COMMISSIONING SPECIAL
Practical Skills for Spring Outfitting

COVER STORY
Whitefin: Dream Boat Without Parallel

APRIL 1984
In the little harbor at Camden, Maine, Whitefin deceives the eye. So exquisitely proportioned is she that the impression from across the water is of grace, lightness, and agility, rather than of size. Her snow-white tapered mast is a spire among the homely trunks that are the masts of Camden's sturdy "windjammer" schooner fleet. But Whitefin is in part an illusion. She is a very large, powerful, fast, and sybaritically comfortable world cruiser, one with dead-serious aspirations in the "first to finish" derby of glamour ocean races. She can almost be classified as an ultralight-displacement boat, yet her lead-alloy ballast alone weighs almost as much as an entire typical 12-Meter, keel to truck. Her 137-foot aluminum mast, which if unsupported would flex and whip around like a Starboat's, weighs 3 tons and is strong enough to carry Whitefin's 4,041 square feet of working sails. Having been part of a crew of four or five people bending on her 700-pound mainsail one foggy afternoon in Penobscot Bay, I can confirm that everything about this boat—her custom-designed and -machined bronze blocks, tracks and cars, hatches, coamings, cordage, wire, winches, turnbuckles, timbers, and all the other thousands of component parts on deck and below—are massive.

Designer Bruce King was charged by owner/builder Phil Long with these priorities: First, beauty is to override all other values. Next is to come speed. Traditional yacht elegance is to overbalance modernity. Comfort is to outweigh cost. The result of this mix, Long believes, is "the most beautiful sailing vessel in the world."

Whitefin was built by, not just for, the 47-year-old Long and his family. Together, they organized an entity called Renaissance Yachts, assembled a crew of Maine artisans, and began building boats, big boats. Just like that.

Their first venture was the spectacular Whitehawk, a 94-foot ketch launched at nearby Rockland, Maine, in 1978. Both boats were designed by Bruce King, whose own credits include many successful, innovative ocean racing and cruising one-off boats as well as most of the Ericson Yachts line of stock boats. During his eight-year association with Long and Renaissance Yachts, King, an almost prototypical southern California type, chose to leave Newport Harbor and move to East Boothbay. His house and design office now perch on a wooded point overlooking Linekin Bay. It is almost as radical a change in King's life as it would have been for Gaugin had he decided to leave Tahiti and move to Norway because the summer light was better. King says that "without question, Maine is the best place to build boats these days."

Whitefin was built in a temporary shed erected on a tennis court on the lawn of Long's leased Camden house. A visitor there last spring, as the hull was nearing completion, sensed the presence of monumental eccentricity. All about could be seen organized, purposeful activity; a neatly swept, well-equipped shop; two- and threeman crews of artists and technicians homing in on final finish details on the immense form, still undefined as a sailboat, filling the shed. But there seemed no ordinary, easily recognized motivation governing and driving it all. Long and his sons shrug off any suggestion of the extraordinary or of fin de siècle eccentricity. Long says, "I'm not what's interesting here; it's the boat. She speaks for herself."

His son Scott looks at the visitor with only a trace of courteous reined-in impatience and says, "Look; there's no big mystery about why we're doing this. My Dad likes wood boats a lot. That's all."

They are, they seem to say, just backyard boatbuilders who are able to give a great deal of time to their hobby. It's that they do it on a scale J.P. Morgan himself might have done it on that's so appealingly bizarre.

Whitefin's sea trials began a few days after her late April launch. There were at the same time marvelous meshings together and the occasional glitch that mark the birth of any custom-built yacht. Final commissioning details, finish details belowdecks, calibration of instruments, some additional equipment installation below such as fireplaces, a

Whitefin makes an easy 9 knots closehauled on her maiden sailing trials. Varnished binnacle block (above left) is a good example of her fine woodwork.
Yamaha electric piano, and then more exquisite joinerwork and finishing—all these additions looked as though they had just grown there with the rest of the boat. Basically, though, Whitefin sat squarely on her lines; her rig fit; the engine and all its systems functioned; the sails looked pretty good; and if necessary, she could have been provisioned and sailed off over the horizon 24 hours after she was launched from the ramp in the Goose River.

