

A New Old Boat

Mark Rotharmel

Nothing on the water turns heads faster than the sight and sound of a gentleman's racer - vintage beauty and performance, and craftsmanship at its finest. At one time or another, every boater dreams of owning a classic wooden speedboat. Few ever do. For one thing, they are extremely rare and most require restoration, a term synonymous with time and money.

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Those who steam ahead will tell you that breathing life into an old boat is one thing, keeping it running is another. Unless, of course, you choose a classic beauty like *Thunder*, a boat built today using yesterday's designs.

Michael Thompson, a high-energy Toronto businessman, Muskoka Lakes cottager and longtime performance enthusiast is *Thunder's* owner. In 1999, Thompson commissioned Peter Breen, arguably one of North America's finest wooden boat builders, to construct his craft from plans obtained from the family of 1920s Gold Cup legend Harold Greening.

That Michael wanted another wooden boat is no mystery. He currently owns a 1955 30-foot Greavette Streamliner powered by a '55 Chrysler Hemi, a 1964 ChrisCraft Holiday with a 283-cid small-block Chev, and a 1964 Century Arabian - the original parasail tow boat - coupled with a 390-cid, four-barrel, big-block Ford. Incidentally, Michael is not just a collector, he uses his boats. Each is meticulously maintained and waiting to be driven from its boathouse wet-slip.

But *Thunder* is a different breed. With its overall length of 27' 6" and narrow beam of five-and-a-half feet, this 1923 replica of Greening's famed Gold Cup Rainbow III Ditchburn racer is in many ways a much better boat than the original. It is after all a Ditchburn engineered for the modern era, with several noncritical design modifications made to make it more appealing to its owner.

For example, Michael felt that Ditchburn's original deck design, if raised slightly, would be more practical. Breen worked with him on the change.



Thunder is a modern boat built to a classic design.

Last spring, Michael and I traveled to Rockwood, Ont., for a tour of Peter Breen's shop. With more work than he and his small, talented staff can handle, Peter explained his philosophy in building boats like *Thunder*. "One boat, one time, one way. It takes two years to complete a boat and we won't build two of them." Breen's customers pay good money to own a very special boat.

While restoring original boats accounts for 75 percent of Breen's business, replicating them is both a passion and challenge. Every piece of hardware, from cleats to the engine hatch ventilators, needs to look period. If it can't be found, it must be manufactured, and that means carving wooden molds, sand-casting and coating fine metals. No minor feature is taken for granted - for example, the nickel-plate, five-gauge sterling silver panel on *Thunder's* dash, an exact copy of the original.

That Breen assigns one person to each customer's project is both a matter of pride and accountability. Like Peter Breen himself, each is passionate about their craft. Watching one carpenter expertly sand a single section of hull side for what had to be 15 minutes straight, I was reminded that patience is a virtue. Both craftsman and a

customer must possess it in order to survive the long build time.

Is Michael Thompson a patient man? Well, as it happens, we're old high school buddies. For over 30 years, Michael (or Mike as I call him) has been moving through life in fast cars and fast boats, and patience is not what I'd call his strong suit. He's a "now" kind of guy - take action, enjoy it, then carry on. All one can say is, *Thunder* must have been worth the wait.

Interestingly, Mike's first exposure to fast boats came about one hot, summer weekend in 1972. It was my second year of racing and Mike traveled with my father

and I to a regatta in St. Jean, Que. Being extremely competitive himself, Mike crawled underneath the trailer and polished the bottom of the boat. I have few doubts this was the edge I needed to win that day. Mike, with his keen sense of humour, has reinforced that point since.

In any event, Mike caught the bug. Since the early 1980s, he and his wonderful family - wife Beverly, daughter Kathleen, sons Gregory, Stephen, and Graham - have owned a succession of fiberglass performance boats including a Glastron Aventura, a twin-engine Four Winns Liberator, a 33' Scarab for Poker Runs and a Doral Phazer.



Thunder's owner, Michael Thompson, admires his unique boat.

Today Mike still has a few "plastic" boats tied to the dock, including a Boston Whaler, Supra ski-boat and a 27-foot Formula. But it's *Thunder* that stands out from the crowd.

It is also thrilling to drive. Powered by a new 8.2-L MerCruiser inboard weighing close to what the original 1920s vintage V-6, 250-hp Packard did, the boat is very well-balanced. As Peter Breen claims, "It has a true bottom with lifting strakes, with the same power-to-weight ratio that it once did, only now it's fine-tuned and reliable."

Yes indeed. At idle, *Thunder* sounds like a Harley, accelerates from 0 to 30 mph in five seconds, 0 to 40 in nine and tops out at 52 mph. Accelerating to plane, *Thunder* leaps out of the water like a rocket. While the boat is meant for small bursts of speed and not wide-open running, Michael grins with delight every time we hit the Vernier aircraft throttle. It is truly one elegant and extraordinary machine.

Let the *Thunder* Roll.

PETER
BREEN

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