

# The Coolest Cat

2009 Interview with Hobie Alter



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**Our long-awaited Interview with Hobie Cats founder Hobie Alter. Enjoy.**

**SA:** First off, we really want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us. We know you haven't weighed in much on sailing in recent years, so this is a pretty big deal to a lot of our readers.

**HA:** Well it's good to keep in touch a little bit. (laughs)

**SA:** You're 75 now, is that right?

**HA:** I am 75, yeah – it happens fast, believe me!

**SA:** And you live pretty far from the sea?

**HA:** We were in Idaho for a while and then we switched to living in Palm Desert for the winter time on a golf course. But our main residence is in the Seattle area.

**SA:** What inspired us to get in touch with you was really the high gas prices a few months back combined with a nasty recession. The one guy in the history of sailing who was able to do something with a situation like the one we have now was you. You revolutionized sailing and created an entirely new movement – all at one of the toughest times in our nation's economic history.. So how did you capitalize on the economy in the seventies and keep Hobie growing, and to keep the Hobie Cat scene so strong?

**HA:** The recession and gas crisis was really a blessing in disguise. We were starting to do so well at that time, we couldn't produce enough boats – so when things got tighter, it let us keep running well, delivering on time, filling all our orders. You don't want to get into a business and fall way behind and have everybody demanding your product when you can't deliver it - because someone will come in and deliver it for you.

**SA:** Did you work to capitalize on or emphasize the gas crisis in your marketing – you know, "Sailing – it's free!" or something like that?

**HA:** No – not really at all. It was just kind of happening on it's own - actually we just went along doing what we do, making Hobie Cats

**SA:** So really you were going strong before the crisis hit.

**HA:** We were growing as fast as we could! It was a different thing at first in '68 when we were delivering our first boats – we weren't geared up to push too much through. We kept working into it, raising money to continue on. Then we brought in a partner who put up a loan, and then we had a private offering. Doing good business takes money, and my partner, Mark Hendrickson was good at raising money, and we did as much as we could. But then we made a mistake – going public – which raised some money but created a lot of headaches.

**SA:** What kind of headaches?

**HA:** We were just too small to be a public company! There was nothing but problems and headaches – people trying to tell us how to run the business. It got to one point where we were in a board meeting with five other people who don't get their feet wet except to take a shower, and they were telling us how to design boats – and I just couldn't do what they wanted. They wanted a 25' boat you could sleep in and all this type of stuff. But they got some guy in Florida who said he could do that.

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**SA:** And what happened?

**HA:** The guy with the plan – his claim to fame was that his company built the cigarette boat – he’s in a room with all of us, and laying out the blueprint for the 25’ cat, which is obviously just a day sailor, and he’s explaining, “this is the captain’s quarters over here, and this is the galley over here...” So I pointed to the conference table that we were sitting at, and I said, “this table here is just a bit taller than your captain’s quarters and galley – let’s all just get under here and talk about your layout!” It didn’t even register, and they went ahead and had the thing built. True story.

**SA:** So being a public company didn’t work. What happened next?

**HA:** We sold it to Coleman in ’76 and the guy running it did a good job. Most companies come in and want to change everything, but he stuck with the system that was working. He got right on with sailing and racing and had a good time, and Coleman left him alone. And it all worked out very, very well. And then they sold it to Tony from Texas – sorry, I forget his last name – but that didn’t really work out so well. They were Hobie Cat sailors so they had a great time, but they didn’t have a feel for the business and had some other problems, so eventually they got out of it and sold it to a couple of guys from St. Louis, and they’re the ones who own it now.

**SA:** And how did your kids get back into it?

**HA:** Well, they didn’t really – what happened is that we’ve always kept the name Hobie for surfboards, clothing, skateboards, sunglasses, and we formed a joint company that handles all the licensing and that kind of thing.

**SA:** Thanks for explaining the history of the company – now on the real questions! Do you feel that the success of the brand of the boat and the class were based more on the performance of the boats and the ease of use or were the after-regatta parties and the lifestyle promotion the keys to Hobie Cat’s success in the late 70s and early 80s?

**HA:** I think it was a combination of everything. There are bigger, faster, fancier boats. And we have bigger, faster, fancier boats too. But the 16 is tough to beat, and was the real key to everything.. If I was going to recommend a boat to a friend for he and his wife want to sail and maybe get into racing, I’d say “get a 16.” They’re easy, they’re not overly expensive, you’ve got a big class to race in – and you can use your wife or kid as crew. When you start getting a little bigger, you’re kinda taking the wife out of the crew thing. With the Tigers and those boats flying hulls and everything it’s much more athletic, but the 16’ class is just perfect for couples. With the more modern race boats, unless you’ve got an old enough kid, you’ve got a bunch of guys racing against each other – it kind of breaks things up. With the 16, with you and the wife doing it, you spend the whole weekend together. That’s what the boat did – it put people together. Did you hear about the 40th Anniversary they had recently?

