TOM PETTY

Survivor II

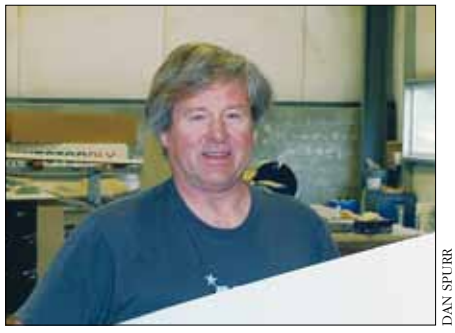
Californian sailboat builder James Betts found new life—and business—in Washington State…until the recession hit home.

by Dan Spurr
Photographs by James Betts Enterprises (except where noted)

Above—Roxanne *is a fast 60' (18.3m) family cruiser, designed by Tom Wylie and built of aluminum and composites. She was launched in 1996.* ***Right***—*Jim Betts, 58, moved his shop from Truckee, California, to Anacortes, Washington, when their last child left home five years ago. He credits the Economic Development Department of Skagit County with making the transfer easy.*

When I visited builder Dennis Choate last spring in Long Beach, California, (see "Survivor," *Professional BoatBuilder* No. 126) our conversation naturally focused—for a few minutes anyway—on other West Coast shops specializing in high-performance sailboats. There aren't many. Besides Choate's Dencho Marine and Westerly Marine in Southern California, we named Schooner Creek Boat Works (Portland, Oregon), and James Betts Enterprises, whose last known location was in Truckee, California, on the Nevada border (what was he doing there anyway?). Last we'd heard, there had been a problem with a big boat, and he'd moved.

Back home, I decided to track him down. Thanks to the Internet, it was easy. For the past five years, Betts has been in Anacortes, Washington, working out of several buildings in a small



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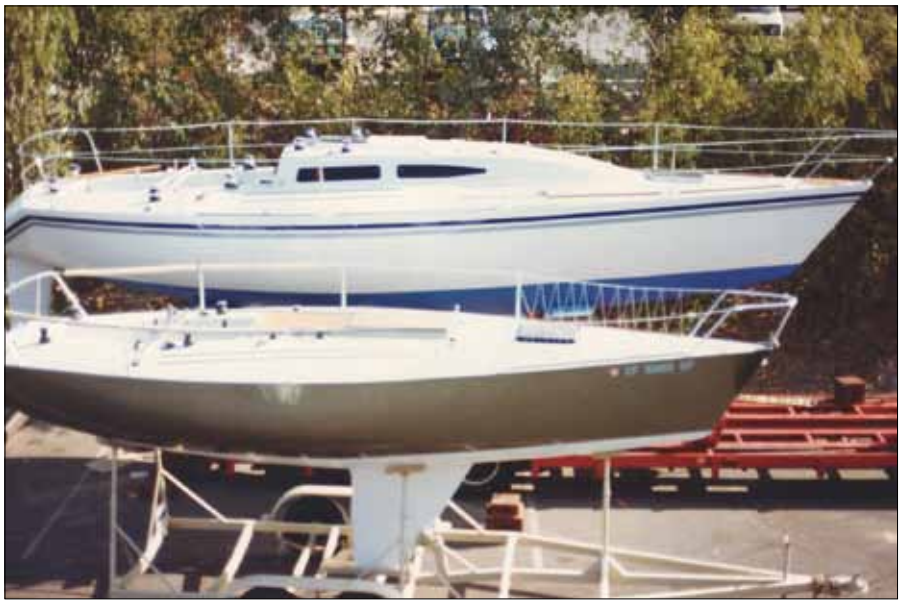


Peppermint Patty, *the 25-footer ((7.6m) in the foreground, was Betts's first build. Designed by Nelson/Marek, she has an aluminum hull and plywood/glass deck.*

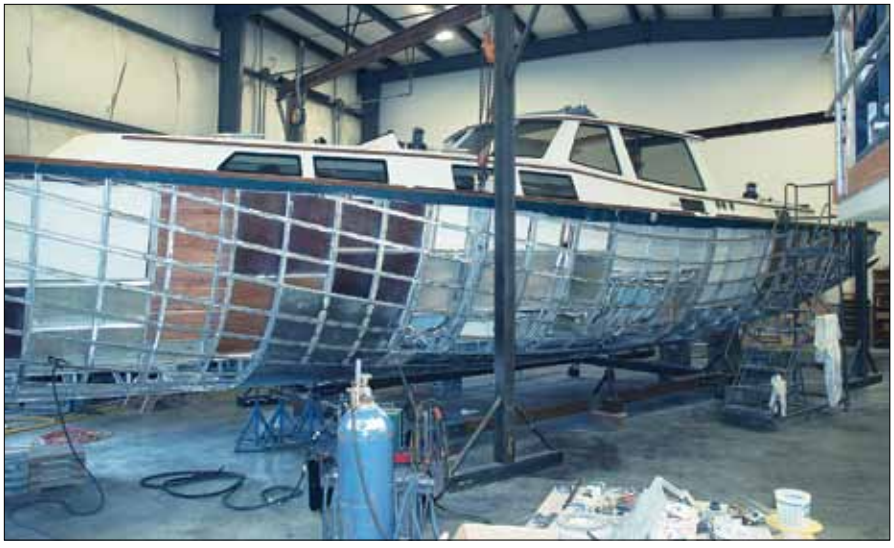
industrial park just over the bridge that spans the Swinomish Channel, a thin strip of salt water separating Fidalgo Island from the mainland.

