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# MULTIHULL SPECIAL

40 YEARS OF HOBBIE CATS



BY MATT BOUNDS

# OFF THE BE

When the day finally came to commemorate the arrival of the Hobie Cat, several hundred Hobie fanatics made the pilgrimage to the very beach where six friends sparked sailing's enduring subculture.

THE HOBBIE WAY OF LIFE. IT STARTED more than 40 years ago with a drawing etched into the grainy California beach sand. The drawing soon led to an informal regatta, an unheralded milestone in the annals of sailing that launched a worldwide phenomenon of beach cat sailing. What better way to commemo-

ROCK KENDALL





# ACH AGAIN

rate this occasion than doing it all over again 40 years after the fact? Last October, Hobie Cat fanatics joined the men responsible, and celebrated the people, the story, and oh yes, the sailing too.

About that drawing in the sand. So the story goes, it was at a beach party in 1967. In attendance were Hobart Laidlaw

Alter and his mates Wayne Schafer, Sandy Banks, and Phil Edwards—one of the most prolific surfers of the early 1960s. It was here, while the others looked on curiously, where Alter sketched the outline of what would become the Hobie 14.

Schafer still recalls the weekday afternoon a few days later that Alter came to

#### **PULLING OFF THE HOBIE CAT 40TH**

Anniversary was nothing like herding cats. Once word got out, the regatta drew sailors, surfers, and Hobie lifers.

his house on Poche Beach. "To see Hobie on a workday was unusual to begin with," says Schafer. Alter was carrying a tape measure, pencil, and foam shaping tools.





"I'm going to design us this boat we've always talked about," Alter declared. And so he did.

About a year later, the Hobie 14 had finished development and Alter started production in a Quonset hut tucked away in a Capistrano Beach alley not far from Schafer's house. In early July 1968, five boats, sail numbers 2 through 6, were set up on the beach at Dana Point, just down the road from Alter's surf shop. Once they were pushed into the water, what else was there to do but have a few races before the beach party?

Fast forward to 2008. More than 100 Hobie Cats of all sizes are piled onto the very same Dana Point beach, waiting for their turn to race. But by all accounts of those in attendance, this get together isn't necessarily about the racing *per se*. It's about the people, the people who brought their vision of a lightweight, recreational catamaran to fruition, and the people—past and present—who live by the credence that the Hobie Way might just be the best way.

Despite the interest, this gathering almost never happened. Organizer James Orkins, not even born when Alter pushed the first Hobie 14 into the Pacific Ocean, hatched the idea to mark this milestone a year earlier. A recent convert to catamaran racing, Orkins pulled together an energetic group of volunteers and sponsors to accomplish a nearly impossible mission.

In the late 1960s, word of the boat that defined the term "beach catamaran" spread slowly. "The first boatshow we went to, a dealer said, 'I'll take one,'" says

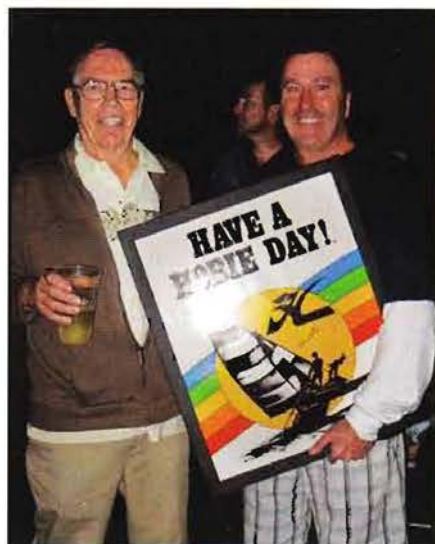
**FIFTY-ONE HOBIE 16S** crowd the line in one several light-air starts. Kirk Spengler hams it up with Hobie Alter. Spengler traveled from Tampa, Fla., to get a commemorative regatta poster, and left owning one of the Anniversary-issue boats built for the event.

Alter. To which Alter responded, "You'll take one truckload?"

"No, I'll take one *boat*," the dealer told me. From then on, we knew we had to take a different approach."

Alter's unconventional method was to crisscross the country, hawking boats from his station wagon. It wasn't long before sales took off, and with the introduction of the Hobie 16 in 1970, sales exploded.

Likewise, word spread slowly about last October's 40th Anniversary Regatta. Once Orkins got the backing of Hobie Cat USA, the marketing machine went into high gear. That first Hobie 14 regatta was like a pick-up game of hoop. The 2008 event had the potential to take over the whole playground. One of the first challenges was, however, was to secure approval for the cats to sail off the beach. Back in the day, nobody had ever seen a beach cat, so there was no problem carrying a few onto the beach. But things are different nowadays: 100 Hobie Cats take up a lot of real estate. Plus, simply getting through the surf would be an issue. Dana Point's Doheny Beach is a surfing mecca, and surfers and Hobie Cats in the same area could be dangerous. Once the necessary civic groups were onboard, however, beach access was secured and things began to *really* roll.



