Perfecting the ‘gentleman’s dayboat’

Matthew Sledge returns to his roots to build hull No. 1 of the cold-molded Samoset 30

By Michael Hauenstein
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Maine boatbuilder Matthew Sledge worked for a dozen years with high-tech composites to build some of the finest racing sailboats around. Sledge built and repaired more than 65 vessels as part of the team at Goetz Custom Boats in Bristol, R.I., including America’s Cup and Whitbread/Volvo Ocean Race boats.

Over the years, though, he tired of building composite boats. Another material was calling his name. “I got sick of Kevlar and carbon fiber,” Sledge says. “What I’ve learned is even with all the exotics and high-tech materials, it’s still pretty tough to beat wood.”

NEW BOAT REPORT

Clearly a firm believer in the wooden boat, he’s set up shop as Samoset Boatworks in Boothbay, Maine. His first boat is a cold-molded beauty called the Samoset 30.

Describing the diesel 30-footer, Sledge extols the virtues of a wooden boat. “Wood handles the sea better than fiberglass,” says Sledge, who is 41. “A wooden boat, she’s unbelievably quiet at full speed. There’s no vibration because the wood absorbs it all, and it absorbs the noise, too.”

The Samoset 30 project was four or five years in the making, according to Sledge. “I saw a boat that was built up here by one of Timmy Hodgdon’s relatives,” he says of a 24-foot dayboat that inspired the Samoset. “I liked the boat — there was nothing else like it on the water — but I wanted it a little bit bigger.”

Sledge approached naval architect Doug Zurn. “I told Doug I wanted a dry-riding boat, that no matter how snotty it was coming back from Monhegan [Island], you’d stay dry,” says Sledge. The hull is stable at rest and stable under way, he says, and he has experienced wind-over-wave conditions that proved to him how dry it is.

“She’s got a bit of a Down East hull shape as far as the sheer goes, with just a hint of Carolina flare at the bow to keep her dry,” he says.

In the end, several design and construction characteristics mark the difference between the Samoset 30 and the 24-foot launch that inspired it. The skinny 24-footer was built of traditional plank-on-frame construction, with a round bilge and a gas inboard. The cold-molded wood-epoxy Samoset 30 has more beam, hard chines, a modified-vee hull shape, and diesel propulsion. However, the timelessness of Down East good looks connects the boats.


Sledge spent 12 years building high-tech boats with exotic materials.

A BOY AND HIS BOATS

Though Sledge builds his boats in Maine and calls the Pine Tree State home, he hails from Marblehead, Mass., where he was raised on and around the water. “My father’s always had sailboats, so I always went boating with him,” he says. “I grew up sailing with Dad.” In fact, Sledge says his love for his current home state came from cruising the Maine coast with his family in his youth.

In addition to sailing experience, Sledge got his first taste of working with wood, including building a small boat, while at his father’s side. “He is a very good woodworker in his own right,” says Sledge, whose father retired as chief of orthopedics at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. “I spent a lot of time in the basement workshop building things with him — I have the scars to prove it — as a young boy.”

Early in life, he dreamed of designing boats. “Ever since I was a little kid I wanted to be a naval architect,” he says. After graduating from Tabor Academy in Marion, Mass., he attended The Landing School in Arundel, Maine, where at one point he stayed on at the end of the semester for a hands-on boatbuilding course. That decision to hang around proved fateful.

Sledge describes succinctly what’s so satisfying about building a boat: “Taking a two-dimensional drawing and making a three-dimensional object from a pile of materials.” He was hired by Eric Goetz as a Landing School graduate in 1989 and hasn’t stopped building boats since. However, Sledge never planned to make a career out of building composite boats. “I thought it would be fun to go down and build custom composite boats for a few years,” he says. “And I finally left them in August 2001.”

While the building materials and technology used at Samoset Boatworks are obviously different from those at Goetz, the lessons from a dozen years building custom boats certainly apply. “All the boats that I built at Goetz have helped me in what I’m doing now,” he says. “I didn’t build the same boat again and again and again. With new boats come new challenges.”

Today, boatbuilding is once again a family affair for Sledge. In addition to the guidance of his father, Sledge’s girlfriend keeps the company checkbook, and her father, who used to run a small boatyard in East Boothbay, occasionally works in the shop. Sledge’s young son and daughter are often under foot, too.

BILLY BLACK

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA: 31 feet, 11 inches **BEAM:** 9 feet, 8 inches **DRAFT:** 3 feet, 5 inches **DISPLACEMENT:** 6,360 pounds **HULL TYPE:** modified-vee **TRANSOM DEADRISE:** 18 degrees **POWER:** 440-hp diesel (prop or water-jet) **SPEED:** 49 mph top, 29 mph cruise **PRICE:** $425,000 **CONTACT:** Samoset Boatworks, Boothbay, Maine. Phone: (207) 633-8350. *www.samosetboatworks.com*

KNOWHOW

By Mike Saylor

Bringing your boat out of hibernation

As Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in his "Canterbury Tales": "Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote" — oh heck, spring is just about here, and since you have a boat you might as well enjoy it, despite the economy. Fuel prices have come down from last season, and the wind is free. Still, the emphasis here is on saving some money.

1. If you used a more-expensive silver tarp to cover your boat, hose it down, let it dry and store it in loose folds. They're reusable for several years. Salvage the framework if it did its job. Make a sketch of the assembly and label it.