In the reality show that is just about every small builder's, fact is often stranger than fiction, and certainly less just. And like the reality shows on television pitting ordinary folks against nature and each other, the tough, resilient guys like Choate and Betts keep coming back. Why? Because it's what they know how to do, and what they love: making things, especially boats.

The Alcan Debacle

When it was bought in 2007 by mining giant Rio Tinto, Alcan, based in Montreal, Canada, was the third largest producer of aluminum in the world. Today, operating as Rio Tinto Alcan, it's the largest. *Fortune* magazine named it one of "America's Most Admired Companies." They didn't ask Jim Betts. Or the owners of Kvichak Marine (Seattle, Washington) and Nichols Brothers (Freeland), and others who had built boats with defective alloy made by Alcan. Betts says he is but one of about 50 companies that built hundreds boats from defective 5083-H321 aluminum plate.

According to the law firm Riddell Williams, which was involved in the subsequent litigation, "A division of Reynolds purchased an aluminum alloy from Alcan Inc. and Alcan Aluminum Corporation, and resold it to 54 boat builders in the Pacific Northwest. Alcan's aluminum later failed in more than 300 vessels. Alcoa settled numerous claims with boat owners and builders, and sued Alcan to recover its losses. Alcoa pursued claims for breach of the implied warranties of merchantability and for particular purpose, and for failure to disclose changes in the manufacturing process and the sensitivity of the product. Litigation extended over two years, with thousands of documents being produced and depositions throughout the United States and Canada. Alcan vigorously defended



DAN SPURR

Jade, *a 68' (21m) Tom Wylie design, was built of aluminum that, later, was found to be defective; the owner sued Betts, who eventually obtained ownership of the boat. Over the past few years, he's removed the old plates, and is now welding new ones for a waiting buyer.*

itself, arguing that it warned of the limitations of its products, that the product met industry specifications, and that the plaintiffs had not properly tested and certified the materials. Trial extended for more than three weeks, and included the presentation of 26 witnesses and 160 exhibits. The jury found for Alcoa, Inc. on all claims presented and awarded all damages requested."

Betts says Alcan had manufactured 775,000 lbs (351,534 kg) of the bad 5083, and that the problem went unnoticed until boats built by Kvichak Marine and Nichols began corroding. Those two yards hired metallurgists, who eventually figured out the problem: the alloy hadn't been processed at a sufficiently high temperature during the stabilization stage.

Betts's one build with the material was a beautiful 68′ (21m) cruising sailboat designed by Thomas Wylie (Canyon, California). Launched in 2000, the owner cruised *Jade* to Alaska and Mexico before learning of the potential disaster beneath him. In brief, he sued, Betts settled (barely managing to avoid bankruptcy), and, once the dust cleared, Betts ended up with the boat that nobody wanted.

In his new shop in Anacortes, Betts has spent his spare time—when he's had any—nibbling the old skin off. That's done, and now he's replating the hull. Fortunately, the frames, stringers, and other structural members were all fabricated from 5086, and are in excellent condition.

Beach to Mountains

Jim Betts was born in 1952 in Port Hueneme, on the coast of California, just north of Los Angeles. His father was in the service then, and later worked for the County of Ventura. His mother was an X-ray technician in a doctor's office. The family spent summer vacations camping and water-skiing, but on weekends the rest of the year they were at local motocross tracks.

During high school, Betts worked on and raced motorcycles, eventually ranking number 54 in Southern California. In 1971 he started in business with a portable welding rig and followed the company he was working for to Tahoe City, California. He met his wife, Janis, there, and the two were married in 1979. She is from San Diego, so they spent a lot of time traveling between the mountains and the coast.

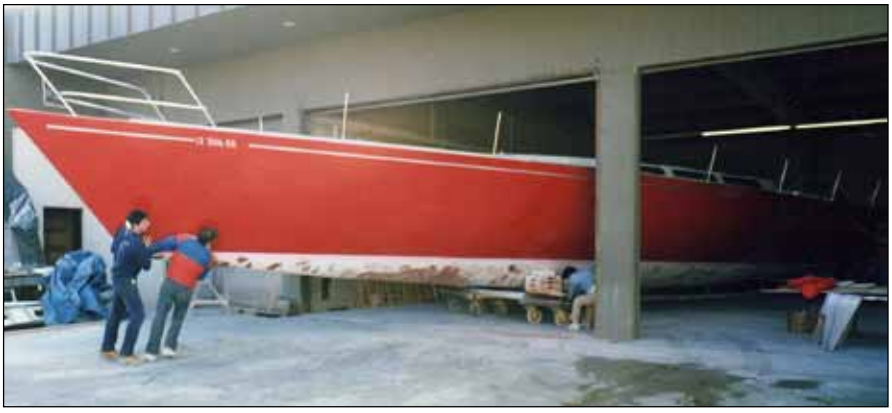
"I got involved with George Olson when he was developing the *Pacific High* prototype for the Olson 30 [9.1m]," Betts remembers, "and I actually bought the first Olson 30 that he sold. I was his first paying customer but wanted a dark green hull, so I ended up with hull No. 2. George was very quiet, but his creative genius provided the inspiration for my future career. At that time, Santa Cruz was the center of the ultralight universe. Earlier, George worked with Ron Moore, who built *Grindel*, one of the original ultralights *[see PBB No. 93, page 17]*. The plug from *Grindel* was chopped and wedged apart by George and Ron, and they built a mold that became the Moore 24 [7.3m].