**SA:** We did hear about it – what was that like?

**HA:** I couldn’t believe the party, literally filled with people I hadn’t seen in 40 years. Whether people are sailing the boat or not anymore, they’re still kind of a Hobie Cat person. So, to answer your question from before, that’s what we helped create. And then the people, they carried it on. You know, you can only sail for so many hours, then you come in and you’re friends. When I first looked into racing, I thought sailing was kind of a little hateful.

**SA:** Why hateful?

**HA:** Mainly you had to be a member of a yacht club in order to sail, so the energy wasn’t so easy. And then if you could sail, and you touched a mark or fouled someone you were done – you had to go home. Or you’d have to wait around to deal with a protest. That

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doesn't make for friendship, at least I didn't think so. So we put the 360 rule in, and I think it was the best thing we ever did. It really... it was really what we were after. You have to have good rules, and there were good rules, but that whole thing about hitting a mark and dropping out of a race – it was like if a football team was offside, and they'd have to get off the field and go home.

**SA:** We've heard a few stories of the origin of the widely used 360 rule. So it was your innovation? Was that your innovation. The 360 for touching a mark?

**HA:** We'd heard some other class had experimented with it – maybe the Penguin class. I'm not sure. But yeah, we put it into use, and we got a lot of grief! Most of the regattas we ran our own races, but some we'd be mixed in with a yacht club. I'd have guys saying to me, "Hey, you're not God, you can't be changing the rules!" And I'd say, "I'm not God, that's for sure." But despite getting a lot of heat, we convinced them to let our class use the 360.

**SA:** A lot of the sport is still that resistant to change. But generally, not the multihull sailors. Do you think the Hobie revolution had a lot to do with multihull sailors openness to change?

**HA:** Well sure, but it goes back a long way before us – to the New York Yacht Club and Nat Herreshoff's Amaryllis getting banned in the 19th Century. It just wasn't accepted. When we started, the people who were promoting cat sailing were trying to do it through the yacht clubs, and working with people that probably weren't overly excited about it. When we started finding dealers, we learned right away that sailboat dealers just didn't work for what we were selling.

**SA:** So what did work?

**HA:** I went to the Houston Boat Show, the first big boat show we ever went to, and I sold 9 boats right there in a weekend - probably more than anyone sold at that show by far. And sailboats weren't big at all back then – just barely catching on in a few areas. I talked to a guy there in Houston at the beginning of the show – he was the biggest small sailboat dealer in the Houston area – and he wouldn't even give me 8 minutes to watch the little video we had even though his booth was right next to mine. He was watching what was going on with our booth – all the action I was getting, so he finally said, "I'd like to maybe handle your boat." So I said, "Great! How many do you want?" "We'll start with one." I couldn't believe it. "I just sold 9 of them right here in front of you!"

But I found a guy who had a music store, and he was looking for something fun to do, and he wanted to be a Hobie dealer, and they wanted 7 or 8 boats right off the bat. I'd talk to him about the racing and how they were doing, and I told him I'd help promote the class in the area. They didn't know much about sailing, but they did it, and they were successful. Of the 9 people who bought boats at that show, 7 of them went on to become dealers. So we could see the handwriting on the wall – this was just different than how things were usually done.

**SA:** So this is early days outside of California – how'd you build the momentum?

**HA:** We hand-fed it the first year. We had regional championships, and we promised the winners a trip to California for the Nationals. I think we flew 5 people from 5 different regions, and they couldn't believe it. It wouldn't have been a very big deal now, cause there weren't that many people there, but back then, it was huge. We may have gotten 15 boats together for their little regionals, and we flew them out, and we had a great little nationals in San Diego, and we got some good publicity on it and I think we did it the next year. After that I think it was going on it's own, run by the Hobie folks themselves – the sailors. And they're the ones that are still carrying it on today, doing an unbelievable job.

**SA:** One of our readers wrote that "he's owned 12 Hobie Cats, that it's his favorite boat in history, and that "Having Hobie hand me a trophy at an event some years ago was a tremendous honor, thanks for coming out to support the sport." These guys just love everything

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you've done, and they credit you with so much of what modern cat sailing is.

