



FULL DISCLOSURE

There's more to **building boats** than meets the eye

By Mike Telleria

Keep this in mind the next time you go to a boat show: All those shiny white boats have a lot more in common than a lot of manufacturers might like to admit. In fact, sometimes it seems that the main difference between boats is the decals with the brand names on them. Even though this might at first sound like a raw deal for buyers, the truth is that this is actually good news for people looking to buy a boat — really good news.

The business of building recreational trailerboats in this country is a competitive one. And while competition is always applauded for keeping prices in check, it drives another very important benefit to

boaters: quality. It's survival of the fittest with such a competitive field out there, and those that aren't able to bring quality boats to the water quickly become extinct.

One independent boat builder that takes survival seriously is Stingray Boats, which builds value-minded trailerboats 18 to 25 feet in length. After spending some time touring the Stingray plant in Hartsville, South Carolina, and discussing how successful boats are built with Stingray boss Al Fink, we've come away with some insight that you're not likely to hear at the boat show or the dealership.

DIFFERENT MEANS, SAME END

While every builder might take a slightly

different approach to building boats, it seems that none of them really has a lock on a method or process that is leaps and bounds above everyone else. "Most manufacturers in business today have learned to build product that holds up in general public use — they wouldn't be in business if they didn't," Fink says. "Just because one outfit builds boats this way and another outfit builds boats that way, it doesn't mean that both boats can't be put in the same body of water and run the same distance without giving any problems."

The hull construction process is a perfect example. Some companies, such as Stingray and many others, use the traditional hand-laid fiberglass technique for

BUILDING A QUALITY BOAT THE STINGRAY WAY

There are many different ways to take resin, fiberglass and gelcoat and turn them into a boat. Many builders, Stingray included, stick with the traditional method of hand-laid fiberglass where workers coat the inside of a mold with gelcoat and then add layers of fiberglass wetted out with resin to create the hard shell of the hull (the technical term for the end fiberglass/resin product is fiberglass reinforced plastic, or FRP — but most builders simply refer to the hull as "fiberglass" or even "glass"). After it's cured, the hull is pulled from the mold and ready for the next step in the process.



DOING SOME COLLECTIVE THINKING

In order to keep quality high and prices low, many boat builders belong to a buying group like the American Boatbuilders Association, which allows them to purchase quality resin, fiberglass, engines, upholstery and other materials at a volume discount. Membership also allows builders to share information and quickly identify materials that are defective or sub par, which means better quality control and a more reliable boat.



creating hulls. Others use vacuum bagging, resin infusion (including SCRIMP) and VEC (Virtual Engineered Composites). While there are pros and cons to each (some cost less, some produce a stronger hull at a lighter weight, some involve an expensive investment in tooling and some produce very little or no emissions), they're all proven methods of building quality boats.

"If any one system was that much better than the other, everybody would be using it," Fink says. "If I had a process that was that much better than what you had, you would be either doing it my way or you'd be trying to buy what I had so you could do the same thing."

COLLECTIVE POWER

In fact, in the case of Stingray and some other brands, they have a lot more in common than you might realize. A number of

popular independent boat-building companies belong to the ABA (American Boatbuilders Association, Inc.), which is a buying consortium that allows the member companies to use the leverage of numbers to buy quality boat-building materials at a low cost. Member companies include Chaparral, Cobalt, Correct Craft, Ebbtide, Godfrey, Grady-White, Monterey, Regal, Rinker, Tiara, Pursuit, Stingray and Formula.

In a way, the ABA exercises the same kind of buying power that Brunswick, Genmar and other boating conglomerates do over resin suppliers, gelcoat makers, engine manufacturers and all the other vendors boat builders use.

According to Fink, at least 85 percent of every Stingray is built using the same materials other ABA companies use to build their boats. This includes materials and components like engines, resin, acetone,

catalysts, fiberglass, steering systems, wood, composites — all the raw materials that you'll find in any boat. And because the ABA is concerned with quality before cost, buyers benefit in terms of higher quality boats at lower purchase prices.

However, there's more to the ABA than using the power of numbers to buy quality materials. Member companies also share information in an effort to weed out problems. If Stingray has a couple of problems with a certain steering component, it might pop up on the radar — but if Stingray, Chaparral, Ebbtide and a bunch of other builders have similar problems, they can quickly see the trend and go to the vendor source to get things fixed.