"George worked for Bill Lee during the Santa Cruz 27 years, and then branched out on his own, designing and building the Olson 30. We won the 1979 Newport–Ensenada race that first year in the PHRF A class, beating *Drifter* and *Ragtime*. Because we had a light-displacement boat, the race plan was to get to the beach and play the shifts down the coast; when we got to Ensenada early in the morning we found ourselves right alongside John Knight and Hugo Carver, the two guys from Knight & Carver *[a San Diego yard; see "Service, Size Large," PBB No. 127]*. They were sailing the huge *Nirvana*, and we had no clue we rated boat for boat with them. We were ghosting along in light air with the kite up and heard these guys yelling. It was obviously driving them nuts, because they knew we were passing them a quarter-mile from the finish line. We got the gun."

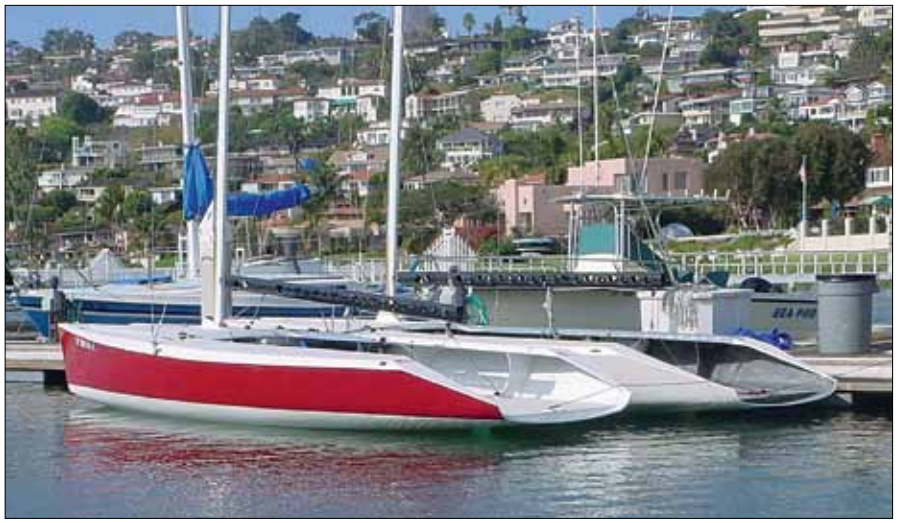
Betts kept the boat in San Diego in the wintertime, and there he got to know yacht designers Bruce Nelson and Bruce Marek. He also began to learn about boatbuilding by watching Carl Eichenlaub build aluminum Peterson 40s (12.2m). Feeling ready to take on his own project, in 1980 Betts commissioned Nelson/Marek to design a 25-footer (7.6m) that Janis named *Peppermint Patty*. He built her in his 25′-deep shop in Tahoe City; she had an aluminum hull and a plywood/glass deck. Why aluminum? Because he'd been welding a long time and was comfortable with the materials and processes. "I built some test panels so Bruce would know what the structures would weigh," Betts remembers. "It was basically a mini-version of Carl's 40′ Two Tonners. We just scaled down to the smallest available shapes and had very little interior, to save weight."

Peppermint Patty was launched in 1981 and Betts was sufficiently inspired to move back to Southern California to build boats. A year later, he got his first contract boat, a Nelson/Marek IOR One Ton design for a partner group from the San Diego Yacht Club. *Crackerjack* had an aluminum hull and plywood/honeycomb deck. Betts says they won "tons of races with that one."

Betts would go on to build a total of 12 boats to designs by Nelson/Marek, including the 43′ (13.1m) *Eclipse*, also in aluminum/plywood honeycomb; the 30′ *Tinman* in aluminum and S-glass composite; the 70′ (21.3m) *Maverick* in aluminum and carbon, and the 50′ (15.2m) *Champosa* in carbon composite, both



Maverick, a 70′ (21.3m) aluminum and carbon racer designed by Nelson/Marek, was relaunched in 1993 after a remodel.



One of Betts's few forays into series production was the Sierra 26 (7.9m) one-design, built of pre-preg carbon and honeycomb composite, post-cured over an aluminum tool. Just two were built.

in 1988. Betts's first adventure in series production was the Nelson/Marek Sierra 26 [7.9m], a prepreg carbon/honeycomb composite that displaces 1,050 lbs (476 kg) all up. "They were post-cured at 220°F [104°C] over a heated aluminum tool," Betts says. "I built two of those and had hoped to take it to a production level. It was very exciting, very expensive to build, and put me in a lifetime bind with my bookkeeper, Janis!"

His other dalliance with production boatbuilding was the Farr 36 (10.9m). When Carroll Marine (Bristol, Rhode Island) went out of business in 2003, Farr Yacht Sales contracted Betts to take over production. It seemed like a sure thing. After all, Jeff Stagg at Farr Yacht Sales had sold 100 Farr 40s and several hundred Mumm 30s. But three boats in three years were not enough to justify the additional overhead, so the prospect of a lucrative model line ended there. It seemed to Betts that interest in one-design racing had peaked, and was winding down along with the economy.