In the early days of the class, Alter, Schafer, and Banks were tireless promoters of the racing class. Even after Alter sold the company in 1976 to Coleman Co. (of the lantern fame), he traveled the country, lending his persona and his charm to regattas. A heavily bearded Banks ran the race department and would often be seen on the foredeck of a signal boat, directing the race committee. These men are the legends of Hobie folklore, and as time drifted away, so too did they. After all, they are now in their seventies, and beach cat racing is for the younger set.

For his 40th bash, Orkins was determined to reunite the old timers and a few other stalwarts. Schafer was easy—he still occasionally races his Hobie 14 and lives just down the beach from Dana Point. Alter's sons, Jeff and Hobie P., were also



easy to convince. Banks was tougher, but persuasion finally won him over. Alter was the tough sell. He lives in the Pacific Northwest, avoiding the limelight as best he can. It took some serious arm-twisting from old friends to win him over, but he finally agreed.

There were other important VIPs to cajole as well. Doug Campbell, who presided over Hobie Cat during the Coleman years, and former race director Kim Kymlicka, both US SAILING Judges, would serve Jury duty for the event. Paul Ulibarri, the first Hobie dealer in the Pacific Northwest and most recently the Olympic Race Officer in Qingdao for the Tornado and Star classes, was tasked with running the race.

They finally all came together at the kick-off "Meet the Legends" party hosted by Dana Point YC. The family had come home: Hobie, Wayne, and the now beardless Banks. It was a magical evening that nobody wanted to end.

But so it did with many a hangover, and the next morning dawned gray and sullen, with the first significant prospect for rain in several months. Nevertheless, a festival atmosphere prevailed as attendees and curious onlookers strolled through the historical and artistic exhibitions set up in the central pavilion of Doheny Beach Park. Wyland, the renowned marine artist, was setting up to paint a Hobie 16 hull and conducting a kids' coloring contest. Special "retro" sail color patterns were sprinkled in amongst the more modern styles that packed the beach. Jeff Alter and his young son Tyler commanded one retro boat bearing his dad's old sail number, good old No. 36. With some words from the Mayor of Dana Point, and some last minute instructions from Ulibarri, the racers were off, and waiting for wind.

Dana Point isn't exactly known for delivering the goods from aloft. "At the first 'regatta,' there wasn't any wind



**GETTING THROUGH THE SURF** was a challenge, as demonstrated by Ben Brown, above, who was recovered by a safety team after being washed off his boat. Marine artist Wyland (below) contemplates his next stroke on the Hobie 16 hull canvas.

when we got to the beach," says Banks, "so we just tinkered with the boats for a while." So it was for the 40th. People tinkered with their boats, socialized, and dodged the occasional raindrops, waiting for the wind to fill in enough to blitz the pounding surf.

Two light-air races were put in the books. A large ground swell and chop were not the best conditions for Hobie Cats; particularly the uni-rigged Hobie 17s that occasionally needed help getting through the surf. Reactions were mixed.

"They interrupted a perfectly good party to send us out racing," joked past Hobie 16 North American champions Paul and Mary Ann Hess. Despite running five different classes on the same course, the day was collision-and-protest free,

par for the course with Hobie events.

Saturday evening was again special. After dinner, the stage was cleared and Alter and crew, joined by legendary surfer and shaper Mickey Muñoz, rehashed the early days. In the exchange Banks explained to a rapt audience how the unique shape of the Hobie 14 hulls originated. "We glued two foam surfboard blanks back-to-back," he said. "That gave us a hull blank that was flat on one side and curved on the other."

To this day, he says, there are no engineering drawings of the Hobie 14. "We did it by eye, by what felt good," said Alter.

The second and final day's wind delivered nothing more than it had the day before, but the trademark California sunshine returned to complete the weekend. Ulibarri knocked off two more races, with the usual suspects winning their respective classes. But again, the results were merely a formality. Likewise, nobody remembers who won the first Hobie Cat regatta. "I don't think we kept score," said Banks with a chuckle, "but Hobie didn't win a lot of the races."

As the sun dipped the far Pacific horizon, the crowd scattered as quickly as they'd come from many different directions. With them went the memories of legends, of life-long friends, and the experience that runs far too deep to be tossed around simply as a cliché. Even at 40, the Hobie Way of Life carries on as always.



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