**HA:** Well, I credit them for keeping it going and doing it all. And part of it is, I was never a basketball or football player or anything like that. But I got into skiing and every other weekend you'd go skiing and hang out with all your friends. And then I got into riding dirt bikes, and you'd tow 500 dirt bikes out to a race, and then on Friday night you'd lay lines out in the middle of the desert. Everyone just got together and played for the weekend and then on Sunday you'd race. You'd just find a place to get everyone together, and they'd make their own fun. Everyone brought their kids, and we'd have 500 or a thousand people in the middle of nowhere having a great time. Those were the kind of things I discovered and wanted to do with the Hobie class. I couldn't really believe it caught on, but that was our goal and I enjoyed it, I really did.

**SA:** So it was all about fun and getting everyone together. What did you have to watch out for?

**HA:** I had a friend, a great sailor but I can't remember who it was. He said, "do not let the good sailors take control of your class. They'll ruin it." So I had a couple of problems with guys that were really tight on the rules, and really weren't well-liked. I told them, "You know what, when you go up to get your trophy, you're going to have 5 people clap for you rather than a hundred. Is that really how you want it?"

**SA:** There was something called the "Hobie Edict" that was issued, which banned non-Hobie Cats from any HCA sponsored regattas in North America. Remember that? Do you think that that helped or hurt overall multi-hull participation?

**HA:** I think it helped our participation immensely, though I don't know what it did the other way around. It wasn't a formal thing completely, but it came after the Prindle Cat got in at Lake Havasu, where we'd been racing for years with the Hobie and the P-Cat. We didn't compete much with the P-Cat, but the Prindle Cat came in and pretty soon that wasn't a fun thing. Their guys didn't like our guys, our guys didn't like their guys – it just wasn't a good deal for us, so pretty soon we separated it out. We had enough people to have a good time on our own. We kept the rules tight enough that you couldn't buy your way to victory on our boat – we were just racing equal boats. Certainly Prindle had enough boats out there to do the same thing, but to put the two together on the same weekend just didn't work. And our guys were doing the really hard work, promoting the Class and having a lot of fun and success, so why should they promote a competing class? We really just wanted to do our own thing, and that was to have fun.

**SA:** Was there bad blood with you and Jeff Prindle after he went off on his own?

**HA:** Not really, we never really had any big problems. Prindle kind of knocked off our rudder line/drop down thing, so we put a stop to that. But basically there were a few small things, you know – Prindle got a few of our guys, but that's going to happen. Compared to the surfboard business, where everyone was robbing everyone else's top surfers – those guys would switch loyalties really fast, you couldn't believe it. Compared to that the cat stuff was nothing.

**SA:** Your surf business went from a tiny custom thing to a gigantic monster, and it still hasn't slowed down, right? You and Clark really...

**HA:** There's a really long history behind all that that was going slowly up through the 30s and 40s through World War 2, and then the light boards, balsa wood and fiberglass were really what changed things, and that's when I got into it. I was like 15 and guys like me all of a sudden became the best surfers – because they had the best equipment. And the old guys didn't want to switch readily, they'd say things like, "Wait'll the surf gets big, you won't want that little potato chip then!" But then it got big and we still went better – but it took a few years for it all to switch over. So in the meantime, all the good surfers were these young guys building and shaping boards with the new materials. That's gonna happen anyway with the younger people, but the change made it happen really fast for those riding balsa/glass. And then foam came in, and we figured out how to make lighter boards and to make them so much easier to manufacture,

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all the while balsa was getting more scarce. I think that only 10% of the tree could be used for boards, the rest was thrown out or used for model airplanes.

**SA:** Let's move back to one of our reader questions. One of the writes, "A U.S. relative of mine, based in Florida these days, told me a tale of buying Hobie 14 # 1 from you way back when. He said you wanted sail # 001 back, and swapped it for a road trailer. Any truth to this tale?

**HA:** No, not that I can remember. We had hull #1 in the 14 and 16. And #1 in the 16 went to my friend Ted McClelland. On the 14, we had a few early boats that went to a couple guys that hung around and worked with us on the beach.

**SA:** That's okay, it was a long time ago...

**HA:** Yep, that would have been '68 I guess.

**SA:** Let's talk about your creation of the 14. How much time did you spend on the Malibu Outrigger before you started on the 14, and was it much of an influence?

**HA:** Almost none, though that was the thing that the surfers were building, the ones that wanted to get into boats. Benny Gilford made one...Phil Edwards made a 20-foot cat that was a pretty hot boat, getting more into the Tornado proportions as far as weight and the 10' beam and small hulls – it wasn't as sophisticated as far as the rig. I was really busy with surfboards at the time so I didn't really pay too much attention, but then I started to build a Malibu Outrigger myself. I didn't have plans or anything, I just had the hull and ama built, no deck, and it was sitting out back full of water. One of the guys said, "why don't you give it to me, I'll finish it and you can use it when you want?" So I said, "that's a deal" and that's what we did. He made a sail out of an old parachute, and I think I went on it once or twice, I didn't even know how to sail.