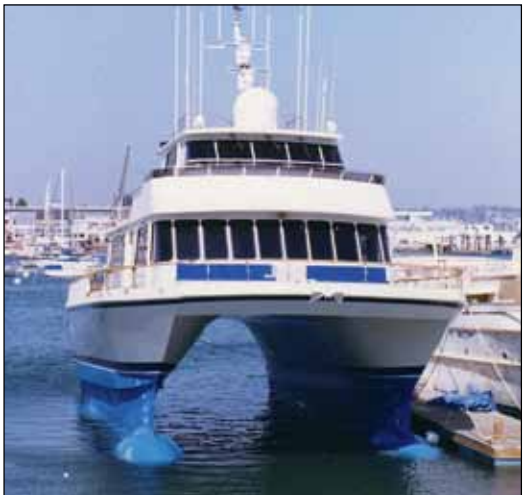
As fate would have it, "I've got a bunch of interest in them now," he says, "but the tooling ended up going to recycling. The tooling partners decided to cut their losses, and the decision was made to cut it up. I didn't own the tooling; I just paid a royalty. In hindsight I wish I'd had the wherewithal to have kept it."

Other Notable Builds

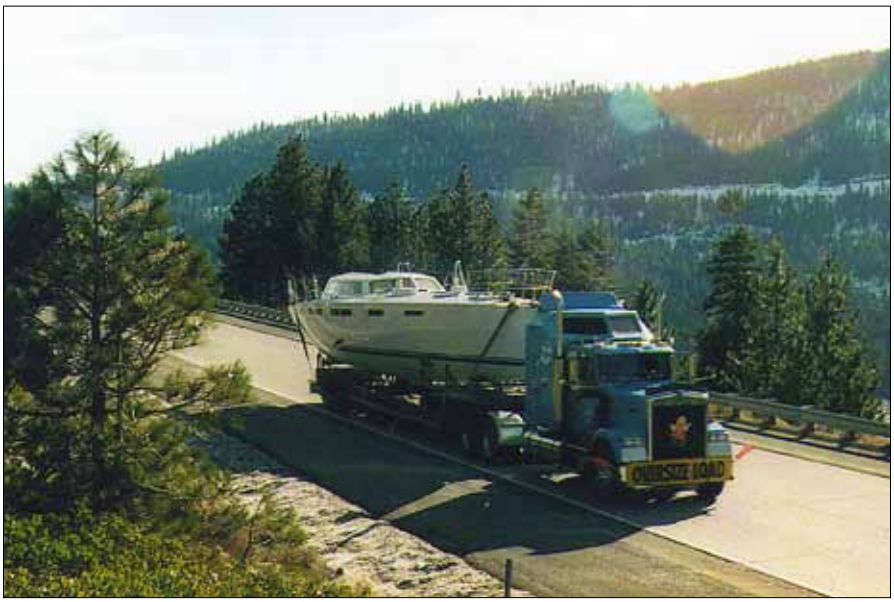
Betts's welding background has opened the door to a variety of projects that might not have presented themselves if he'd been limited to composites. Surely that was the case with the 78′ (24m) SWATH he built in 1985 for SWATH Ocean Systems (SOS, in Chula Vista, California). SWATH is the acronym for Small Waterplane Area Twin Hull, in which about 5/6ths of the smooth-riding catamaran's buoyancy is in two submerged torpedo-like hulls, or tubes, well below the surface in calmer water. The semi-submerged hullform was invented by Frederick Creed, a Canadian who obtained a British patent for the concept in 1946. Since the 1960s, a number of SWATH projects have been completed, ranging from the 430′ (131m) *Radisson Diamond* cruise ship to a 26-knot passenger ferry, four U.S. Navy acoustic surveillance ships, and in 1993, *Sea Shadow*, a 164′ (50m) so-called stealth ship built by Lockheed Missiles and Aerospace Company. Betts says his commission from SOS was a "huge upswing for our business." He built the aluminum structures up to the deck. The superstructure was built by Larry Drake, of Long Beach, whose Drake Craft Boats built sportfishermen in plywood, sheathed in fiberglass. The parts were married at Shelter Island. *Chubasco* later was donated for service at the 1988 *America*'s Cup in San Diego, where it served as the committee boat.

Betts: "From the waterline to the bottom of the tube there was a forward elliptical bulge, a long, straight section, and then a big elliptical bulge aft *[see photo* ***below left****]*. The engines were down in the bottom, and there were direct-drive transmissions to the props, with the rudders behind, and a fixed wing between the aft bulges with tabs. The forward bulges were water ballast tanks, and they had two canards made with foam and glass with hydraulic actuators. A Sperry gyro system controlled the appendages; the rudders were separate. The operator could push the forward canards down, run the boat down to where it almost put the deck in the water, which was 6′ or 7′ [1.8m or 2.1m]. He could get her driving down and then go fully the other way and broach like a submarine, pulling the hulls out of the water."

