

Steering Onward

For more than 30 years, when the marine industry needed a new product—and often didn't know it—or an individual customer had a problem he couldn't solve, Bob Latham has always found the solution. By Eric Colby



Bob Latham holds his Alan J. Freedman Memorial Leadership Award.

For most of the afternoon, Bob and Kathy Latham had been refusing phone calls. They were being interviewed by a magazine and, because they are always gracious to any guest who comes through the front door of Latham Marine, they frequently told the receptionist, "I'll call them back." Then the front office buzzed and Kathy knew that an exception must be made.

It walked Latham Marine's patent agent, Alvin Blum, to inform Bob Latham that he had been awarded a patent on his vertical shaft support for a 350-hp Yamaha outboard. Throughout the afternoon, Latham had been responded pleasantly to all questions, but his first full smile of the half-day came when Blum handed Latham the documentation.

Latham can't remember how many pat-

ents he's received, but it doesn't matter. Every time he's awarded one, he knows that he's developed something that no one else has. It drives him to continue producing the highest quality accessories in the marine industry.

Make no mistake, however, about Latham's attention to details. Earlier in the day, he was discussing his Latham Performance hydraulic pumps and was explaining the decibel-output of the machines. After he said the level was 86 decibels, he immediately corrected himself. "I'm sorry, that was 85 decibels," he said, despite the fact that the human ear cannot even detect the difference between 85 and 86 decibels. The number was off by one and Latham needed to be right. It's the only way he knows.

Anyone even casually interested in per-

formance boats knows the Latham Marine story. A native of South Florida, Latham was raised in Miami from the age of 14. He picked up his father's natural ability to fix things, building bicycles from spare parts and repairing household appliances. He hopped up cars when he was in high school and a chance request from a neighbor, Johnny Nagler, got him interested in performance boats. Nagler was a boat broker and when a customer came back with problems, Nagler asked Latham to fix them. Soon Latham Mobile Marine was rolling all over Florida fixing boats.

It wasn't long before Latham was drawn into offshore racing in a 28' Magnum, *Evil Ways*. He had to re-rig the boat from the stringers up and once he did, he throttled the boat to success. The victories piled up and Latham's reputation as a problem

solver grew. But it was a race in 1979 in Key West, Fla., in a 30-foot Sutphen called *Magic Gems* that would change Latham and performance boating forever.

"There was only a small chop, nothing rough," recalled Latham. "Suddenly the steering broke and the two drives crashed into each other." Boat owner Ed Mero asked Bob as to develop a better system and asked Latham to build it. Latham bought his first manual lathe, learned how to use it, and began designing and building his first steering system.

More than 30 years later, there are photographs of boats that have run various forms of Latham Marine steering systems lining the walls of the 20,000-square-foot facility in Fort Lauderdale that employs as many as 24 people. Most have been with the company at least 10 years and some

as long as 30. Kathy's brother Ted Chance has worked in sales for 24 years and was awarded a gold-steering cylinder when the company built its 5,000th unit in 1991.

Legendary boats from *Popeye's Chicken* to *Jesse James* to *ACR Systems* and current champions like *Bacardi Silver* and *Bud Light* are featured in pictures throughout the facility. Today the product line includes trim tabs, shift and throttle controls, raw-water pumps, sea strainers, drive spacers and even swim-platform lifts for yachts, to name just a few items.

Among current racers, the Latham

name is still revered. John Tomlinson used Latham steering when he rigged David Scott's 50' Mystic, *Bud Light*, and so did Jeff Stevenson on his 50' Mystic, *JBS Racing*. "It's quality. You get what you pay for," said Stevenson of Latham products. You never want to worry about anything while you're racing, and Latham products let me concentrate on racing."

His never-ending drive to improve boating has led to accolades from outside the performance world. In 2007, he received the Alan J. Freedman Memorial

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...to brand-new tie bar mounting brackets (above and right), Latham products are built to the highest quality.



From old to new: from a set of 20-year-old steering rams (above)....



A 23' Maelstrom (left) and a 29' Cary (above), the last ones built by either company.

Leadership award from the National Marine Manufacturers Association. The award is given annually to a marine accessories manufacturer who has excelled. In the history of the award, Bob Latham is the only recipient with roots in performance boating.

