific Northwest with their three boys, alongside the Berglinds (*Scuffy*), the Johnsons (*Zephyr*), and the Connors (*Phoenix*), among many others, building friendships that have endured a lifetime.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Though the boat had tremendous appeal as a family boat, many were

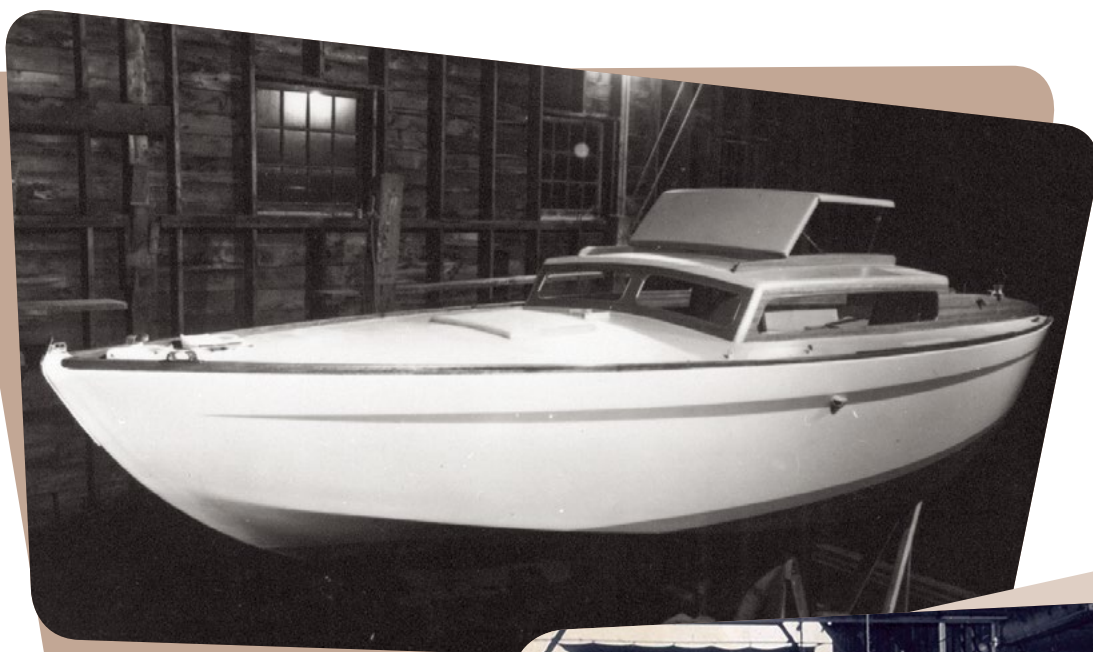
keen to race it. With the possibility of boats being built in different ways, early boat owners saw the potential for differences in the boats that might affect sailing performance. They formed an organization and laid down a set of principles to guide the preservation of a true one-design class through its *Black Book*—the T-bird bible of detailed boat specifications—and a gold seal, which is awarded to each officially measured hull (not all owners chose to measure their boats for racing).

The first Thunderbird International Championship regatta was held in Seattle in 1966. The first trophy went to the San Diego fleet and the second to sailors from Sydney, Australia. John Malleson of Victoria (*Sunday*, #900) became the first Canadian champion in 1971 in a contest among 43 boats. At the International Championship in 1983, 72 boats competed. Clearly, interest was strong in this home-built fleet, but the challenge was to keep it that way.