For proof of concept, *Chubasco*



Left*—Other than high-performance sailboats, Betts has done a few builds such as this 78′ (24m) SWATH, which rides on submerged torpedo-like hulls for improved seakeeping. Their construction in aluminum is shown at* ***right.***



Built in Betts's shop in the mountains on the Nevada-California border, White Eagle*, a Bob Perry design, heads over Donner Summit in 1997 toward the ocean.*

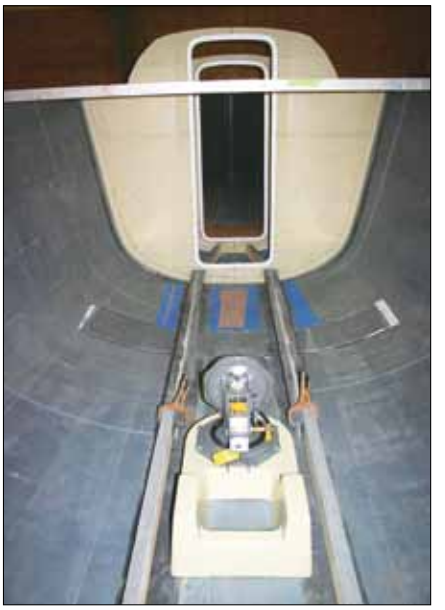
was taken to the Columbia River bar to see how it performed in that infamous stretch of water, where the mighty river discharges into the Pacific Ocean. A video was made, taken from the SWATH, looking across at the 100′ [30m] Coast Guard cutter steaming out abreast. In the foreground was a glass of wine. Both boats were running at 12 knots. Water blew over the wheelhouse of the Coast Guard boat, but the SWATH remained level, wine glass still in place. "The gyros sensed roll motion and repositioned the fins," Betts said. "That would all be trained software now."

In 1995, Betts built *Beowulf VII*, a 79′ (24m) Sundeer, for Steve Dashew. Hull and deck are aluminum. It was Betts's first build after elimination of the onerous luxury tax that had brought yacht building almost to a standstill in the early '90s.

The next year he built his third boat to a design by Tom Wylie, for whom Betts holds considerable respect. *Roxanne* was 60′ (18.3m), built of aluminum and composites.

Betts had a nice string going in the mid-1990s: next up was the Reichel/Pugh 75 (23m) *Zephyrus*, a carbon/epoxy high-performance sailboat. That same year, 1997, he built *White Eagle* to a Bob Perry (Tulalip, Washington) design in aluminum and composites.

Then in 1998 came the opportunity



The 39' (12m) Bien Roulée, *an Alan Andrews–designed racer, seen* ***above*** *on the male plug, and at* ***right*** *turned right side up with the sail drive foundation installed, was built in 2007 of carbon and Corecell. Betts works only with epoxy resins, citing their environmental and structural advantages.*

of a lifetime: to build an *America*'s Cup boat. For a specialist in high-performance sailboats, it doesn't get any bigger. The client was the San Francisco Yacht Club's America True syndicate, challenging for the 2000 event. Betts, who four years earlier had moved his operation to nearby Truckee, California, quickly built a large shop addition to accommodate the project. Experienced Cup builders—Peter Sowman from Team New Zealand and John McConaghy from Australia—were brought in to lend their expertise. Construction was carbon composite and aluminum honeycomb core: Hexcel F80 and Flat Rigid honeycomb; more on this below. *America True* was skippered by the first woman in Cup history, Dawn Riley. (The successful challenger was Italy's *Luna Rossa*, which lost in Auckland to Team New Zealand.)

Next was an Open 50, *Convergence*, that Bob Gay hoped to enter in the 2000 Vendée Globe around-the-world race. The designer was Jim Antrim (El Sobrante, California), and the name derived from the convergence of design elements Antrim developed to minimize the chance of inverse stability, a problem with the open-class boats due to their extreme beam and flat bottoms. He incorporated a large coach roof, cambered decks, and a large radius to the hull–deck join to reduce the waterplane area when upside down.

"On the engineering fun side," he wrote of *Convergence*'s construction, "we developed bowling-ball-impact test models to represent a collision at 25 knots. Our plywood baseline panel was demolished, while the pre-preg/balsa panel received only a scuff mark. Continuing the evaluation, the composite panel survived a sledgehammer test, finally failing under splitting-wedge impact. We've instructed Bob to avoid splitting wedges."

When the sponsoring company, Ascend Communications, was bought by Lucent Technologies, corporate interest in the project flagged. She was renamed *Everest Horizontal*, and Tim Kent successfully circumnavigated on her in the 2002 Around Alone race.

The new century opened with construction of the aforementioned *Jade*, and Betts's foray into production boatbuilding with the Sierra 26 Nelson/Marek design; a few carbon/Corecell racers, including three Farr 36s; and the 39′(12m) Alan Andrews–designed *Bien Roulée*.

Betts works only in epoxy. "Any vinyl ester?" I asked. "No," he replied. "I don't like styrene."

