



Tom Schock

The Second-Generation Boat-Builder Has Put His Stamp on 70 Models

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Tom Schock stands atop the mold of the new Harbor 30 in his 30,000 square foot boat building facility in Corona, Calif. "We'll be ready to introduce this design next spring when I think the market will be willing to look at new boats again," he says. And Schock's opinion on such things is worth hearing.

It hasn't been easy, but W.D. Schock Corporation has managed to stay afloat through tough economic times, primarily because they take their business personally, believe in a business model that has no debt, and stays small and nimble enough to shift gears quickly. That model has also lead the company to produce thousands of boats, including some of the most celebrated sailboat designs of all time.

Self-described as a series boatbuilder, rather than a production builder, Schock, 65, has produced more than 13,000 boats in 70 different models from 8 to 55 feet over the past 50 years, much of it thanks to President, CEO, shop foreman, and head salesman, Tom Schock, the second generation of boat building Schocks.



The Schock 40 was also recognized as the "Most Innovative" boat and the "Best Sport Boat" by Sailing World Magazine and to this day it is the only boat to receive all three awards.

Tom Schock has a real passion for sailing and boatbuilding," says Dave Geoffroy, executive director of the Southern California Marine Association, a Harbor 20 owner and a 30-year Schock colleague. "He walks like he talks and his ability to identify trends and to run lean in down times has made him a survivor. This industry would be better off if we had more guys like him."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Started by Tom's father, W.D. "Bill" Schock, the business had its beginnings in Newport Beach, Calif., where the elder Schock started repairing rental boats for a local amusement park. He was building himself a wooden International 14 from a kit when a friend offered to buy it. Soon three more orders came in and a boatbuilding business was born. Even during the lean winter months, Bill continued to repair woodie station wagons and make wooden toilet seats.

By the 1950s, fiberglass came into the picture and Bill's friendship with designer Barney Lehman led to the production of a 10-foot sailing dinghy, the first U.S. built production fiberglass sailboat. The success of the Lehman 10 led to the fiberglass Snowbird, Sabot and the Schock 22. By the end of that decade, Schock rang the bell with the introduction of the boat that put them on the boatbuilding map, the Lido 14—and design that put a whopping 6,338 hulls on the water. They are still used

today in school fleets around the country.

Schock was two when the company was founded and eighteen when he was named manager of the firm's retail shop. At 21, he moved from the retail shop to the manufacturing facility where he worked in each production department, becoming the CEO when he was 24.

Schock and his two brothers naturally gravitated to different parts of the business. "Scott took over the retail shop and dealership and Steve became the architect, drawing the lines for many of the boats including the Harbor Series," says Tom Schock. "I was all about the production side where I could take what I learned on the race course and make it better in the shop."

There was a lot of time spent on the race course. Schock became the youngest Snowbird champion at age 12 and went on to win championships in numerous other one-design classes including Thistles, International 14s, Lido 14s, Santana 22s and 20s, and the Schock 35s. He crewed on the 12-meter *Columbia* in 1967 in America's Cup trials and has raced in countless offshore distance races on both coasts including more than 25 Newport-to-Ensenada runs.

SO MANY BOATS

Tom Schock is responsible for bringing a variety of boats to market including Capri 14, Wavelength 24 and 30, New York 36, 16 Santanas ranging in size from 20 to 39 feet, and the Schock 23, 34, 35, 41 and 55. He says he doesn't really have a favorite because each of his boats was designed to do something different.

"The important thing is to identify the target market and give that group of sailors the best boat of its kind," says Schock. "You can't be all things to all people, so each time we launched a new design, we made it specifically for a niche. And we did that well. But in the process, we built so many boats that we've done a fine job of confusing everyone as to who we are and what we build."

One such boat was the Schock 40, the revolutionary canting ballast, twin foil, uber race boat designed by Matt Brown and Bill Burns of Dyna Yachts. A high performance sport boat that could surf at 22 knots, the Schock 40 was introduced in 2000 and received Sailing World Magazine's 2001 "Boat of the Year" award. It

was also recognized by the magazine as the "Most Innovative" boat and the "Best Sport Boat" and remains the only boat to receive all three awards. Today, most custom racing boats are designed with twin foils and canting keels, but Schock was first to do it, just as the company was the first to use fiberglass hulls and aluminum masts on production boats.

Self-effacing and down to earth, Schock is an unassuming presence so you'd never guess at his racing heritage or his clientele, which includes some of the wealthiest businessmen and accomplished sailors. His friendship with designer Gary Mull brought about the development of the Santana 22, which spawned more than 700 hulls. Mull went on to design the Santana 27 and 37, the latter becoming a challenger to Cal 40s everywhere. Humphrey Bogart is also in the family scrapbooks sailing a Lehman 12, and Roy Disney just launched a new *Morning Light* in the form of a Harbor 20.

"For such a competitive guy, Tom has a lot of humility," Geoffroy says. "He just let's you make your own mistakes and it's always comfortable going out sailing with him."



Today, the lead time in the factory for a new boat is six to eight weeks.

