

SIGHTINGS

redefining boatbuilding

In a shed at the bitter end of the Berkeley Marina, a new breed of beast is taking shape at Berkeley Marine Center. Fifty feet of vacuum-bagged Divinycell foam, carbon fiber, fiberglass and epoxy resin, this new animal will wear a pair of transom-hung rudders, a canting keel, single centerline daggerboard and a nine-ft bowsprit. All of this will be driven by a sail area similar to a current TP 52's — with nearly two tons less displacement. Perhaps the most apt way to describe the new Jim Antrim design being built under the watchful eye of Berkeley Marine Center owner Cree Partridge is that it will be a scaled down version of a Volvo 70 — a Volvo 50, if you will. With a projected completion date around the end of the year, Partridge and his team are cranking away, having completed the hull shell and barrier-coat phase. Next up will be the deck.

PHOTOS LATITUDE/ROB



Custom race boat building in California has become a bit of an anomaly — in a state which used to churn out custom and one-off IOR boats at a furious pace. Partridge is one of the rare builders who bridges both eras, having built boats like the bright-yellow Peterson 46 *Aleta* — which is still kicking around the Bay — in the '70s and '80s. But having boats you've built still sailing successfully is no guarantee of future orders. There are a lot of factors that

go into being able to make a business of custom boatbuilding.

"The challenge is trying to be competitive on price with the offshore competition," he said. To this end, in conjunction with Antrim — whose engineering he describes as "top-notch" and whose working demeanor he describes as "easy" — Partridge employs technology like computer numerically controlled cutting for the frame stations the boat was built on.

Another challenge for a boatbuilder is keeping a team of skilled employees together from project to project — covering a payroll when there's no money coming in. That's where the more typical boatyard work generated by the Berkeley Marine Center comes in — keeping what he calls "the most talented team I've ever had" gainfully employed in the downtimes. "You can't just build boats," he explained. "You finish a project and you've either spent all the money on keeping your guys — which doesn't leave you with any money to start the next project — or you let your team go, and when you call them to come back they're already working on something else."

Partridge's formula seems to keep working. The 50-footer — which is for his Southern California-based brother Jim — comes on the heels of the Barran family's Antrim 40 XL, which already has a 9.5-day Pacific Cup crossing under her belt. As soon as his brother's boat is done, Partridge will be branching out a bit.

Next up will be a prototype barge for Puget Sound that will generate power via tidal currents. After that a composite whaleboat for Lake Merritt's "Ladies of the Lake" rowing club and maybe even some custom carbon fiber sweeps that will take only one of the women — many of whom are in their 50s, 60s, and 70s — to carry, when a wood version would require a least two pairs of hands.

After that, it's back to race boats again with another Antrim 40, this one water-ballasted and geared toward Northern California sailing. With his team in place, orders in place and "the proverbial three-bridge view" from his little wedge of the Berkeley waterfront, Partridge has a great thing going, and it's obvious he enjoys what he does.

"My first love is the marine industry," he said. "It's the atmosphere, the people, everything about it."

We can't argue with that.

— rob

Cree Partridge, owner of Berkeley Marine Center, values his staff of skilled boatbuilders, like Chris Burreson (above). When not building boats, they stay employed by working in the yard.