**SA:** But you kept it on the back burner?

**HA:** I was always looking at what was going on, watching guys sailing cats. I sailed the Ensenada Race with Phil, it was illegal for a cat but we went anyway...and we talked about them a LOT. When the Catfish came out I watched, and then the Aqua Cat came out, but it really didn't do much – the "plumber's nightmare." I guess it was a better boat than it looked, it served it's purpose, and did alright – I mean, they sold 4 or 5 thousand of them so they got people in the water...

**SA:** And the Malibu?

**HA:** It was really just a stepping stone for all the guys making small cats. We tried the Catfish, which was just too heavy, too low in the water, but then Joe Quigg, who was a surfboard builder before I was, came out with the Cal Cat, a really nice boat. So here I am, pretty much a non-sailor, and I bought a used P-Cat. I kept it at the beach and started sailing up and down the beach, riding waves in, there wasn't any racing or anything, just having fun. I kept it on my mooring in Laguna in the summertime, and we still kept talking about making a little boat.

**SA:** So where'd you finally get the motivation for the cat?

**HA:** A guy came in and wanted to buy my surfboard company – I guess this was in early '67. It wasn't really for sale, but if someone gives you too much money you probably have to take it. He had a friend with him that his mother made go with him – I guess to keep him from doing something stupid – that was Art Hendrickson. They looked at the board business and we talked about that for a while,

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and when they asked, "what else can you do?" I told them that I thought there was room for a little catamaran – a small single handed cat. A few weeks later Art comes back in alone, and says, "so tell me about that boat you want to build." We talked about it, and we agreed that we'd go in together with the money to make it happen. I told him that I didn't want to run the business, I liked building things more, and he'd run the business part of it. And so we did that.

**SA:** And did you go right to work on the prototype?

**HA:** Well let me take it back a step, I got a little ahead of myself. Before then, Sandy Banks had his little 11-footer, and Phil Edwards had his big 20. Sandy's boat was kind of fun, but it was all over the place, just too small. We used it along with my P-Cat and we thought of everything that needed improvement – that we could do on a new boat. Then when the Cal Cat came out, it got us really revved up to do it right.

**SA:** And that's when Art and some money came into it.

**HA:** Yeah, and I took my little Quonset hut, cleared all my motorcycles out of it, and we started working on our prototype. First we bought two Cal Cats because we figured it was the best thing out there. This way we always had one to chase, seeing how ours compared to it.

**SA:** And what was the defining feature of your imaginary boat?

**HA:** I guess it was the asymmetric hulls. For a single handed cat there was enough to deal with without dagger boards, especially going in and out of the beach, riding waves.

**SA:** You built 4 test boats before going to production - how long did it take to build one?

**HA:** About six days, but we saved a lot of time by putting the Cal Cat rig and rudders in, and it gave us a chance to see how our hulls compared very quickly. The first prototype didn't maneuver the way we wanted it to. We saw how much more rocker we needed and we built the second boat – and it was much closer to what the 14 ended up as. It did everything we wanted and we felt sure we could do better than the Cal Cat.

So now what are we going to do? We knew we had to have some looks out of it, so we came up with the idea of casting metal parts to make it look right and be the right weight.

**SA:** What kind of casting?

**HA:** Sand casting. Now this is where Art was good – he didn't know much about anything, but he was a smart person. We could send him off to the city and tell him to find out everything about sand casting – how much it costs, how it works, what we needed to know, and what potential it had for us. It was generally for short run prototype metal parts, you pack dirt or sand around a pattern, then pull the pattern out, which leaves the shape you want as an open space. Then you do the other side and put them together, and fill them with liquid metal. The thing is you can make these shapes and you don't have to have them release, you just bang the sand out when you're done, so you can make all kinds of shapes that you couldn't do in fiberglass.

**SA:** So that made life a lot easier.

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**HA:** Well it gave us some good shapes that we couldn't otherwise do, for the crossbeam and runners and that. The boat started to have a body of its own - kind of a weird looking one, but enough to see that it wasn't an Aqua cat, it wasn't to be confused with anything that was around that time. We didn't want a full-width or full-height hull, just too heavy - so the cast parts solved that.

**SA:** What was the biggest difference between the boat you envisioned when you first talked to Art and the final 14 production hull?

**HA:** Well I didn't have anything when I first talked to Art. Sandy's little boat was down on the beach then, we looked at plenty of stuff, but we just figured it out as we went along.