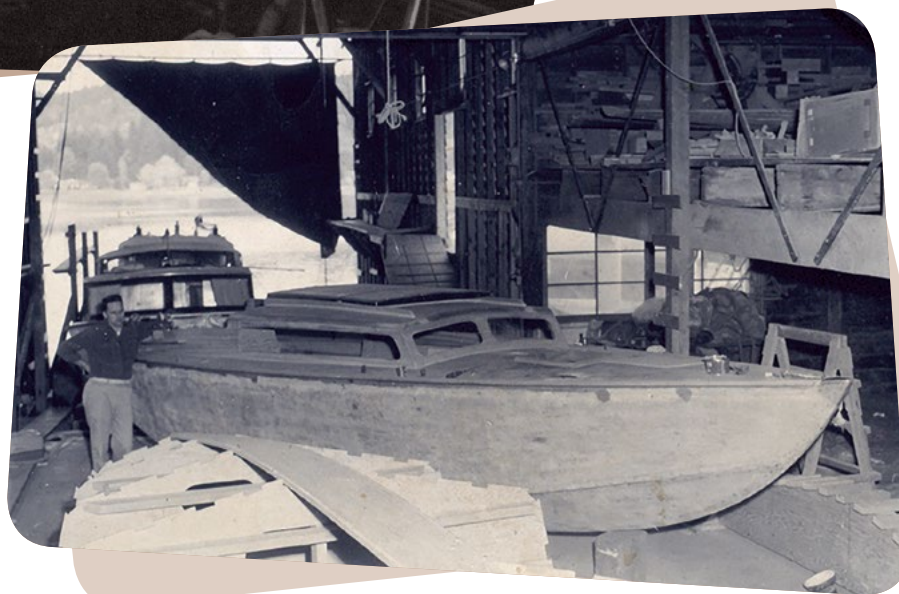
## EVER EVOLVING

Early leaders realized that to maintain broad, the class needed to find ways to incorporate new materials and ideas into the Thunderbird design. Of greatest significance was adapting to fiberglass building methods. John Booth of Victoria built the first fiberglass Thunderbird in 1971. In response to demand, others made molds that were distributed around the globe (so much for selling plywood). Soon T-bird fleets were prospering in Canada, the U.S., Australia, and the Pacific Basin.

Other aspects of the design also evolved. The barn-door style rudder was replaced by a high-aspect ratio spade rudder and the original wooden mast gave way to easier-to-maintain aluminum spars. The fleet approved the use of an adjustable backstay, a revised traveler/mainsheet arrangement to replace the traditional barney post, and the adoption of newer sail fabrics. New development often started with trial and error on the part of members that morphed into a grass-roots discus-



Above: Thunderbird hull #1 nears completion at the Edden Boatyard in Glg Harbor, WA. #1 proved to be somewhat overbuilt - and consequently heavy. The real prototypes for the production boats were hull #2 (*Pirouette*) and #3 (*Windsong*). Right: *Pirouette* and *Windsong* under construction in early 1959.





sion of the pros and cons of making a change, and culminated in a ruling by a membership vote at the annual general meeting. Movement towards allowing a larger J/24 spinnaker, which makes for more exciting racing downwind, took years of testing before it was adopted. Consideration of asymmetrical spinnakers are in the works. These adaptations have allowed the class to change with technology and the demands of racing sailors to keep the class dynamic, yet affordable.

The home-built nature of the boat and DIY attitude fosters an inclination to try things and a willingness to share tips and tricks with others to make competition better. Anyone new to the fleet will soon discover when considering any rigging change to the mainsheet/traveler arrangement or the spinnaker hoisting and dousing system that there might be eight approaches for every four boats he checks, because each skipper freely shares how his set up used to be or how he plans to tweak it. And those experiments often get adopted for the betterment of the fleet, all with a bias towards frugality.

## MORE BANG FOR THE BUCK

An endearing part of the T-bird mystique is that it is such an affordable boat to race and cruise. Its rules are designed to keep costs within reach for the average Joe. Limiting new sail purchases to every two years helps ensure the competition measures skill and keeps racing manageable for a broad range of people. There's a pervasive joke that the cry of the Thunderbird is, "Cheap, cheap, cheap."

The price of entry makes it a great first boat, but people often get hooked for life.

My husband, Garth Wilcox, raced and cruised a T-bird (*Wild Weasel*, #727) in San Francisco Bay as a boy. When it came time to buy our first sailboat in 1991, the T-bird was an obvious choice, and not just for sentimental reasons. We wanted a boat that sailed well in all conditions and one that we could both cruise and race. We were also attracted by the fact that there was a strong one-design fleet, with twenty-five boats on the starting line on any given Wednesday night at Leschi, more than thirty years after the design first made headlines. Being able to race boat-for-boat appealed to us after years being frustrated with a handicap

system that could not possibly address all conditions and accurately measure performance among dissimilar boats. Plus, for a couple of tightwads, the boat was in our price range.

Kwadwo Copeland (*Selchie*, #101) races several times a week on an old woodie decades older than himself. He's surely paid more in moorage than his original purchase price yet has recouped his investment many times over. In July *Zoe*, a \$3,500 T-bird, completed the Race to Alaska (R2AK) in one of the lowest budget campaigns of the excitement-filled 750-mile competition. The young bucks racing *Zoe* were excited they could afford to sail a keelboat competitively while still in their twenties. They and others marvel at getting beaten by "the old men," some of whom have raced T-birds for 40 years or more.