When you walk through the Latham Marine facility, you're instantly impressed by the amount of equipment. Machine Centers and Computer Numerically Controlled lathes fabricate many of the components used to complete many of the company's accessories. Latham is at home on the shop floor, preferring to spend 95 percent of his time there or in the engineering department. He prefers to fabricate as much of the parts for his products in-house to eliminate any chance of a problem. "When I outsource, that's when I have a problem. The details get lost in the shuffle and what we do is very detail oriented."

Because he is a problem solver by nature, Latham and his company are not limited to marine products. In the 1980s, Latham began building hydraulic-fluid pumps to cool his stainless-steel-machining equipment because the integral units weren't up to the task. Today, Latham Performance

Pumps builds 24 models from 300 psi to 2500 psi and has many customers including Caterpillar and Bosch.

But the backbone of Latham Marine remains marine accessories and the company president takes details seriously. Even the cable ends for throttle and shift controls are machined out of raw-stock aluminum. These pieces are fabricated on palletized machines. On each pallet, the fixture or jig for the piece being milled is fastened in place with bolts. The machine takes over, cutting and tapping parts less than an inch long. "Anytime you keep spindles spinning it's a good thing," said Latham.

In another building that also serves as a storage facility, Latham Marine has a Hi-Def plasma cutting machine that can be programmed to cut multiple small pieces out of single sheet of stainless steel. An advantage to this machine is the smooth edge it leaves on each part. That saves additional sanding and buffing time.

When all parts are finished, they go through seven stations of sanding and buffing before being adorned with a Latham Marine decal and a highly polished finish.

During our tour, the company founder

explained to us the difference between his products and the competition's. All hydraulic cylinders may work on the same concept, but Latham cylinders have 1/4" thick walls, while the competition's cylinders have 1/8" thick walls. "Heavier walls mean that during the machining process you don't get as many imperfections or variations to ensure long seal life," he explained.

Latham continued, "People ask me, 'Why do we never have to work on your pistons?' That's why we go to great details to make sure that the surface is exactly what it's supposed to be. It ensures long seal life and if someone has to work on a steering system on a three-year old boat, he's not going to be happy."

To find the stainless steel worthy of his standards, Latham has to search diligently. He won't reveal his suppliers because he doesn't want his competition learning any Latham Marine secrets.

An example of how overbuilt the rams are, Latham said that the company tested the prototype cylinders at 10,000 psi with no signs of stress or weakness. In typical use, the cylinder might endure pressures between 500 and 1,500 psi. "I love mar-

gins," he said. The more margin I can get the more I like it."

To make it easy for customers to maintain the rams and the overall hydraulic system, Latham Marine uses automatic transmission fluid as the internal lubricant. Some proprietary special oil could have been used, but then what if a customer needed to top off his reservoir and he was at a small marina somewhere? The likelihood of the marina having the tranny fluid on hand is much greater and, as Latham pointed out, you don't want to start mixing up oils.

If you don't believe that quality lasts and is worth the investment, we saw proof. It was a pair of 20-year-old hydraulic rams that were in for re-finishing and new seals. They hadn't been re-finished yet and after a simple cleaning looked as good as new. The cost for the refurbishing starts at about \$325 and up.

To meet the demands of all its performance-boat customers, Latham Marine has an assortment of tie-bar lengths and clevis-pin sizes. From these, manufactur-

ers and riggers can choose the right size for everything from V-bottoms to catamarans. The company keeps an impressive inventory of parts on hand in its facility and, typically, each part goes through one production run per year. Behind the shelves of new steering rams was the one section of the facility we weren't allowed to see—the prototype area.

Latham products are created using various techniques. Some parts are cast, which consists of pouring molten steel into a ceramic, wax or sand form, while others are extruded, which means aluminum or steel is fed into a machine that forms the metal into a shape. Finally, there's billet, which are solid metal pieces that are cut into parts using a CNC machine.

All Latham products are designed in the engineering center, which was recently expanded with new software. It is staffed by Austin Pender and Marcus De Souza, who use computers with three-dimensional CAD-CAM design software. They can look at a product, animate it as if it was working

in real time and run finite-element analysis on it to examine which types of metals, such as aluminum or stainless steel would be the appropriate choice.