**SA:** It's kind of funny to think of how modern boats are designed and compare it to a few guys in a quonset hut throwing together one of the most important boats in sailing history. How did you go about designing the rest of the boat - rudder, tramps, halyard locks, everything else? Did you have any specialists or people devoted to that kind of thing?

**HA:** No, I designed virtually everything. I had a couple of guys like Sandy working for me, doing hand grinding and sanding and stuff. I got the first plugs sanded and all polished out ready to make a mold, and I remember it was in September, and the sun came through the windows and heated up one of the hulls and warped it. We had to take a big saw and slice it in each direction, made a noodle out of it, routed it and put rebar in it and put it back together straight. Everything was hand done. We had everything but the rudders done that Christmas, and I was spending a lot of time trying to figure out how to get them to kick up right and to get them down without moving the tiller around. I was mounting my kid's ski bindings, and looking at how the toe plate locked into the boot, and I realized I could put a cam and a ball in just like the bindings to make the rudders work, and it kind of just evolved like that.

**SA:** How much time passed between moving the motorcycles out of the hut and the 14 being ready for production?

**HA:** We started about in June, and by September we'd decided on a shape for the hulls, and that we were going to do the castings for the mast bearings, and all the little parts. All winter long we were making molds and putting everything together. And the first boat we got out of the molds we called April, it pretty much had everything but the kick-up rudder. Then we had another one called May, then another one called June. And my partner started getting nervous now, thinking we'd have a July and August and everything - worried about money. So on the 4th of July, 1968, we were going to have our first regatta with the four boats we'd built. But of course it was glass, the wind didn't blow even a little. So the next week we had our first little race out off Beach Road.

**SA:** That's awesome - you are just full of stories about everything. One of our readers wants to know, "Why are you golfing and fly fishing instead of sailing? Have you lost all interest in the sport?"

**HA:** No - but I've never really stuck too long with anything! When you're a kid surfing you think you'll be a surfer all your life, but you get on with other things. I've always loved model airplanes, I played with those, and then I got into the dirt bikes - we went to the desert and raced dirt bikes every weekend for three years! And that's what all the rest of the guys were doing too. There were just a load of fun things to do, none of them were intentionally laid out, it all just happened somewhere along the line.

**SA:** Robin writes, "You and my old man Sled Shelhorse did the Worrell 1000 back in the late '70s and early '80s. It seems with insurance liability and a general aversion to risk these days, we'll never have that sort of adventure where a few guys just take off with a compass and go. Do you think we'll ever see that kind of race again?"

**HA:** I don't know! I thought it was scary at the time - I mean, it really was downright dangerous, and they were lucky they never killed anyone. And I didn't want to do it anymore, but my kids, oh boy! Off they went, raced it two or three times, won it...so with that I went back to follow it and watch it. They were gonna do it anyway so I might as well be there to watch it, right? It was exciting, but it wasn't patrolled as well as it could have been. Guys that could handle almost anything, but God! They went around Hatteras on one of the

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races, and I was right on the tip watching them, and you could see the oceans running together. They tacked out to clear the point, but they just kept going while I was thinking, "why are they tacking out?" Those waves were twice as high as the mast, and they just couldn't find a spot to tack – there wasn't any safe spot. You could just be dead out there, it was such a scary thing.

**SA:** Do you think it helped promote Hobies or multihull sailing?

**HA:** Well Mike Worrell got a LOT of press from it, and it definitely promoted the boat. The fact that they came in to the beach every night, it got everyone on the East Coast into it. And then the Hog's Breath did another one around the bottom of Florida, that one had its scary pieces too, but it was also good for the boat.

**SA:** Another reader says that he raced on the ProSail circuit as well as "the Ultimate Yacht Race" on Hobie 21s against Jeff and Hobie, Jr. - he wants to know if there is any potential for another multihull series in the US that could catch the public's interest?

**HA:** I don't know – I really haven't thought too much about it. But the ones going up the beach, the Tybee and that, that could work really well if the individual towns are promoting it like they were back in the Worrell days. Individuals watching sailboat racing isn't too exciting. But maybe that thing that the San Francisco computer guy built up here in Anarcortes...

**SA:** You're talking about Elison's triamaran. What do you think of that one?

**HA:** (laughs) I've just seen it in pictures off the internet – that looks scarier n' hell! They're gonna be a long way in the air. But it sure would be neat to see it race in an ultimate, all-out kind of thing.

**SA:** Could be really ugly too.

**HA:** It sure could. That's the thing, all that stuff they're doing now, with the canting keels and open oceans, you really can get hurt. It is a real sport!

