

Sailing's heartland



Billy Black

Wherever in the world we sail for fun, chances are good that some of the boats and the gear and the techniques for using them originated on the inland lakes of Wisconsin or on the great inland seas, Michigan and Superior, that form Wisconsin's coast and waterway connections to the world.

All kinds of mega-yachts are built at the Palmer Johnson yard, to the north in Sturgeon Bay. At the southern border of the state, near Lake Geneva, lies Zenda, the seat of Melges Boatworks and Melges Sails. Star boats, 5.5-Meters, and the famous inland-lake scows are built there, as are winning one-design sails. The most famous export of all, of course, is "the Wizard" himself, Buddy Melges.

In the dead center of the state, amid farmland and forest, can be found Red Nimphius's boatworks, a last bastion of traditional wooden-boat construction that has, over the years, turned out both successful ocean-racing and cruising boats. All through Wisconsin are such surprises as Joe Norton's boatyard in Green Lake, where some of Garry Hoyt's furthest-out concept boats are materialized in WEST System laminates.

Way to the southeast lies Pewaukee, home of Harken Yacht Fittings, whose low-friction gear makes everything from Optimist prams to International America's

Speed freaks: Harken, Mattison, and Krueger (above)

Cup Class boats manageable. Tying everything together out there—the innovative boat designs, the gear, and the high-performance sailing techniques—is the iceboat, which, along with the very fast scows, in many ways laid the foundation for today's world of planing boats and multi-hulls.

One of the chief development laboratories for this "new age of sail" has been the Skeeter class iceboat. Some months ago we asked writer Knowles Pittman to take a look at three new E-Skeeters, all built by their owners, Paul Krueger, Peter Harken, and Bill Mattison, in Bill Mattison's boat shop in Madison, Wisconsin. E-Skeeter sailors don't have real names, only nicknames. The three are known as PK,

Harkoon, and Matsoon. According to Peter Harken, "Speed is all this class thinks about. Not safety, not anything, only what makes the boat faster—regardless of increased danger to the human body. We should have roll bars, but they would add weight and drag, so, unless it's required—no way. It's dumb, I know." These guys work on the boats like driven men. Harkoon says of PK, "He drives an iceboat like a madman. He doesn't steer, he drives it. PK has no fear, none. He comes into a leeward pin on my outside at one hundred-plus miles per hour and slams his boat sideways in front of me, expecting me to follow suit. He scares the hell out of me."

The boats and the crazy hard-water sport are fascinating. But while in Pewaukee, Pittman found that the iceboat project—interesting as it is—was nearly blotted out by the larger-than-life figure of Mattison—Matsoon—himself.

A winner in both scows and iceboats, Bill Mattison is an incredibly curious, resourceful man, who, when he needs something, simply builds it. In the hours when most of us sleep, Mattison thinks, tinkers, and plans. When most of us work, Mattison does too, at a pace that is simply dazzling. He is a dynamo of creativity whom you'll meet with his partners in "Fast-Forward Since Birth," page 58. Stand by for unleashed energy.

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