## A COMPELLING CHALLENGE

What makes the T-bird challenging to race competitively is its flexible mast with jumper struts and its lee helm, which can take time to master. While the T-bird is easy to sail, it requires focus to reach peak performance. Still, the boat can easily be raced with three or four people and has even been known to win with only one or two crew. The boat does not demand athletic prowess, but rather tactics and strategy combined with good sail trim to sail well. That keeps racing interesting and allows people to race into their older years. George Trusk (*Canopus*,

#1141, his second T-bird) raced into his late seventies, and John Monk (*Aozora*, #1015) even longer. Sandy Pratt won the International Championship in 1975 aboard *LeBar* (#711), which he finished from a bare hull in 1967 after his wife told him his *Star* wasn't a good family boat. Sandy is now well into his eighties and is still winning races aboard *Falcon* (#1177)—probably with that Buchan-built genoa from 1983.

## CONTINUING THE TRADITION

Many families have bonded racing and cruising aboard a T-bird, and younger generations have carried the tradition into adulthood.

Mark Malleon, who started racing on his father's T-bird as a young boy, helped bring Duncan Stamper's *Scooter* (#1115), the coveted gold bird in International Championship victories in 2007 and 2010. In 2012, he and the crew nearly won the championship again on the same boat as his father had 41 years earlier, but lost on a tie-breaker. In 2014, Mark Malleon and Duncan Stamper won the International Championship a third time aboard one of the most recent additions to the T-bird fleet: *Thunderbaby*, #1266, which skipper/owner Duane Emnott launched in September 2008. Emnott grew up sailing aboard *Kalua*, hull #262, which his father built in 1962 when Duane was still in diapers. The Emnott family cruised throughout his childhood

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*Frolic, Thunderbird #940, was built and launched by Don Booth in 1971. Booth had crewed on a Thunderbird in the early 1960s and, like many fans, decided to build his own. Frolic is now owned and sailed by Booth's son Neil. Frolic is one of many multi-generational family T-birds.*



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with six aboard. As an adult, Duane wanted to build his own T-bird. After 22 months, in 2008 he launched his own beautifully varnished creation, *Thunderbaby*, fifty years after the birth of the Thunderbird, with his proud father looking on. In a world where some boat owners change boats nearly as often as they change their underwear, Thunderbird owners are a loyal bunch.

*Fandango*, hull #9, was built in 1962 by George Valentine. Longtime fleet member Jaime Storkman bought her in 1977 and raised his kids aboard. About five years ago, Jaime received a call from George Valentine's son. Although his parents had divorced and sold the T-bird, his mother held fond memories of their years aboard *Fandango*. He asked if Jaime would be willing to let him and his mother come visit their old family boat, which Jaime had restored in 1997. Then last summer, Jaime got another call. Would he take the family out to scatter his mother's ashes?

Whenever he's not racing *Fandango*, Jaime Storkman's passion for the T-bird has led him to work preserving Thunderbird history alongside Ed Hoppen's son Guy. At the Gig Harbor Boatshop on the site of the original boat shop that spawned the Thunderbird, he helped rebuild Hull #1, which is now housed at the Harbor Heritage Museum, and Thunderbird hull #2, *Pirouette*.

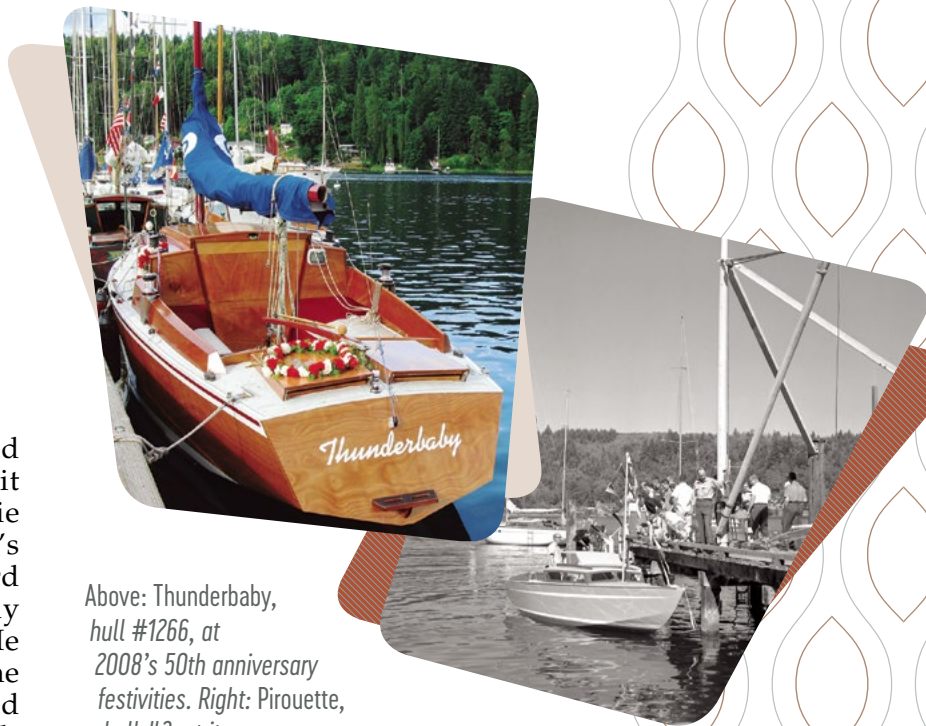
Jaime has been in the unique position of not only restoring T-birds, but reuniting them with nostalgic former owners. About ten years ago, Gerry Dryer contacted Jaime in hopes of locating the boat his parents built, *Two Knots* (hull #274). He wanted to buy it back. He and other faithful T-bird fans feel compelled to find boats that have been lost from the flock and bring them back to life.