**SA:** Is it true that you worked on Dennis Conner's America's Cup catamaran?

**HA:** No – but I was kind of their official lender. They had an old Hobie Cat building that they built it in. Bob DeLong, who is a friend of ours, he was doing the hull work, and John Wake, who worked for me, he went on to work on the Conner crew.

**SA:** So you lent a bunch of technical expertise to Stars & Stripes through some of your Hobie crew?

**HA:** Well, John was really the one who laid up the hulls, laminating them out of pre-preg honeycomb, something we weren't really doing. But I was two buildings away building Katie Sue, so I had clearance to go in and watch the build. I really give 'em credit, I mean we were all catamaran guys, but I was just looking at it thinking "boy those are long, skinny things with little tiny bits, is that really gonna work?" But they did an unbelievable job of putting it together and making it a one-shot success.

**SA:** And yet the boats are still holding up – one of them sailed the Chicago-Mackinac race just this year.

**HA:** I didn't know that, but it doesn't surprise me. I have a little piece of the hull section that they gave out to some people - it was really a great job that Rutan and all those guys did on the overall structural work on the boat.

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**SA:** So you know that the America's Cup is in a mess right now, at least as bad as it was back in '88. Have you followed any of the current legal battle?

**HA:** Well, I have just a little because of that new boat they built. I guess it's kind of like what Fay tried to do with Dennis, you know, forcing a race on their terms. I don't really know too much about this one, but I thought what Fay did was really rotten. The New York Yacht Club had kept it in this country, and weren't the best people to deal with, but it was starting to really come together, it had gotten to the foreign countries, they'd gotten some rules together, and then Fay pulled that. Guys with too much money...that's kind of been the story of the America's Cup the whole way.

**SA:** Pretty much...

**HA:** I'll tell you a story about a boat, though John Wake would know more about it...John was working for Dennis after he won the catamaran race for the next Cup, he was trying to do a double-keeled boat with a bulb stretched in between the two keels. Did Dennis tell you about any of this?

**SA:** Nope, nothing.

**HA:** Well, to test it, they decided to get a half-scale boat, so they took a couple of Hobie 33s, which John was very familiar with, they sawed them in half and stretched them to 37 or whatever was exactly half-scale for Dennis's boat. They left one stock, then put the new keel configuration in the other one. I think it worked fairly well, but they didn't have the time, or maybe it didn't work so well on the bigger boat.

**SA:** I never heard that one.

**HA:** Well I couldn't tell anyone - we were sworn to secrecy! That boat - there are a lot of stories - but one of those two boats, they put racks on it and trapezes, and were racing it in San Francisco, really a hot boat - and that's where the guy who was Rolex Yachtsman of the Year died - a wire snapped or something like that. And it was interesting that the incident was the first time that boat was ever called a Hobie 33.

**SA:** One of our Anarchists asks: "I have Hobie 14 # 242. What hull number did you stop doing the glass work? I only ask because I think you may have done mine."

**HA:** No (laughing), I stopped a long time before that! I probably had a hand in up to number ten - I mean it was still going on in the shop right where I was, but I wasn't doing much layup.

**SA:** Given that most of the boats that Hobie US sells are more recreational without much focus on racing at all, this reader wants to know, "How do we get more recreational cat sailors to go racing?"

**HA:** In Florida, I remember one of the dealers would get the local fleet to bring down their boats and give lessons there right off the beach, taking people sailing. They'd have some beer and burgers, and charge some nominal fee to help them get a Boston Whaler out there to act as a committee boat. What that did was it got people out on the water - not necessarily people who had a boat, just people who were looking to do something different. The dealer sponsored it, and he did well from it. The total amount of new people coming into Hobie Cats probably isn't huge right now - the Mirage kayaks are the big deal. Have you seen them yet?

**SA:** The ones with the whacky fins that flop around underwater and move the boat?

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**HA:** That propulsion thing WORKS! The kayaks are rotomolded so they're not the latest and greatest technology, but the Mirage drive really does work. When they designed it I thought it would never work, but it's actually very efficient, particularly with small, slow boats that would otherwise be paddled or rowed. The constant power gets the same boats to a higher speed than paddling would – I put one on my little fishing boat. It's quite a deal, and that's got Hobie Cat into the kayak business.

**SA:** Do you do much kayaking?

**HA:** I love it, but I always hated how the water would drip off your paddles when you were looking down into clear water for fish – you really had to coast if you wanted to get in anywhere. With this drive it's fantastic, and your hands are free.

