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The Resin Cowboy: Form, Function and Speed

by Brenda Tredwell

John Hutchins of Downeast Boats and Composites possesses a kind of Roy Orbison cool. You'd never guess by his laid-back demeanor that his shop produced the hulls for super-fast lobster boats like Alfred Osgood's Starlight Express, or Andrew Gove's Uncle's UFO.

Hutchins saunters in to TDP Automotive in Steuben, hanging back while Tim Bybee yammers away on the phone with a customer from Beals who races a Camaro at Winterport, and the world's fastest lobster boat. Galen Alley reports to Bybee that the engine on his boat, Foolish Pleasure, was turning 7,000 rpm during a pass down the course at Rockland, with no water circulation.

"You've got to get a thermostat!" advises Bybee. "Jeez," sighs Hutchins. He's here to talk boats. Hutchins blows off steam racing cars. Boats are what he does for work.

Fast cars, fast boats. While TDP has a chassis dyno for measuring automotive performance, it hooks up totally different from an engine dyno—the tool used to measure power for lobster boat engines. Butler and McMasters in Augusta is where you'd go for that. A newly-tuned Dodge Magnum with a 392 Stroker hemi engine that needed some serious breaking in sat outside at TDP.

"It accelerates like a rocket, even without the nitrous," said Hutchins. With an approving hhh-yuh, Hutchins says, "Winterport is an NHRA sanctioned drag strip."

Cruising at twice the speed of Foolish Pleasure's record breaking 68.1 run, Hutchins explains, "Ya know, if we was strung out..." John does some quick math. Brushing a catcher's mitt hand through his hair, he decides, "A 150 shot of nitrous gives it another 150 horse power....and this car does 180 mph." Later, Hutchins calls on the phone. "I was at TDP and we were getting the Dodge wagon ready for Winterport Dragway Sunday, and HOLY SHIT!" explaining torque and horsepower, Hutchins was just like a kid on Christmas day.

As far as lobster boat racing goes, Downeast Boats and Composites has been lent some class by cranking out fast hulls. Customers of Downeast Boats and Composites might play hard, but they fish harder. A few Hutchins boats went to Vinalhaven, including Victor Ames's Hey Baby,



John Hutchins' hull boat mold and '52 Willys near his boat shop. Speed by land and sea are his interests., although that is not reflected in this photograph. *Brenda Tredwell Photo*

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and Amby Alley's Shit Poke. "I asked Amby: Why'd you name it that?" laughed Hutchins.

Downeast Boats and Composites was started 15 years ago, after John Hutchins left the cabinet making business, to work for Morris Yachts. Hutchins said he was the second or third person Tom Morris hired, back when Al Michaud was there. Hutchins built wooden components, then graduated to decks. He eventually ran Morris' fiberglass shop after proving his skill with resins. Then, he went on his own. Hutchins said he, "Started out building the 36-footer. Then I acquired a 20', 25', 28' and eventually the 38." Hutchins then sold the 36 mold.

Over a 15-year span, Hutchins built the 36s. He sold 135 of them. Hutchins company continued to build a name for itself, laying up well known work boat hulls. A business partner, Perry Kuiper from the Netherlands, entered John Hutchins' scene. Hutchins said, "He came to me. He heard I built fast boats. He liked the 36', and he said, 'Let's design a new boat. A better boat.'" So they got busy on plans for a 38'.



Perry Kuiper, at the Winterport race track, 2010. Kuiper is the precision and details man at Downeast Boats and Composites. *Brenda Tredwell Photo*

The 38' was drawn up by Chuck Paine. Hutchins brought Paine his own drawings, rattled off ideas for his 38' design, then the drawings were sent to Europe, where Kuyper had the frames robotically cut. Before glassing the plug, the frames were set up, imperfections were corrected, then the molds were made. Hutchins' set of 38'molds was put on a freighter.

"I got it drawn, then it was a year to build the plug—you can imagine me tearing my hair out," recalls Hutchins. His partner, Kuiper, has molds for the 38' in Europe," added Hutchins. "He did all the tooling, and it's been a great advantage to me to work with someone so meticulous. He's got a European watchmaker's mentality."

The first 38' Downeast Boats and Composites—Hull No.1—was completed in 2004 for Ira Guptill. Hutchins describes Mystery Machine as a "heavy-built work boat with a 410 SISU Engine." Still, the boat wins races. In 2007, another 38' with a 1,000 HP engine went to Robert Young, on Matinicus.

"Everybody thinks the 38' is a stretched out version of the (Northern Bay) 36' we did," said Hutchins, "But it's not. It's 2-1/2 feet longer, it's wider, there's 6 more inches in the free board. The 38' has better prop efficiency- no cavitation. With the 36', Spencer Lincoln thought nobody would put in more than a 375 HP CAT. On the 38', the keel is fine, and the skeg - is finer. There's better propeller efficiency." That's a key component of speed.

Downeast Boats and Composites built a couple of 38' draggers that went down to New York. "They pull like hell, 30,000 lbs., or so. Those big John Deere engines go top speed – 36 mph," commented Hutchins. Hutchins explained boat construction, saying, "Composite simply means sandwich construction. Even regular fiberglass, where resin and fiberglass could be considered to be composite." Hutchins, whose expertise involves advanced composites, said his work "Could include 5-lb. density balsa core, divynyl, core-cel, or foams, and have a super structure of nida-core for the stringers and floors, or honeycomb."

At Downeast Boats and Composites, Jim McDonald and Brad Limeburner work in the shop.

Their latest commission is a 38' tuna boat with an 825 HP Engine for Rick Pozzo, that's headed to Orleans, MA. Outside the shop, surrounded in a field of Queen Anne's Lace that rolls down the slope of Route 176, Hutchins' 1952 Willys sits next to a boat mold It's a car he plans to re-build and race. On Thursday, Perry Kuipers is flying in from the Netherlands. He and Hutchins are gear heads, with a passion for boats, and racing cars at Winterport.

"It was Perry (Kuipers) who got me hooked on Dodges," admits Hutchins. He was ready to spring for an RX-8 Mazda sports car when Kuipers dragged Hutchins into Bangor Dodge to check out a Magnum. During a test ride, Hutchins said to Kuipers, "Holy hell! This thing has got some nuggets!"