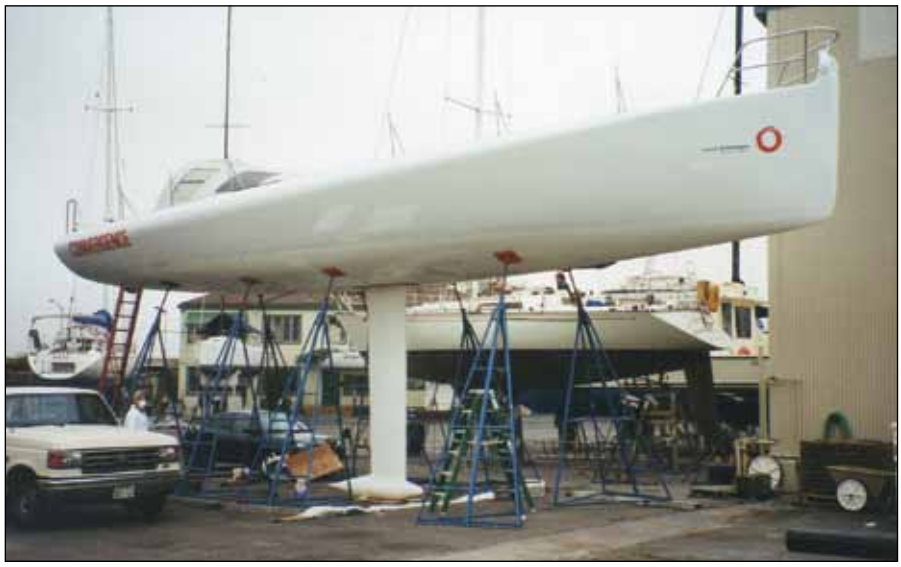
Core Considerations

Turning to developments in core materials, we noted that some segments of the composites industry are trending away from cores in favor of single-skin carbon and toughened epoxy resin systems.

"I don't see how you can live without core in the marine industry," Betts says. "Separating the skins makes sense. The first cored boat I saw built was with rigid Klegecell that was heated until it got squishy and bent over a male plug. ContourKore wasn't available then. For a time we scored our own core." Predating the availability of Klegecell, Divinycell, and Corecell, in the early 1980s, California surfboard shops used urethane foam. Betts looked at it and determined "it was crumbly, brittle, nasty stuff." His first boat with a foam core, a 42′ (12.8m) Nelson/Marek named *Sleeper*, had to wait for the introduction of Divinycell in 1985

Betts acknowledges the other, emerging school of thought regarding cores: designers today can look at a wide variety of options with finite element analysis software and weigh the trade-offs between a thick-cored hull, shell-style structure with limited framing, versus the much more labor intensive thin-cored hull shell with the panel loads supported by lots of transverse frames and stringers.

Betts prefers cross-linked PVC foam cores rather than end-grain balsa, because of water-absorption issues

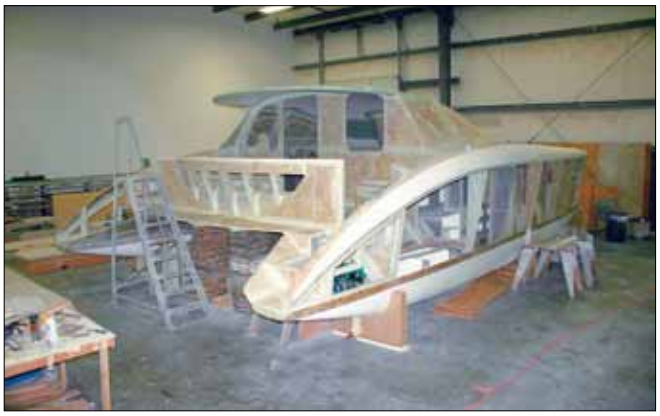


Convergence, *an Open 50 that sailed in the 2002 Around Alone race under the name* Everest Horizontal, *is one of two composite boats Betts has built with balsa core—in this case, to provide buoyancy.*

with balsa, and so has built only two boats with the latter: a catamaran described below, and the Open 50 *Convergence* described earlier. Betts explains why that boat had to be balsa cored: "Under the category rules, you had to have a certain amount of built-in buoyancy. We wanted to build a pre-preg boat, and at that time the high-temperature foam cores that could withstand the pre-preg temps weren't available. So Eric Goetz and other builders shifted to Baltek SuperLite [balsa], and Jim Antrim designed the [Open 50] structure around that. By coring the hull, deck, and bulkheads with balsa, we got great sheer strength and the flotation requirement solved, too. The wood core had no problem with the 200°F [93°C] curing temperature and took to the large-radius sheer shape very well."

Recent Projects

Three weeks prior to my visit, Betts launched his first sailing catamaran, a Craig Schionning design called the Spirited 380 (11.7m). It's an Australian kit boat; the American buyer hired Betts to put it together. Designed to ship in a 40′ (12.2m) container anywhere in the world, all parts are computer-cut flat panels that are resin infused. The hull bottoms (2.4′/200mm high) receive the bulkheads in the correct position; Schionning calls this



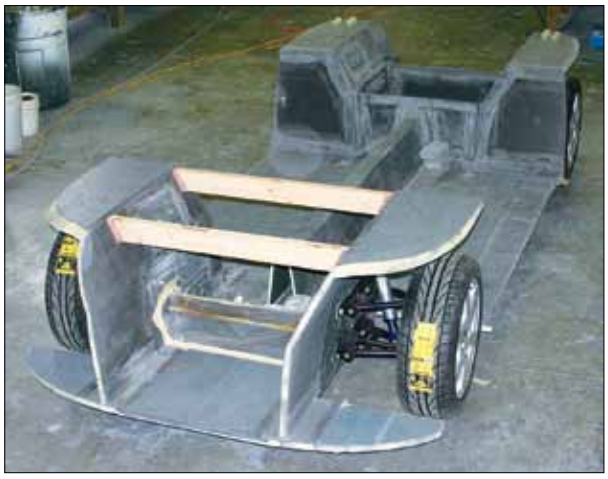
A recent project was the Spirited 380 (11.7m), a cruising catamaran kit from Australia. Designer Craig Schionning designed it for amateur builders, though Betts's client opted for professional help. Like Convergence*, it, too, is balsa cored.*