The big yacht's first venture forth from Maine waters was an artistic success. Whitefin met Whitehawk in the annual Opera House Cup off Nantucket in August. Her elder, somewhat-longer-on-the-water sister, able to hang out great clouds of sail off the wind on her two masts, presented formidable opposition. Spinnakers were outlawed by the rules of the competition—essentially one designed as nontaxing racing for veteran Cruising Club of America and Royal Ocean Racing Club rule maxi-Grand Dames. Whitefin and Whitehawk were in virtually a match-race situation within the larger race. Whitefin's sloop rig made it no-contest on the wind. Probably it would have been so off the wind, too, had spinnakers been allowed, but in any event, Whitefin won on elapsed time. She seemed potentially what designer King predicted: the fastest monohull ocean racer in the world.

For any serious racing, a crew of 20 or more will be desirable, if not essential. Even given maximum power of the largest coffee-grinders Barient builds, a middle-aged crewman states positively he would not want any part of sheeting home the 3,500-square-foot #1 genoa in a nice sailing breeze any more often than perhaps once before lunch and once after an afternoon nap. Even a crew of young, very strong grinders would require relief for hard racing, so there's eight bodies needed for just one of dozens of sailhandling tasks.

Whitefin's proportionately very light displacement, 70-foot waterline and almost frightening potential to carry perhaps 10,000 to 12,000 square feet of sail suggest that she may well make many more than her share of record-breaking ocean passages. That seems her ultimate purpose as Long expresses it, more than to accumulate trophies in the world's classic offshore races.

At the same time these passages are being made, the owner may be loung-
ing in his hot tub in his suite aft; others in the crew may be reading by the fireplace in their own stateroom, and still others may be relaxing off watch with music and refreshments from the wet bar in the main saloon, jamming around the Yamaha, or maybe monitoring icebergs while sitting in shirtsleeve comfort in a nav/command center worthy of the bridge of a nuclear submarine.

Only the advent of the WEST System of epoxied laminations made a project such as Whitefin feasible—or supportable in wood. Massively constructed traditional coastal schooners as large, or larger, are coming off the ways of Maine boatyards every year. Great frame timbers sheathed in thick planking weigh several times over for every square foot of enclosing surface what a

Ribs and stringers backstop Whitefin’s epoxied cedar hull construction. She beat predecessor Whitehawk in their first race

Whitefin muscles into line at Rockport’s public launch ramp. Crew muscle bends on the 700-pound mainsail for post-launch sea trials

diagonally, are Maine white cedar. The outermost ply is Port Orford (Oregon) cedar. Each one of the many hundreds of component planks are encapsulated on all six surfaces with WEST System epoxy. The innermost, longitudinal, ply is exposed, giving a warm, rich feeling of being in a nineteenth-century luxury yacht rather than aboard a high-tech wonder.

Whitefin is a vertebrate, again an indication of her designer’s nod to conservatism in a world cruiser. She might have been monocoque, like an eggshell, with just some light trussing to keep her from turning up at the ends as her great rig developed
full loads. Then King could have added more ballast or more rig or simply made her more ultralight displacement with everything else remaining equal. Her backbone, however, is a 2-foot-wide I-beam of laminated black locust—strong and virtually rot-proof. Her floor timbers and massive O-rings are also laminated black locust. With the stability and rigidity lent to each of the parts by perhaps 3 tons of thinly applied adhesive layers of epoxy, there could be no stronger structure by strength-to-weight measure built of any material but the most exotic superfibers, such as carbon, Kevlar, and others, even newer.

The deck is a four-ply lamination. The bottom ply is also cedar, laid fore and aft, and the two above it are cedar, laid diagonally. These three layers are fused in a lamination, and the fourth is laid on top as a traditional teak deck.

Belowdecks, Whitefin is of a piece, visually and functionally. It's hard to imagine a yacht more pleasant to live in. She's warm, rich, curving, open, and free—just a little this side of embarrassingly opulent. Underneath, muted, humming, hidden by layers of traditional carved, inlaid, cunningly joined paneling and moldings, is an environmental control system that is contrived to feed, house, bathe, comfort, and please its inhabitants and to insulate them from discomforts more completely than in any but the most palatial habitats anywhere on land or sea. Belowdecks, Whitefin is simply pure delight.

Above deck, she presents some visual anomalies that seem to me just not reconcilable. There is, for example, a magnificent decagonal skylight, crafted by retired master joiner "Duffy" Dodge in his own workshop. Each of its 10 pie-shaped panes of beveled, leaded glass appears to be at least ¾ inch thick. The segmented teak frame is a good 5 feet in diameter and is set into the deck dead center above the main saloon. From below, this view up is stunning; it lends a nostalgic sense of the squanderously extravagant style of the rich folks of the nineteenth century. It "makes the room." But above deck, there's a puzzling anachronistic look that tugs at the unconscious when one is aboard a boat that approached from a distance promises sleek, one-step-ahead-of-state-of-the-art modernity. Similarly, there is slight aesthetic static in the great oval amidships cockpit, the deep, round helmsman's cockpit astern, and the broad, carved, gilt transom.