2. For general cleaning, a solution of bleach and water will work for fiberglass and plastic. Baking soda gets rid of odors in the drinking water and in the refrigerator. "Casey's Solution" — a 50/50 mixture of alcohol and ammonia — is a great homemade brew that works on everything but mold and mildew. Bleach kills mold and mildew, but elbow grease, along with a household product such as Tilex, can get the stains out and kill the odor. Whatever you do, never mix bleach and Casey's Solution; the gas that forms when ammonia meets bleach is toxic. Black-streak removers work well.

3. Bleach will also get rid of any organisms that grew in your freshwater lines during the winter. To clean your potable water system, add a very small amount of bleach to the water. We've used about three or four drops per quart, less than a cup for a 35-gallon water tank.

4. If you used a multiseason ablative bottom paint with a signal-coat — a first coat of contrasting color — you will see where the paint needs touching up. Multiseason ablatives work when the friction of water wears away the outer layer of paint, exposing fresh biocide. These are great paints, but they aren't for trailer boats, slow movers, or boats that rarely move from their berths. Some boats require modified epoxies. Remember, you can't put a vinyl-based paint over anything but vinyl-based paint. Before painting, wipe the area with solvent, even if the hull was power-washed. Then sand with 80-grit free-cut paper.

5. Check your zincs. Make sure they are in contact with bare metal, not paint, and never paint over your anodes or bronze grounding plates.

6. Check the stuffing boxes on rudders and prop shafts. I lost a boat once because the packing in the stuffing box for my rudder failed. Ensure that the stuffing boxes haven't loosened. It's amazing what years of vibration can do. If you have shaft seals, "burp" them by pulling back on the seal and letting a small amount of water through. Make sure it is reseated and resealed.

7. I hope you topped off your fuel tanks and stabilized the fuel before you put her to bed last season. If not, you may need to hire a pro to clean the fuel system. Change the primary and secondary fuel filters — they're a helluva lot cheaper than replacing injectors or worse. Older diesels may require manually bleeding the fuel lines. Most modern engines do it for you.

8. If you didn't change the engine oil last fall, now's the time. Open the seacock to your raw-water filter and run the engine long enough to warm the oil in the crankcase. (It'll take a lot longer than five minutes.) Stop the engine and use a vacuum pump to remove the oil through the dipstick fitting. Be careful — that oil is hot. Now fill the crankcase with the recommended oil.

9. Reinstall your batteries and check the charge. Generally, fully charged batteries will not freeze. However, lead-acid batteries are continually self-discharging, and you can't trickle-charge gel cell or AGM batteries. Clean any corrosion from the terminals with a wire brush or burnishing tool and a solution of water and baking soda. Grease the terminals and charge the batteries to full capacity using a proper charger for your type of battery.

10. Check your electrical panels and wiring, as well as lamps and housings, especially those in awkward locations.

11. Enjoy the season. You only go around once. If you do it right, once is enough. ■

'A WORK OF ART'

Cold-molded construction results in a wooden boat encapsulated in epoxy, which is then sheathed in fiberglass cloth. The first Samoset 30 took 18 months to build. Sledge worked alone for the first nine or 10 months, he says, but finished the boat with a crew of three, who are still part of the operation.

"With cold molding you can get a nice stiff, light hull," he says. With full fuel tanks and water tanks, the Samoset 30 weighs in at less than 8,000 pounds. The boat's efficient, too.

"At a 20-knot cruise you're burning a little more than 4 gallons per hour, which is remarkable for a boat this size," he says. "Compare that to a fiberglass boat with twin 250-hp outboards that's burning 12 gallons per hour at that speed."

"It's a proven design on our part — very easily driven through the water and fuel-efficient, dry and soft," says designer Zurn.

From a builder's perspective, Sledge says, cold molding is cost-effective for limited-production boats because it doesn't require a lot of expensive tooling. He says he invested a fraction of the price of a hull mold on his building jig. Fit and finish, however, set the Samoset 30 apart.

"The boat's just incredible, what he's done," says Zurn. "It's just a work of art. It's something that's going to be handed down from generation to generation."

Zurn describes a boat with Awlgripped bilges and the underside of the deck finished. "Places you wouldn't usually see are perfect," he says.

Sledge built the first boat on spec to get his company started. He describes hull No. 1 as a "gentleman's dayboat." While it has a couple of rod holders, it's fitted out with plenty of teak and brightwork, and it has an enclosed head compartment in the center console, with a VacuFlush marine head and a stainless-steel sink. The price tag on hull No. 1 is $425,000.

"Basically I set it up as a showpiece to say, 'This is what I can do,' " says Sledge.

The boat has stainless steel deck hardware and grab rails, Awlgripped deck and hull, and a varnished teak deck coaming, toe rail and flagstaff. "Less varnish is less money," Sledge quips.

He has already received interest in building a 30 as a pure fishing boat, with outriggers and bait wells. He also could move the forward bulkhead aft and install a V-berth. "You can have the boat set up any way you like," he says.

And it won't just be Samoset 30s coming out of the Boothbay shop. Sledge and his crew are up for most any boatbuilding challenge. "With the envelope I have in my shop, I can probably build up to a 45-foot boat," he says. "I'd love it if somebody walked up to me today and said, 'Build this boat.' " ■