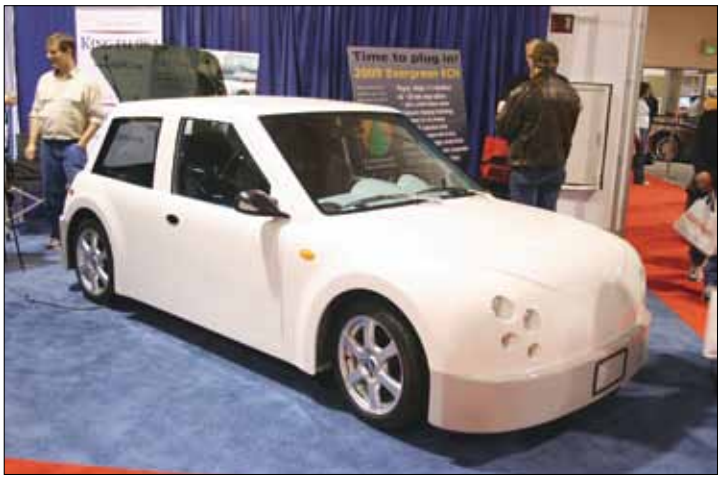
method the Spirited Assembly System, or SAS, which makes the entire project a reasonable undertaking for a do-it-yourselfer. Hull topside panels are added later. Most structural parts are balsa-cored, while interior furniture is cored with a type of paper honeycomb. Betts used epoxy resin throughout, noting that the boat is very light and strong.

Buzz Ballenger in Watsonville, California, built the rig (see PBB No. 94, page 10).

On the topic of multihulls, Betts remarks: "This was a different animal. It's like building two-and-a-half boats. We took the skin off the outside of the building, rolled the boat out, and then put the skin back on."

If variety is the spice of life, diversity is often the secret to success, and Betts has tried his hand at a number of nonmarine projects. In 2008 he was approached by a software developer, from Bainbridge Island, who wanted to start a company manufacturing a small electric car. He'd bought a 25-mph (40-kmh) electric car from a Seattle company; it had an ABS body and aluminum frame, which he thought could be improved on. Also the owner of a Santa Cruz 52 (16m), he naturally turned to a





Left—*Betts's son Kellen designed this electric car for a client on Bainbridge Island, Washington, who wanted to series-produce it under the Neighborhood Electric Vehicle Law, which doesn't require crash testing. The NEV speed limit is 35 mph (56 kmh), though it can go faster.* ***Right—****It was exhibited at the 2009 Seattle Auto Show; the body and chassis are carbon composite.*

boatbuilder for quality construction of his prototype vehicle. For a design, Betts's client visited several firms in California, which told him to bring a million bucks and they'd get started. As it happened, Betts's son Kellen had completed a research project at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and had some time available. Over the years he'd done the computer lofting, pattern making, and drafting for the shop; and was commissioned to design the automobile in-house.

"We started from scratch. The client wanted it to be a little sedanish…not just a two-seat vehicle," Betts says. "This has a back seat; 35 mph [56 kmh]; all carbon. The suspension was made in Michigan to hook to our differential drivetrain; that was the only thing we didn't make. We had a rolling chassis that weighs a third of a steel frame and metal body. The body

and chassis are all carbon composite. It drives like a little racecar, and has a 130-mile [209-km] range with its Evergreen ECH lithium battery and German electric motor.

"We could have gone to highway speeds, but the client was working under the Neighborhood Electric Vehicle Law, where you don't have to go through Department of Transportation crash testing and other really expensive development costs. In Washington and other states, they've upped the NEV limit to 35 mph. On Bainbridge Island, 35 mph is the common speed limit. We could get it going 50 [80 kmh] easily. With other drivetrain combinations it could operate at normal highway speeds."

Betts found the project satisfying. "It was very challenging to build car doors with latches, and window regulators that would electrically run up and down. We had to build tooling for all the tempered safety glass. It was a whole different genre of construction. This was a really stimulating period in my life, especially to have my son here daily and be able to build his design. Watching him work, sitting back, rubbing his chin as he created the shapes with Rhino 3D software was a father's dream come true."

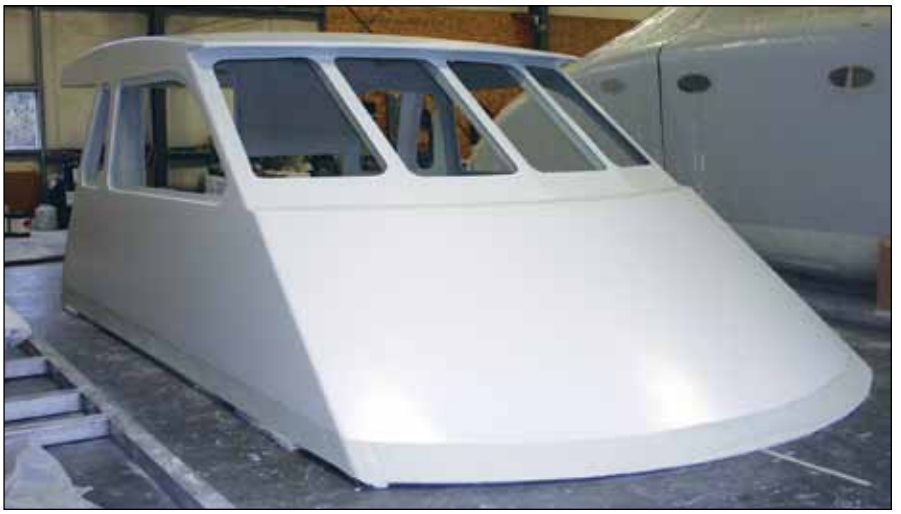
The car was exhibited at the 2009 Seattle Auto Show and well received. But when Nissan announced its Leaf, and Toyota an all-electric successor to the Prius, and venture capital seemed less interested in the Neighborhood Electric Vehicle niche market, the client decided it was time to get back to earning a living.

