

EVERETT PEARSON'S QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE LED HIM ALONG A TORTUOUS COURSE THAT CHANGED FIBERGLASS BOAT CONSTRUCTION FOREVER BY DENNIS CAPRIO

# No Regrets



**E**verett A. Pearson could have done anything, though his innate modesty may not let him publicly admit such a possibility. He majored in economics at Brown., and spent a great deal of his adult life building boats and other composite structures. His forays into the industrial side of the composites industry taught him the value of testing resins, fiberglass and the finished laminate. His associations with the corporate world taught him to avoid their inherently complex and cumbersome way of conducting business—to focus instead on individual creativity, careful management and quick response to new ideas. His many contribu-

tions to the composites industry earned him the 2002 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Composites Fabricators Association. Throughout the ups and downs of a life in business, his natural curiosity, fierce independence, integrity and matter-of-fact approach to work and life have always urged him forward. He doesn't have any regrets.

Pearson and I met at his office in Fall River, Massachusetts, a couple of days before the summer solstice. While the sunlight threatened to burn holes through everything it touched, a brisk onshore breeze fanned away the pain. Although Pearson, at age 73, has retired from the daily routine of running SwimEx and Pearson Pilings, he goes to the office on average two days a week during the warmer months. He keeps a Pearson True North 38 at the dock off his property and spends winters in Florida. He's been boating since childhood.

"I've never gotten up any day where I dreaded going to work," he said. "I'm waking up at 4:30 thinking about what I'm going to do." SwimEx designs and manufactures water treadmills for rehabilitation and physical training, allowing the user to benefit from the therapeutic properties of swimming within a small space. Pearson Pilings makes composite pilings for docks and to support houses in flood planes. These pipes, designed and built to be driven into the ground, serve the same purpose that pilings made of steel or wood serve, but are impervious to rot. Both companies are indirectly the result of Pearson's experiences with corporate America.

SwimEx and Pearson Pilings, now run by Pearson's son, Mark, occupy two sides of an unassuming building in an industrial complex north of Fall River's center. A simple sign in front announces their presence, though the SwimEx name is the only one on the building. A single door in the center of the building leads to the reception room—which greets visitors with three chairs, a small table and two doors. Behind door #1 is a storage room. A sign on door #2 reads, "No Admittance," and tells visitors to use the phone on the table to call whomever they wish to see. I was 20 minutes early and simply waited.





A few minutes before 1 p.m., Pearson, fit and tan (he plays golf and walks for exercise), entered. We'd met and talked approximately 20 years before, when he was at Tillotson-Pearson, but this was like meeting him for the first time. We shook hands, exchanged pleasantries and headed for his office on the second floor—a loft-like area above the cavern that houses production of the SwimEx pools. A handful of half-models, each one representing a model of sailboat Pearson has built in his various businesses, hang on the wall that faces the entry. The original Freedom 40 cat-ketch was among them and stands as a symbol of Pearson's long relationship with Garry Hoyt, who now markets Alerion Express sailboats. A variety of J Boats recall Tillotson-Pearson's outstanding relationship with the Johnston family. Framed and hanging on the wall next to the entry is a bill of lading from the Celanese Corporation—this for the materials that Everett and his cousin/partner Clint Pearson put into their first fiberglass boat.

"In 1955, when I was a senior in college (Clint had graduated in 1952), a friend of ours, Ted Harrison, was reading—in *Popular Science* I think it was—an article about this new material, fiberglass and how they were making boats out of it," Pearson said. "He got intrigued with it, so he asked Clint and me—he said, 'Hey, if I buy some resin and glass, do you want to try making a boat with it?'" The Pearsons answered, yes. "So, on my spring vacation, we built a plug for an 8-foot dinghy.

"The interesting thing is we started making them by what was called the Marco Method,"



Opposite page: Everett at age 12 sailing on the Kickemuit. Left: In front of a J-Boat while at TPI. Above: In 1958 with one of his first builds.



Above: Everett, on the right, experimented with glass in the early years. Right: one of Pearson's early 20-foot runabouts.