STILL SELLING...OCCASSIONALLY

There is no computer on Tom Schock's desk. His wife and chief marketing officer, Jane, a three-time Santana 20 champion herself, takes care of his correspondence and online presence. With only about 20 dealers, Schock sells mostly direct in the U.S.—and Schock himself is the primary salesman. Currently, the only place Schock is looking for dealers is overseas, where he feels they have the biggest untapped potential.

When asked about ebbs and flows of the market and meeting these challenges Schock says, "It's easier to run a large company because you have resources. In the history of the company, we've been through four major economic downturns when I've had to be everything myself. That can be fun but you never really get to be that good at any one thing because you don't specialize. But when times are tough, it's easier to be small."



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collecting ideas, brochures and price points and in 1997 handed Schock a 20 page document that described what was to become the Harbor 20, the boat that steered Schock in a new direction.

The new design had to be fast, easy to sail, low maintenance and safe. "The idea of hiking out was strictly prohibited," says Schock. "We built a boat that would be sailed from the cockpit where everyone was safe, dry and comfortable."

With the Harbor 20, Schock focused on the very experienced, affluent and often retired ex-racer who wanted to single-hand or get his wife out for a no-hassle afternoon. These were not first-time boat buyers so expectations were high. It was a perfect niche market.

Schock notes that the current economy is the worst he's seen because it seems that every segment of the market has been affected. "There's no safe haven," he says. "I was on the phone the other day with Frank Butler (of boat builder Catalina Yachts) and we agreed that the joke of the day is 'yeah, we're all selling boats...occasionally.'"

But being small has its advantages and today, with only 15 people, Schock is keeping their doors open and planning for the future. "At our peak more than 20 years ago, we had 175 workers and two factories in Florida and California. Downsizing from that was major. By contrast, the current situation has been rough but manageable."

THE HARBOR SERIES

Schock was commodore of the Newport Harbor Yacht Club when he and five friends, all world class sailors in their day, lamented that no one was out sailing and that yacht clubs had become dining clubs because it was just too much trouble to get most boats out for a quick day sail. But these guys did more than complain. They decided that if they were to get their club sailing again, they'd have to design the boat they couldn't buy. So they spent three years

The Harbor 20 became a success with 296 hulls built in just more than a decade. But the thing it was missing was a head – literally – a day head that would entice wives to come out for an extended sail. So the Harbor 25 was introduced with a marine toilet, accommodations for four and the same great sailing performance. In the spring of 2010, Schock plans to launch the Harbor 30 in which a 6 foot sailor can stand up, a key feedback point from the owners of the Harbor 25, where headroom is scarce.

The average time an owner keeps a Harbor 20 is seven years, more than twice as long as most other boats and 70 percent of the Harbor series now sells outside the state of California. "Some of the East Coast folks think the design is bland and want us to add wood trim. One guy even wrapped the mast in wood veneer," Schock says. "We'll do whatever they want but many of our owners actually buy a new tiller before they even contemplate varnishing the old one, so we figure we have it pretty dialed in for low maintenance."

Schock still gets out on the water every chance he gets and he can't stop tweaking sails for that extra bit of speed. During a recent tour of Newport on the Harbor 25, the master eek out just a half knot more it appeared trimmed to perfection. "I don't race much anymore," he says. "I spend more time coaching, teaching and crewing. When you win against your customers, it's bad for business."

He is building hull #277 of the Harbor 20 for his own use but is having trouble finishing it. There have been at least three boats that have carried the number 277 because anxious customers keep buying the one he's building for him and his wife. "Everyone wants our boat because they think we're putting something special on it," Jane says. "The truth is our boat will always get the leftovers – the scratched mast or mismatched parts. The boat is nothing special but we keep the hull number the same for sentimental reasons."

TOMORROW

The factory's backyard is littered with old jigs and molds for designs that keep having resurgence. "I was going to cut most of these up," says Schock. "But some of them keep coming back to life as we get orders from one-design fleets and schools."

Today, the lead time for a new boat is six to eight weeks. That time could be shortened by ramping up production but Schock is not ready to do that, preferring instead to remain small and nimble. He doesn't see any need to move production overseas like many builders have done to cut costs. "I'm not sure what you're saving when you extend your supply lines 3,000 miles, combine two cultures and add communication problems. We'll keep building boats right here in California for as long as anyone wants to buy them."



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And it seems there is some pent-up demand. Schock is maintaining a healthy file of interested parties who've written in to inquire about the new Harbor 30, the fast, upscale daysailer/weekender with a base price of about \$170,000.

Would he go back to building racing one-designs? "We could, and we might at the right time," he says. "Right now, it's not a world of instant dot-com millionaires who buy the fastest and flashiest boats. Today, we're focusing more on the wealthy, stable, ex- racers who still want to get out and compete or just have fun."

What has kept Schock interested in racing and boat building for so many years?

"Winning is a pretty good drug," he says. "So is building better, faster boats. As my dad used to say, 'It would take a genius to make a new mistake around here.' And we've made them all, but I think we have our market dialed in these days and we're set for 2010."



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