Both cockpits, the massive black locust hatches that are crafted to slide the way the door of a vintage Rolls Royce swings, the inlaid binnacle and wheel, powerful-looking low bulwarks, and varnished caprail all seem part of yachting's grand tradition. Most of the heavy deck hardware had to be custom designed, cast, forged, machined, and assembled to suit the unique order of loads imposed by Whitefin's very modern rig. Where possible, the choice seemed to go with brass or bronze—to the traditional metals. Individually, these elements are exquisite. Together with the leap-into-the-future entity that is Whitefin, they seem to present a note of indecision or compromise.

These are disappointments only to some. Certainly, they cannot reasonably be called flaws because they all seem to function, and she's Phil Long's boat. Chacun à son gout, we used to say back in Chicago. With these slight reservations, it can fairly be said that Whitefin is a highly suc-
successful, even stupendous, individual expression.

After a summer’s experience with Whitefin and preparing for her first passage offshore, a leg to Bermuda and another back in to Fort Lauderdale, Long says, “The only thing I’d do differently in building this boat is to scarf in another four-foot-long section amidships. I don’t know where we’re going to stow everything we want to take with us.”

There is a great deal crammed into the present midships section of Whitefin. On deck is the approximately 20-foot-long oval cockpit. To its perimeters lead many of the lines controlling the rig: staysail sheets, mainsheet, traveler car controls, all clustered around the after end. At the forward end is the main companionway. In the center is a comfortable lounging area with table, icebox, and lockers for glasses, bottles, snacks, winch handles, and whatever else. On a mooring or at a dock, this same cockpit is the patio, the outdoor social center. It is under the main boom, hence under an awning when appropriate. This entire cockpit assembly is a removable module, bolted and gasketed in place to make a watertight seal in an otherwise yawning deck opening.

Below that maw, if the cockpit is removed, is a large share of the ship’s machinery and tankage. At the core is the GM-453 turbo-charged diesel developing 210 horsepower for a two-bladed Gori folding propeller. Nine hundred gallons of fuel (approximately 2,000 miles range) are stored in one aluminum tank, fabricated to hull contours by Steel Pro of Rockland, which also made the one 450-gallon stainless steel water tank. The latter tank serves as kind of a “day tank” for the anticipated eight to 24 people in the crew. A water-maker is the main supplier of fresh water at sea.

Steering is direct, marvelously smooth and docile. It is by a bevel-gearred steering wheel column bearing on a geared quadrant attached to the rudderpost. The autopilot is also linked to the same high-precision gearing, and the whole system consumes minimum power to maintain course as compared to the typical cable-driven or hydraulically driven systems.

Also in the main machinery space is air conditioning and refrigerating equipment as well as batteries.

Auxiliary generators, a 20-kilowatt
Controlling the 9,000-square-foot power plant turns out to be a two-finger job, so beautifully did designer Bruce King balance Whitefin

Pisces and a standby 7-kilowatt Westerbeke, are in the lazaret space below the aft cockpit and astern of the after watertight bulkhead, which is well insulated against sound. Also in the lazaret is the hydraulic pump for the various rigging tensioners, including the running backstays.

The galley is electric. Whatever you might have in your new Gold Coast condo, Whitefin probably has, too—trash compactor, microwave oven, convection oven, and refrigerator.

Whatever twists and turns lie ahead in the story of Whitefin and her crew, the boat herself is a finished creation: separate and, in a way, independent of her designer, builders, crew, and other admirers. No matter which places, or with what crews, she will probably have a long, interesting maturity. Designer King may have had a sense of this during early sea trials.

As Whitefin ghosted along at 8 or 9 knots, her lofty rig disappearing into the fog, King strolled across 30 feet of unoccupied deck to a place near the shrouds where another crewmember was standing, marveling. "Well, what do you think? Does she strike you as huge?"

He probably anticipated the answer, because he seemed to agree. After a pause for thought, it was, "No, she doesn't seem huge. Everything is in scale. It seems more that Whitefin is just right, and we are very small."

Knowles L. Pittman is Boston-based. His 40-plus years of sailing include owning boats ranging from a Finn dinghy to a 51-foot cutter.