Pearson said. Dr. Herbert Muscat, of American Cyanamid, developed this early example of vacuum-bagging and later founded the Marco Chemical Company. The Marco Method comprises a male mold, over which the workmen draped the fiberglass. Then they placed a female mold over that, catalyzed the resin and poured it into the trough around the perimeter of the male mold. They drew a vacuum from the top of the female mold, which sucked the resin into the laminate.

"We tried and tried," said Pearson, "but the doggone vacuum would leave a hole here or come up there and leave another hole. Our tooling wasn't precise enough, so we had some sections that were thick and some that were thinner, and the flat area near the bottom would suck together tighter than it would on the sides. So, we finally said, 'jeeppers, we can't afford to keep making all these blunders. Why don't we just try laying the stuff up?'" So, that's what they did.

The Pearsons lived in a two-family house in Seekonk, Massachusetts, at the time and built the dinghies in the barn behind the house. They kept the completed dinghies in the backyard, and as you'd expect from the residents of this seafaring area, passersby noticed them and wanted to buy them. By 1957, after Everett finished his stint in the Navy, he and Clint rented space in the basement of an old textile plant on Constitution Street in Bristol, Rhode Island, and started Pearson Yachts with Fred Healed, another alumnus of Brown. The new company built 8-foot and 12-foot dinghies, 15-foot and 20-foot runabouts, and by 1959, the Triton sloop—a lovely 28-footer designed by Carl Alberg. "And that flipped the whole business," Pearson said. The company sold 17 Tritons at the New York National Boat Show in 1959, catapulting Pearson Yachts into nautical stardom.

"We were enthusiastic to build [the Triton]," Pearson said, "but we really didn't know what type of laminate [to make] and how to put a boat together of that size." As luck would have it, Dr. Press Veltman, traveling through New England with his wife,

grew tired of antiquing and slipped across Constitution Street to visit Pearson Yachts. He was a sailor and head of the research center at W.R. Grace Company in Clarksville, Maryland. When he was at Johns Hopkins University, Veltman had developed a solution to treat burned children. He'd also been involved with nuclear energy and worked on the atomic bomb. They fell into a conversation that eventually resulted in a long friendship. When the Triton neared production, Pearson turned to his new friend for advice.

Veltman suggested that Pearson talk with Carl Alberg to find out what loads the Triton would experience, such as from the keel, on the chain plates, compression beneath the mast and more. Pearson sent all of the data to Veltman, and, when he was building the plug, he made samples of the laminate taken from a variety of locations on the mold and sent those to Grace. The engineers at Grace determined that a safety factor of 3:1 for the hull and 5:1 where the lead ballast attached to the keel would be enough. Veltman also taught Pearson to add titanium oxide to inert polyester to prevent the gelcoat from cracking, a common problem in the early days of fiberglass.

"A lot of people said we'd overbuilt [our boats], as if we didn't know what we were doing," Pearson said. "There wasn't any historical data back then. The stuff hadn't been out long enough, so we built them to the criteria that we thought was right, and they're still standing up. We haven't had any failures."

Experience is a marvelous teacher, and Pearson kept his mind open to learning from mistakes, as well as from his many successes. Always thinking of better ways to build a boat, Pearson began using strips of Balteck balsa coring to stiffen the deck of the Triton. He soon discovered that when water leaked around a deck fitting, it migrated along the grain of the balsa, eventually rotting the core. "I thought, 'geeze, this will drive us crazy,'" Pearson said. He solved the problem by glu-



ing strips of longitudinal-grain balsa into blocks measuring 3 feet by 1 foot. He'd then slice the blocks on the bandsaw, making panels of end-grain balsa.

One day, Bob Levine and Alex Lippay, salesmen for Baltek, visited Pearson. "I said, 'here's what I'm doing to make your product work. It's a pain in the ass. You people should be doing this.'" That episode started Baltek on its program to manufacture end-grain balsa coring. Its brand name, Contourkore, appeared on the market in 1963, and Pearson used it in the hull of a racing boat that year. "I should have patented that," Pearson said with a wry smile, but showing no sign of regret. "That's the side of the business I enjoyed—building the product, engineering the product."