ACCOUNTABILITY

While this kind of large-scale collective accountability is great for catching problems, it's really left to individual builders to

MAKING EMPLOYEES ACCOUNTABLE

As any successful boat builder will acknowledge, it's the employees who really deserve credit for quality boats — but they also must be held accountable. If a buyer discovers something wrong with his boat, it's important for the builder to be able to quickly identify the cause so the boat you buy doesn't have the same problem. It's a continuous system of input and feedback that results in boats that are built better and better every year.



assure their finished products are as good as possible.

As with any other product, you get what you pay for. A 20-foot Stingray bowrider equipped with a 260 hp MerCruiser starts at \$28,284, while a 20-foot Cobalt bowrider with a 260 hp MerCruiser starts at \$46,816. That's obviously a big difference, and the Cobalt certainly has more going for it in terms of luxury, upscale amenities and other areas — but that doesn't mean that its quality is twice as good as the Stingray's.

Quality starts with accountability, according to Fink. In his office in Hartsville he's got a wall-sized projection screen that shows a computer spreadsheet that tracks virtually every single employee, part, screw, nail and staple that moves through the plant. That way, if a problem arises, he can immediately pinpoint the cause and take action.

"If a manufacturer does not have good accountability and can't go back and find out what mistake was made, it can't go back and fix its products," Fink says. "In our case we know who did it, when they did it, where it was done, what time of day it was done, how much it weighed, how much they put in and so on. When a warranty comes in and we determine it was caused by a specific employee, within two days that employee has a copy of that warranty claim, and we have gone over with that employee exactly what he or she could have done that may have caused what we had to pay out on warranty."

As with all other builders, Stingray doesn't claim to be perfect, but the fact that it goes to great pains to catch mistakes and put corrective procedures in place speaks volumes as to how committed it is to building quality boats. "Sure, we still screw up," Fink admits. "There's still a place for mistakes — nothing is going to be perfect. But we work to keep problems to a bare minimum. Most people really want to do good work; you just have to give them information that enables them to do good work and avoid mistakes."

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

When you go to the boat show you'll be bombarded with everything that's different. That's how marketing and spin control works: Whatever the difference is, it makes the boat better.

One great story is about a company that



ACCORDING TO AL We asked Stingray Boats' owner Al Fink how we would go about finding a quality boat — here's what he said:

"If I was a consumer looking to buy a product, I would start with my local dealership. An experienced reputable dealer has researched the product he is selling to the point that he knows that not only does the manufacturer have to stand behind him, he has to stand behind the boat as well. You can almost be assured that a dealer with a good reputation is selling a fairly decent product.

"The used market is also a very good tool to learn how good a product or brand is. Sought-after brands don't sit in the classified section or on eBay for very long, while poor products might take weeks or months to move.

"Don't spend all your time looking at the boat if you've never bought a boat before; instead, look for indications of the experience others have had with that boat. Dealers can put you in touch with others who have bought a boat you're interested in. Magazine and Web site reviews can tell you about a boat's handling and performance. If you can't find anybody other than the manufacturer with something good to say about a particular boat, you might want to look at a different boat."

used a more expensive knit fiberglass for a stronger, lighter weight boat. Great feature, right (even though it cost a little more to build)?

At the boat show, however, competitors would thump their heavier (and cheaper)

hulls and say how much more solid they were than the stronger, lighter hulls of the other company, which sounded weak and hollow in comparison when thumped. Perception is reality, and the thump test won, causing the builder to go back to

building heavier, cheaper hulls because nobody wanted to buy something that sounded flimsy (even though it was actually stronger than the cheaper, more "solid" hulls).

In a lot of cases, the main differences between boats will be on the surface. Small things like labels, decals and other brand-specific elements that help a builder establish its identity can go a surprisingly long way in helping brands stand out from one another.

In our opinion, it's a real comfort to know that just about any boat builder that has been around for a number of years has had to prove itself in the marketplace by building quality boats. That takes a lot of pressure off buyers, because it means that most of the boats out there today are built with quality materials using manufacturing processes that have been greatly improved upon over time. All that's really left to do is find the boat with the distinctive personality traits — those little items that can make a big difference — that best match your own boater personality. **GO**



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