**SA:** Very cool – so what about Hobie Cat racing?

**HA:** Well, there's action – regattas around all over the world – and I'm sure all the fleets are trying to get new people in. But it's probably a little on the stagnant side.

**SA:** Like so much in sailing – stagnant. But not for all the boats – it seems that some of the smaller trailerable boats are still doing well – boats that don't take big slips, or lots of expenses.

**HA:** That's what we tried to do with the Hobie 33, to make the hottest keelboat that was truly trailerable – and it was a good thing, but probably the way we promoted it wasn't the best.

**SA:** And yet it's become a cult classic – one of the sweetest 30-footers of its time.

**HA:** The guys liked the boat – it was really my problem that it came in too expensive. I tried to get it to do everything, but I probably could have had it a little more gutted inside. Right off the bat the boat was opened up to the sailmakers, just a dimension rule. So they'd come down, put their sails on the boat, and then go race the guy's boat for them. And I think that hurt things.

**SA:** How?

**HA:** Well I went to the first H33 Nationals, and I had the worst sails there! You had guys like North and all the other hot guys, and all sorts of brand new stuff. So opening it up definitely got the boat and class to do better than it should really quickly, but if you have to go back and buy new sails the next day, that isn't great for the class. The boat went pretty well the stock way, without all the modifications that the sailmakers brought in – I mean, you're never going to get that much more out of the boat. So we started providing the boats for Nationals as soon as we could – and then we changed the boats between races.

**SA:** And what was the sailors' reaction?

**HA:** It got everybody more into sailing than into boatspeed. The couldn't do anything to the boat, so people really concentrated on the racing and, I think, had a lot more fun. If we could help their minds, they'd stop thinking that their boats were slow, settle down, realize they were all alike, and truly feel they were competing level.

**SA:** Speaking of boatspeed, what are your thoughts on multihulls and the Olympics? Is there a future for another multihull event. Do you think it's a good thing for multihulls in general, having them in the Olympics again?

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**HA:** Well I don't see why they shouldn't! I mean, if they're going to have sailing in the Olympics, of course multihulls should be in it.

**SA:** In what boat?

**HA:** Well I never wanted it to be the 16, because as I said earlier, the good sailors would come in and run the rules and the amateurs would leave. They'd keep it going at a high level of skill, but the participation would be worse. But maybe the 16 has been around long enough now that maybe it's time to give it another kick. I don't even know how many Tornados there are in the world, but there sure are enough Hobie 16s around.

**SA:** They may not be as high-performance as people would like, but I sure do see a lot more Hobies around than I do Tornados.

**HA:** Arthur Knapp once said that if everyone had a bathtub and a handkerchief, as long as they were equal, I'd race it. The 16s are now worldwide, manufacturers in New Zealand and France and Australia and US and I'm not sure where else. Look, there should be multihulls, and the 16 would probably be great for it, but the Olympics are a political thing.

**SA:** Could you put a spinnaker on the 16 to try to get some performance on a boat that is so widely available – something the IOC would like to see?

**HA:** I think the the 16 is so good for what it is. I mean, don't they use the Laser? What's wrong with having a stock boat that you can't do much to? The 16 would fit into that just fine.

It's the bathtub and handkerchief again.

**SA:** This next question says, "Your life's work has been about building and producing toys. Have you grown up yet?"

**HA:** Oh no, no way. I'm making a little golf gadget right now. Yeah, we're going to have a photo shoot on it tomorrow, and start trying to produce it.

**SA:** Did you ever have doubts about what you were doing and consider getting a real job?

**HA:** I guess you don't think about anything, you don't know what you're going to do tomorrow. Things kind of happen, and with a little serendipity you start off one way and something totally different happens. It's just fun making things – I have a shop with tools out in Palm Desert, I can play with making electric sailplanes, little helicopters, stuff like that.

**SA:** When was the term "Have a Hobie Day" quoted, and was it only in regards to a cat?

**HA:** That was when we were still in our first shop in Capistrano Beach, so it had to be in 72-73, and I don't know who really started it! But our PR guy, Paul Collins, I think he picked up on it - and his daughter is Bo Derek.

**SA:** Wow, that's great. I think I remember a bikini picture of her on a Hobie Cat.

**HA:** No, she had clothes on. She and my daughter sailed together at times. And she was just an average 15-year old girl.

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**SA:** Not average!

**HA:** Well, no.

**SA:** What invention, what thing that you created, are you the most proud of?

**HA:** Well, the boat of course was the most successful thing, so that is up there. But maybe the Hobie Glider, I really liked that. The construction of it was totally different than all the stuff that was out there. We had a pre-preg tail cone and rotomolded nose cone, and you had the battering ram up front and you could mold your wing into it. The wings were 3/2nd and 6/4th inch plywood and that was with the foam core. Everything about it was thought through, instead of a prepared kit like everything now.