A one-percent error in the resin-to-glass ratio taught him the value of careful workmanship. In 1964, Pearson Yachts became a division of Grumman Allied Industries. Clint left the company in 1964, to escape what he considered to be corporate meddling, and Everett followed in 1966. When Everett left, he agreed to stay out of the boatbuilding side of the marine industry for a period of five years. During that time, he built composite caskets and chemical-storage tanks. One order called for a tank measuring 10 feet in diameter and 12 feet in height. The buyer asked for a laminate of 42 percent glass and 68 percent resin.

"We built the tank, delivered it, and they cut a plug right out of the side of the tank. We had only 41 percent. They shipped the tank back to us. I thought, 'man, that's a costly lesson.'" The aftermath? "We set up a lab so that we knew what we were doing, and that started us." When Pearson partnered with Neil Tillotson (on a handshake) to form Tillotson-Pearson Industries (TPI) in 1966, he expanded his testing facilities and procedures.

From 1966 into 1992, Tillotson, who'd made his fortune in latex and real estate, and Pearson operated on a 50-50 basis. Tillotson put up the money and Pearson did the work. During their partnership and after Tillotson sold his half to John Walton in 1992, Pearson built, in addition to the Freedoms and J Boats, Rampage sportfishermen, Lagoon catamarans for Jeanneau, Sundeer high-performance cruising sailboats for Dashev

Offshore, and Hoyt's Alerion Express 28 and 38. On the industrial side, TPI built the SwimEx pools, wind-turbine blades for Kenetech Windpower, cars for the GM Test Track ride at Disney World ("We solved the problem of how to bolt the suspension system right to the fiberglass so you get the feel of the car as though you were on a test track."), a 490-pound electric car for Selectria ("It went from Boston to New York on a single charge at highway speeds."), an all-composite 30-foot bus and its hybrid drive system. "The bus performed great, and I wanted to do a delivery vehicle like the UPS trucks."

Pearson presented his idea for the truck to UPS, and the company agreed to buy 50. Pearson, however, couldn't find anyone to commit \$2 million to finance development and production. He suggested a 50-50 deal to UPS, but that failed. "Then I got discouraged and said the hell with it. That's when I got out and bought the SwimEx," Pearson said.

Before he left TPI, Pearson had entered into a partnership with Seemann Composites and Hardcore Composites to promote and license the Seemann Composites Resin Infusion Molding Process (SCRIMP)—a vacuum-bagging process that introduces the resin from closed containers after a vacuum has been formed. It eliminates evaporation of resin's volatile components. In the early days, Pearson and his crew mixed resin to suit the products they made. "We used to lay up those boats until our eyes watered," he said. "It was brutal in the early days. That's why I jumped into SCRIMP with Bill Seemann. That's the answer to making this industry a tolerable situation."

In 1999, Pearson bought back the rights to his name as it applied to boats. He and Mark introduced the Pearson True North 38, a traditional design by Clive Dent, which proved to be practical and seakindly. Once again, the corporate monster chewed at Pearson's independent and creative nature. He and Mark got out to form Pearson Pilings and to focus on SwimEx. "I'd say the worst part was just the last few years of frustration dealing with people who have plenty of money but no imagination and no willingness or guts to take a chance on something," Pearson said.

"I have to say the most satisfying thing I ever did was to build the Freedom Independence." This is a 20-foot sloop designed by the late Gary Mull for paraplegics. It has a self-tending jib, great stability, a foam-filled composite mast to prevent it from turning upside down, positive flotation to prevent sinking, plus a pair of counterweighted seats to bring the crew to windward on each tack. Freedom Cup races have been staged all across the U.S.

"A kid came up to me at the end of the last day of the series," Pearson said. "He was about 20. He shook my hand and said, 'You know, I played football at Syracuse. You know when you're waiting for that kickoff and you get that adrenalin flowing. For the first time since I've been hurt, I felt that today on the starting line. I want to shake your hand and thank you for that.'

"It's been a good run," Pearson said finally. "I don't think there are many people who've had as much pleasure in working." Everything at Pearson Pilings and SwimEx points to more of the same—part-time for Everett and full-time for Mark. No regrets.