

# WE CAN WORK IT OUT



The story of how designer and builder Sam Devlin turned a stalled build into a salty tugboat.

story and photos JONATHAN COOPER



TugZilla, tucked away in one of Sam Devlin's three sheds on his 9-acre property. The 26-footer is built to proper working tugboat specifications, but she's small enough to not warrant the legal certification required for operators of larger tugs.

The owner attempted to cut away the structure of the tug and replace it to meet the new specifications. As many home boatbuilders do, he got lost in the conversion.

**E**very creative person needs a fountain of inspiration. Pacific Northwest boatbuilder and designer Sam Devlin finds his spark on Sunday mornings in his office, listening to the Beatles on his radio.

"After a busy workweek and catching up on Saturdays, I love my time on Sunday mornings tucked away in my den and with the Beatles soundtrack in the background," Devlin says. "I allow myself to dream of creation and discovery."

We're sitting down in what Devlin calls his den. What I really want to know, but forget to ask, is whether he is more creatively inspired by the "Magical Mystery Tour" or the "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" spectrum of the iconic pop band's catalogue. If gut instinct counts for anything, I'm leaning toward "Magical Mystery Tour."

Tucked away in this cozy, wood-clad building that sits on its own patch of Devlin's 9-acre greenscape, he confesses that the '60s quartet is always streaming on those mornings when he comes up with his best stuff. Personally, I could happily live in this 500-square-foot place with or without the Beatles, but leave me the rest: the endless bookshelves, the old boating magazines, the homemade ship models, the carved name boards and the wood-burning fireplace that turns the tiny house into a warm blanket on cold days. The scent of fresh-cut pine boards lingers as Devlin's German shepherd pup, Oso, curls at my feet, putting the whole experience well over the top.

Devlin designs wood boats that he builds in his own shop, usually for custom clients. (For background on his stitch-and-glue technique, see "Beautiful Mind," the story of his Kingfisher build in *Passagemaker's* November/December 2017 issue.) Devlin also has designed myriad projects that others have built themselves (see "From Russia, with Love," *Passagemaker*, January/February 2019), an endeavor that can result in something truly special if you know what you're doing or if you can hire the right people.

With Devlin's method, all of the necessary parts are pre-cut on a CNC router to exact tolerances. Then, the kit-build is cut, packaged and delivered ready to assemble straight off a shipping palette. But taking on such a project is not for rank amateurs. The plans and construction methods must

be followed precisely, as any deviation from said plan may result in dispiriting, roughshod work.

#### "FIXING A HOLE"

During a previous visit to his property, Devlin asked if I wanted to check out his latest project, which was sitting in his barn. We entered through the side door where I found a 26-foot unfinished hull resting on a trailer. The lines were distinctly Devlin: workboat with a proud stem, yet small enough to trailer down the highway.

"I designed her originally for a client who started construction wanting to build a nice little tug-yacht," he said. "But soon thereafter, he got inspired more toward a design that would allow him to haul more of a load of friends and family than the tug version."

As the owner attempted to cut away the structure of the tug and replace it to meet the new specifications, he, as many home boatbuilders do, got lost in the conversion.

Devlin purchased the boat for parts and trucked her back to his barn, where she sat unattended while other projects took priority.

"TugZilla," as Devlin affectionately referred to her, remained there until one Sunday morning, when he was struck by a little Beatles-fueled inspiration.

#### "AND YOUR BIRD CAN SING"

The boat was a mess. With her bulkheads chopped up, she was the boat version of catching someone mid-thought, about to lose his train of thought altogether. Devlin knew it would take a lot of work just to get back to a reasonable starting point. And since he didn't have a buyer in mind, he started by imagining what she might look like in a different application.

"I was going through some pictures on my computer and ran across some small cottages built in Ireland with a boat turned upside down for the roof," he says. "That was the spark that led to sketching the *TugZilla* hull being the roof of a small cottage building that I could build on my property. But the hull intact wouldn't work, so I contemplated how I could come up with a way of doing a larger floorplan while still making use of the hull."

Devlin loaded the original drawing into CAD and virtual-



The dry stack painted with Devlin's orange, black and white livery. Traditional appointments include a brass bell and towing hardware on the aft flush deck.

that would fall just shy of 26 feet length overall, allowing his friends and co-workers without a tugboat license to be at the helm. And so, the opportunity to create a small fleet of small-task-oriented tugs was born.

**"AIN'T SHE SWEET"**

As fate would have it, the build process was fairly lengthy for such a small ship. After he arrived at a CAD drawing he liked for the tugboat conversion, Devlin and his team removed much of the interior work that had already been roughed into place. The boat was stripped back to a good starting point, and they got to work on systems. Devlin kept the 110-hp Yanmar that had already been installed, but says that he plans to put in a slightly more powerful John Deere when he builds a second edition.

As *TugZilla* was initially conceived to be a cruiser, her deck, future house and utility of the boat underwent significant changes from the original. Alterations aft included making the deck flush and installing a large towing bit plus high-powered LED lighting to aid nighttime duties. The boat wouldn't be complete without a working dry stack, sized perfectly to the scale of the boat and adorned with the striped livery in the style of a classic working tug. A large serif font "D," for Devlin, is painted within the black-and-orange scheme.

The house itself was shortened to allow for more deck space than the original drawings requested. Inside, the minimalist pilothouse has a 12-inch Simrad multifunction display, engine gauges and a bow thruster control. While untraditional to a tug, a thruster will help make the boat more useful in tight situations, Devlin says.

Forward are a utilitarian berth, a sink, and room enough for a stowaway head. A windlass and traditional heavy-duty tug gear are installed on the foredeck.

There's also a tug-distinctive wrap of fenders from the transom to amidships on both sides (also carrying the orange and black motif), as well as the hallmark of all proper tugs: a pudding (also called a tugboat beard or less colloquially as a bow fender) that protects the bow. Devlin had the pudding among his spare parts, so this was the opportune time to use it.

What Devlin has achieved with his first tiny tug is at once a capable and utilitarian workboat that has the handsome styling of other Devlin-inspired cruisers. Time will tell if *TugZilla* is the first in a line of such tugettes (tugitos?), but even if she stands as a one-off, I'm sold. ✨

ly sawed the boat in half across midships. He then flipped the two halves on their ends, placed the keel sides facing outward, and used the two half hulls as the bread ends in a cabin sandwich. The cabin, at least in CAD form, became a tidy couples retreat, with a bed, kitchenette and head. The middle space was a simple, shed-roof structure that joined the two boat halves together, creating enough floor plan to reasonably rent to visitors.

Enamored with his digital creation, Devlin assembled a wood model to check the proportions before showing it to his wife, Soitza.

"This was a real idea for a while, and it's still something I may do eventually," he says.

In the end, the partially finished boat would stay a boat—and would be transformed into a bona-fide working tug, one



The wood mockup of Devlin's boat-cabin design. Bottom: *TugZilla*'s first sea trial in front of the Olympic mountain range in south Puget Sound.



RUNNING SHOT: SAM DEVLIN