**SA:** What was your favorite Hobie Cat to sail?

**HA:** The 16. I like it, and I like sailing with someone. The 14 was great, and easy to handle and everything for racing, and going out on the weekend. And some of those hot ones, I haven't even sailed. I did take an 18 foot, 10' beam, real small hulled prototype cat, and it had the boom underneath the trampoline. So your traveler was upside down, and you went between the sail and boom when you tacked. It was wacky, and you had to be careful because the boom could knock you over from below. And it sailed pretty good, but no one turned out to want to sail it too much.

**SA:** With foilers now and some of the other innovations, have you ever thought about what might be the next "Holy Crap Moment" in sailboats?

**HA:** You know, it's really hard to say. When you take what they're doing with the kites now, that's really the ultimate in sailing. Before I even got into sailing there was an article in Scientific America and it talked about the 40 knot sail boat. Now, that used to be a term, "The 40 knot sailboat." Is someone gonna make one that'll go 40 knots, ya know, someone would have a story out on it every so often. But anyway, they had a drawing in the magazine back then - there was a kite in in the air, string down, a bucket, a guy in the bucket and the string goes down, and there's a foil in the water. And if you think about it, that was the ultimate way, the ultimate sailing. And if you notice at the bottom it said, "chase boat not shown."

**SA:** Have you seen, Hobie, that the WSSRC recently ratified a record over 50 knots?

**HA:** You see, that's probably the ultimate until you can just have a foil in the water and almost nothing else. You know the Hobie Tri-Foiler had that for a while?

**SA:** I've never sailed one of those.

**HA:** It was one of those boats that makes you say, "I'd like my neighbor to own one so I can borrow it." It's too much to maintain, and you really need the right wind to go good - 12 knots or more. I spent two days trying to get enough wind, but when you do go from 4 knots to 20 knots in just a minute it's really something. But there's just so much hanging down in the water that when it gets light you stop. I think the foils make a lot of sense on a small boat like the Moths. But if you ever get a chance, you should sail the tri-foiler. There's nothing wrong with it, it's just a lot of boat to sail.

**SA:** As a salesman for Hobie for the past three years through two retail locations, I've had the extreme pleasure of coming to know the Hobie way of life. Without hesitation, I can say that your products and the company you started have created more lifelong sailors than any other. Although I was introduced to the sport through racing and still compete on a national level, Hobie always brings me back to

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what is great about the sport. What are the principles that guided the creation of this lifestyle that has touched so many?

**HA:** Well, greed for one! We wanted to have as much fun as possible, and to have everyone to have a Hobie, and to not have sailing be hateful, just to be as fun as it possibly could be. That was always preached right off the bat, and now you have hundreds of thousands of people...that's what amazes me, that there are still all these people sailing and racing Hobies, that they're still going strong after all this time. We loved the idea of guys and girls sailing together, people making friends, and enjoying their time on the water.

**SA:** John Williams asks, "Your sons' part in the Hobie business keeps them on the periphery of the sport. We love it when they all come out and race, but it seems like an indulgence for them now. As your grand kids are coming up, do you have any aspirations for another generation of world-class Hobie sailor?"

**HA:** Well, they crew with their dad, but I can't say they've taken that on yet. Sure they've been surfing and skiing and sailing since they're four years old, so they've got so many things that they're good at and used to, that I don't know if they will or not. I wish they would, that would be neat. I'll tell you a little story about my grandson. We were up in Alaska and he went one afternoon to pull the dungeness crab traps. He comes back giggling, and it turned out he had a King Crab – it could have never gotten in the trap, but it was hanging on the outside of the trap trying to get the bait. The crab measured 54 inches from tip to tip. 5 of us had him for dinner, and then 4 of us had dinner on him the next night. Just unreal.

**SA:** So maybe he'll be a fisherman?

**HA:** Oh, he already is. But you never know what a kid is gonna do, how they fit into their slots. I was lucky because I grew up right on the beach at the center of Laguna's best surfing. My dad didn't know anything about surfing, but that's how it ended up and that made me who I am.

**SA:** Well, you're a hell of a guy, and we can't thank you enough for taking all this time to answer our questions. Seriously man, thanks.

**HA:** Just don't print my phone number when you write this up. I'm always glad that our boats have made people happy, but the worst thing is when you get some drunk boat owners that get all liquored up and say, "well let's call Hobie."

**SA:** We'll be careful with your digits. Thanks again, man.

**HA:** Well, thank you too and your readers too, some really good questions. It's been fun!

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