One of Betts's biggest projects since moving to Anacortes was for a 77′ (23m) low-wake ferry, designed by Teknicraft (Auckland, New Zealand) for service between Seattle and Bremerton. The primary contractor, All American Marine (Bellingham), selected JBE to build the carbon-composite hydrofoil and glass-composite superstructure. "They found they needed to save weight in the superstructures," Betts explained, "so they designed the main deck, house sides, cabintop, wheelhouse, and all the accessory components around composite construction using fire-retardant epoxy and foam core, all vacuum-bagged."

The project developed quickly; Betts doubled his shop space and added staff. "We went crazy for eight or nine months. Then, as usual, we worked ourselves out of a job when the project finished."

Survival projects include a new bottom for a Santa Cruz 27; production carbon rudders for the Flying Tiger 10M one design; and a Jim Antrim-engineered V-boom for a Catana 52 cruising multihull that was delivered from Europe to Nanaimo, British Columbia, on *Dockwise*. Betts got the job through friends at North Sails.

And then, of course, there's *Jade*, big and beautiful, positioned kitty-corner in the building hall, coming back to life one plate at a time. He says removing the old plating was a "three Sawzall nightmare," in which he drilled a starter hole in each corner of a rectangle formed by the frames and stringers, then inserted a Sawzall blade and cut out the piece of plate.



A year ago, Betts had a contract to build the composite superstructure, and carbon/composite hydrofoils, for a low-wake ferry now in service on Puget Sound. Like many builders, he added staff for a project, only to let most go when it was finished and comparably sized jobs failed to materialize.

He finished by sanding, and cleaning with Scotch-Brite. It took more hours than the original construction.

As part of the legal settlement, all the plating, even the dust, had to be collected and shipped for recycling to ensure that it would never be used again. But Betts has a buyer for the boat, and the eventual sale will signal the end of the long and difficult trial—of patience, tenacity, and tight bookkeeping.

Survival Secrets

Custom builders of any size know that they're only solvent as long as the current job pays up and the next job materializes. Even those who've enjoyed a relatively steady succession of projects can be upended by one gone bad—for example, Geotz Custom Boats being forced to close last year after a client cancelled a contract. If you get a big contract, you hire; and when it's over, you let them go. While I was visiting Betts, the office door was opened several times by guys looking for work: "I used to be at Northern; thought maybe you had work."

Betts was polite with each. "Not now." He'd shake his head. "But check back." He's got bids out on a number of projects, and if one or more comes through, he'll be saying yes.

"We realized a long time ago," Betts said, "in San Diego, where we had 30 employees, that after you work your way through the backlog, you either downsize, prepare for the inevitable, or you're dead meat. Last

year at this time, we had 10–12 employees.…" Today? I count three in the shop, building a camper for someone who walked through the door with an idea for something a little different than the thousands on the used RV market. There is no set of plans, just full-size patterns Betts made up. "I'd love to build another Cup boat," he says, "but I'm building a camper."

He readily admits, "We'll do anything." But it takes more than humble pie to keep a business going. One also has to mind the till.

"The success of my business," says Betts, "has been my wife controlling every dollar that comes in the door. She is the reason that this company has been able to sustain itself. I'm not depending on an employee or accounting firm. That was her background from the beginning. Through thick and thin she's hung in there with this crazy business. Maintained our accounts. Maintained a cash-positive situation all the way through. We've eked out a living and stayed afloat."

Leaving California was another strategic move that helped the balance sheet. Life at 7,000′ (2,134m) was good when the kids were young and could ski out the back door. But when their daughter Emily went off to school at the University of Washington, Jim and Janis were ready for a change, too.

"What spawned the whole thing was I called the Economic Development Department here in Skagit County, and got Don Wick on the phone, who was just unbelievable. For the first time in my 25 years of boatbuilding I finally heard the voice of government saying, 'We want you. This is a growth industry in this county. Come.' They spent a week with us. Showed us property. My wife and I both wanted to get out of the long Tahoe winters and said to each other, 'How can we not consider this?'"

With a controlled workers-compensation insurance system, the rates in Washington are half of those in California, which would help the Bettses compete for projects. In 2004 they loaded the tools and made the move.

"Boatbuilding is a mainstream activity in this state," Betts says, "and I don't have to answer the question 'What are you doing building boats in a ski resort?'"

"I get up every day wanting to make stuff," Betts says, "and not too many people have that mentality. My grandfather sold hardware to the company that became Caterpillar. I'm reaching the end of my working career, but I've got a grandson who loves my tools. He has a favorite wrench. Just 2½ years old and he climbs up on the forklift and knows how to start it and get the gantry up."

While the dozens of great boats Betts has already built, and will build, are a worthy legacy for any builder, knowing he's got kin following with a similar work ethic just might be more satisfying. PBB

***About the Author**: Dan Spurr is* Professional BoatBuilder's *editor-at-large.*