

Cruising at 80

BY HERB McCORMICK

FRANK BUTLER takes a brief break during last October's U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis. His California plant (left) at one time built five Catalina 22s a day.



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Frank Butler and Catalina Yachts

After graduating from high school, serving a two-year stint in the U.S. Navy, and attending college, Butler's inaugural foray into the business world was a machine shop called Wesco Tool that addressed his growing love of engineering and his affinity for hands-on labor. He didn't start sailing until his late 20s, when he bought a Sailfish and taught himself the ropes on the harbor at Newport Beach, California. He had no idea that such a simple act would change his life.

With a growing family, it wasn't long before Butler was searching for a bigger boat, but he didn't have to look far. Just around the corner from his shop, a small yard was building a simple, sweet-sailing sloop called a Victory 21, and Butler decided it was just the ticket. He paid for the boat in full and waited for delivery. And waited, and waited, and waited. On the morning the boat was supposed to be launched, a Saturday, Butler showed up at the factory, wife and four kids in tow, and learned that the Victory not only wasn't finished; it hadn't even been started. The builder, conveniently, was nowhere in sight. Off to the side, however, stood a completed hull and a new deck. So Butler chose an original response: Instead of jumping up and down and screaming bloody murder, he sent the family packing, commandeered the facility, and with the reluctant help of a handful of employees, began building his own boat.

"And I loved it," he said.

That was in 1961. The remainder of the decade would be a whirlwind. The Victory guy went out of business, and Butler assumed his operation, which he later named Coronado Yachts. He built several small boats as well as the Victory, but he made his first big splash with his innovative Coronado 25. It was the first boat, he says, to be built with a pan liner, which made for a light, rigid structure that also streamlined production; it was a trick he picked up from Lockheed, the airplane manufacturer, and it was a sign of things to come. By 1967, Coronado was a tidy, profitable business, and Butler sold it to the Whittaker Corporation, a big conglomerate that also owned Columbia. Butler stayed on as a consultant for a year before tearing off a pointed letter to his employer that completely accomplished its purpose: He was fired.

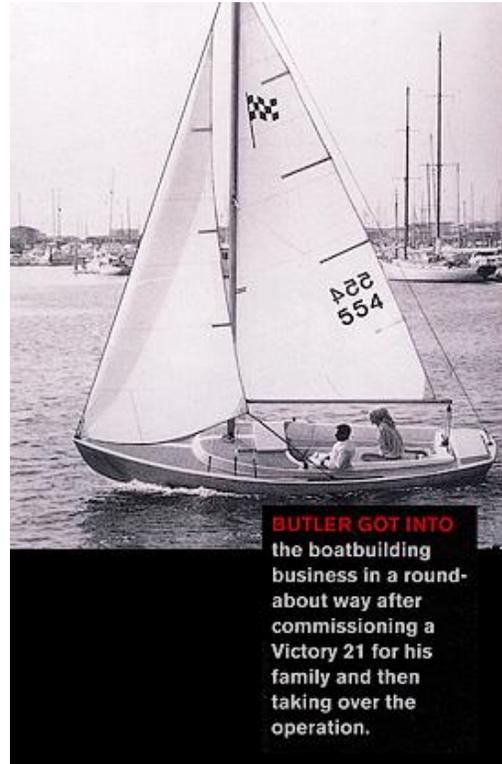
"I didn't like the way that they did things," he said flatly. "I'm not a corporate type." He was, however, an independent soul who'd amassed considerable knowledge about every single facet of the sailboat business, from designing and building them to marketing and selling them. In 1969, he aimed all that hard won experience toward a new enterprise. He founded Catalina Yachts.

His first boat after hanging out the new shingle was the Catalina 22, a trailer sailer he'd tried to convince Whittaker to build with no success. "I believed in it," he says. "I thought that if I could sell 300, I'd be very happy."

To date, the company has built nearly 16,000 Catalina 22s, including the 22 Sport version, and the 22 Mark II, both of which remain in production; at one stage, five 22s a day went out the door.

Butler followed up quickly with the Catalina 27 and then the 30, the combined runs for which ultimately produced another 13,000 models sold. But Catalina wasn't just amassing huge numbers; it was redefining how the game was played. First, nearly everything was done under the same roof at Woodland Hills, where Butler moved the company from North Hollywood in 1974. Catalina had its own sail loft, made its own cushions, and even poured its own lead keels. "If you need something and you own it yourself, you can get it right away," says Butler.

And if you bought a Catalina and called the company with any sort of issue, the man who picked up the phone was often its owner. "If there are problems, I want to know about them," he says. "Plus, anyone who buys a Catalina is part of the Catalina family. They can call me any time."



BUTLER GOT INTO
the boatbuilding
business in a round-
about way after
commissioning a
Victory 21 for his
family and then
taking over the
operation.

"When I go to a boat show," Butler says, "it's not unusual at all for someone to come up to me and say, 'I've had four of your boats.' Actually, quite a few people say they've had seven or eight."

"I think we've taken good care of those folks," seconds Gerry Douglas, VP Design, Engineering and Construction. "I think people got, in many ways, a better boat than they expected for the price. The more they learned, and the better sailors they became, the more they liked the boat, not the other way around. You give folks a good experience and they'll come back."

Today, Catalina remains one of the major builders of production sailboats, and it's now as well known for its line of full-size, go-anywhere, systems-rich cruising yachts as it is for the entry-level boats that helped launch the brand. For 2008, the Catalina catalog lists 21 models, ranging in size from the tiny 8-foot Sabot dinghy to the oceangoing 47-foot Catalina 470, with a vast selection covering all the bases in between. Butler, Douglas, and Sharon Day, VP Sales, all have their say, but for many years, Douglas has set the company's overall direction and philosophy, and that, too, will remain a constant as the company inevitably moves forward.

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