Joe Daubenberger's father owned *Dorado*, #242, and he, too, bought it back once he located it, as did Annie Abraham. So did Neil Booth. Neil's father, Don Booth, crewed aboard a Thunderbird in the fleet's early days and decided to build one. He launched *Frolic* (#940) in 1971. The Booth family raced and cruised extensively throughout Neil's childhood, but eventually the family sold it to buy a bigger boat. Some twenty years later, Neil came across the boat on Lake Union. He let the owner know he would be interested in buying it. Finally, six years later he got his chance. He spent about a year refurbishing it with the help of Brower Boatworks, reproducing its original color scheme and graphics, and currently keeps it in front of his office at Anchor Marine Insurance. Neil sails the Thursday night series from Elliott Bay each week.

## 50 YEARS & COUNTING

In 2008, the Thunderbird fleet celebrated its fiftieth year at the birthplace of the Thunderbird, the Eddon boatyard site in Gig Harbor — barely saved from the wrecking ball in 2004. (In an inspiring effort, the Gig Harbor community voted to fund saving this part of its maritime history and turned it into the Gig Harbor Boatshop).

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary party was a grand reunion of T-birders old and young from far and wide. More than fifty boats were in attendance along with a 95-year-old, white-haired Mrs. Hoppen looking on, clearly proud of her husband's legacy. Among the many in attendance was Paul Horton, owner of *Ivy Lee* (#782), visiting from Australia. Howard Shausen was there to celebrate aboard the boat his grandfather built in 1961, *Tu-Tush*, hull #39.



Above: *Thunderbaby*, hull #1266, at 2008's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary festivities. Right: *Pirouette*, hull #2, at its maiden launch.

So were two of the last T-birds built. *Orca*, #1264, took more than twenty years to build. Terry Raat from Colorado Springs suffered from a brain injury midway through building his T-bird and returning to his boat building project helped him recover his memory. He finished it just in time to bring it to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary party, as did Duane Emnott, who christened his new *Thunderbaby* at the party. For both, it seemed the ideal time and place to celebrate the birth of recent additions to the flock.

## THE LOVE

Many a sailor in the Pacific Northwest has at least a passing history with the T-bird: cruising them, racing them, or racing against them. For quite a few, it was the boat they first learned to sail. And the reach of the T-bird still extends far beyond the Salish Sea. How can an old plywood design have such lasting power? Why haven't the old woodies one-by-one succumbed to the scrap heaps of history? People love them, that's why.

Today 10-15 boats race once or twice a week in Port Townsend. The Regional Championships on September 3 and 4 are likely to attract a sizeable fleet of those who hope to win the regional title while preparing for the 2017 International Championships, which will be sailed in the same waters. But there's always room for more. In many marinas and backyards, there's a T-bird with the potential to cruise or be competitive with a little love and attention. If you can't beat them, you might as well join them.

## Champions!

The Thunderbird Northwest Regional Championship Regatta will take place September 3 and 4, 2016, in Port Townsend. There is a \$65 registration per boat. The dates for the 2017 regatta have not been announced, but details about the championship can be found at [thunderbirdsailing.org](http://thunderbirdsailing.org).

## Where it all began!

To find out more about the birthplace of the Thunderbird, visit the Gig Harbor Boatshop ([www.gigharborboatshop.org/thunderbird-sailboat-history](http://www.gigharborboatshop.org/thunderbird-sailboat-history)) and the Harbor History Museum ([harborhistorymuseum.org](http://harborhistorymuseum.org)).



Wendy Hinman is the author of *Tightwads on the Loose*, a novel about her 34,000-mile voyage aboard a 31-foot boat with her husband, to whom she's still married and happens to like. Her second book, about Garth's shipwreck and circumnavigation with his family when he was a teenager, will be out in 2017. [www.wendyhinman.com](http://www.wendyhinman.com).