During our visit, Pender was working on a front-mounted steering cylinder for an outboard motor. The length of time it takes for a product to go from idea to prototype to production varies. "We don't want to talk about certain parts because they're so frustrating," said Kathy Latham.

The new product that Latham debuted at this year's Miami Boat show was the swim platform lift for yachts. Latham has been building telescoping models exclusively for Formula boats for years, but the new model is available to anyone.

What sets apart the lift from others currently in production is that there are no external hoses or locks. All the hydraulic lines and locks that hold the lift in its "up" position are contained in the ram housings. This eliminates the need for annual replacement of hoses and gives the mechanism an incredibly clean appearance.



A new part is designed on a CAD-CAM.



Mounting tie-bar brackets for a Bravo drive.



The front of the Latham Marine facility in Fort Lauderdale, FL.



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steering onward



A Yamaha 350 outboard hydraulic side-mount system.



The starting billet piece or "stock," to be made into a custom stainless rudder.



A stainless-steel flange burned on a hi-def plasma machine.

As we continued to poke around the storage building, we found the Lathams' two boats, the last 29' Cary offshore model ever made and the last 23' Maelstrom sportboat. "As I drove away with the boat they were changing the sign on the building from Cary to Blackfin," Bob Latham recalled. The Cary was sold and the Maelstrom is for sale. A 20-year-old Porsche was recently sold and Latham has his eye on an Audi F8. He also has two large portable generators that provide enough electricity to power a small town. They kept the CNC machines and operations running after a hurricane shut down the neighborhood around the factory. It's just Latham trying to stay ahead of the game by solving potential problems.

To blow off steam, he enjoys riding his snowmobiles in Steamboat Springs, CO, with his family. "You gotta have some toys," laughed Bob. The Lathams have two daughters, Olivia, 24, who trained with the U.S. Ski Team and Amanda, 21, who is an accomplished pianist. Two dogs, Tut and Dinga, prowl the Latham Marine front offices, greeting visitors with a wagging tail and a thorough sniff inspection.

Despite a drop in attendance and the slow economy, Latham said the company

picked up more business than he expected to at the Miami show. He tries to plan for where he'd like the business to be five, maybe 10 years down the road, but admits that when he planned for the current economic slowdown, even he was caught off-guard. Undaunted, he said he'll just revise things a little and keep moving forward.

New product development at Latham Marine is as much a result of consumer requests as it is the staff coming up with ideas on its own. A company other than Formula came to Latham with the yacht lift request and an individual wanted Latham steering on his Intrepid powerboat with Yamaha 350-hp outboards before the engine was even introduced. It didn't matter to Latham. He simply developed his prototype on a 250-hp Yamaha and made adjustments when the bigger motor was completed.

The size of Latham Marine allows the flexibility to respond to special requests. When the *Bud Light* racing team needed a stronger part to support the driveshafts for its TriMax drives, crew chief/throttleman John Tomlinson knew where to turn.

But it was a chance meeting at the dry-cleaners that provided the Lathams with

one of their most memorable projects. A man recognized the Latham Marine logo on an armload of shirts Kathy was carrying and said he knew someone that could use the company's help. The two exchanged business cards and pleasantries and went their separate ways.

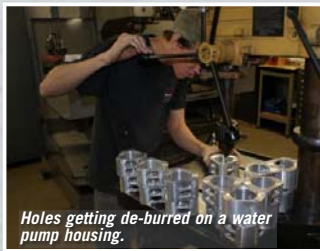
A few years later, that gentleman walked through the front doors at Latham with his employee, who was missing both arms after being electrocuted. "I went to shake his hand and he had no arm and then I tried the other hand," remembered Kathy with a shudder.

He couldn't go to the bathroom by himself, but he still wanted to drive his boat through the islands near his home in the Turks and Caicos Islands. His boss was from Bermuda and the employee ferried product for him. Latham and TNT Custom Marine worked together, installing a foot throttle and a special joystick so the man could steer the twin-outboard boat with the nub that remained on his right arm. It was horseshoe-shaped and the nub fit perfectly.

When the man returned home with his boat, his mother was thrilled for her son. He told the Lathams she said, "The beauty of that is that my son can now use his b



A special shaft support made for the Mystic race boat Bud Light.



Holes getting de-burred on a water pump housing.



From raw aluminum stock to finished throttle cable clip.