

IT ALL BEGAN WITH (RICHARD) BERTRAM

Bertram celebrates its 50th anniversary this year with a big bash titled “The Blast to the Past” on April 29 and 30 at the Biscayne Bay Marriott in Miami.

To mark this momentous occasion, we look back at the history behind one of the most ubiquitous names in powerboating and the man who started it all.

STORY Forest Johnson PHOTOS Bertram



FROM LEFT: The original *Moppie* was a prototype and was all open; Dick Bertram lent his name to a boatbuilder now 50 years strong; the Bertram 540, at right, is the most recent model to see the light at the original Miami-based Bertram factory





On a windy July morning in Newport, RI, in 1958, Richard “Dick” Bertram stood in awe of what he had just witnessed. A 23-footer holding its own in a rough ocean caught this avid boater’s eye. This chance encounter helped change the boating industry forever.

Bertram, a competitive sailor, was in Newport for the America’s Cup trials. At that time he owned a large Miami-based yacht brokerage firm, which he had started in 1947 in a one-room office.

Boating was more than a business to Bertram, it was a part of his life from an early age. The East Orange, NJ, native was eight years old when he got his first boat—a 15’ Sneakbox—and entered his first race, on Barnegat Bay, when he was 10. Racing became one of his favorite pastimes. While attending Cornell University, he founded the Cornell Corinthian Yacht Club, which won intercollegiate sailing titles in 1936 and 1937. After moving to Miami, he continued sailing, winning the World Lightning Class championships in 1948 and 1949. He helped sail the *Finisterre* to victory in the 1956 Newport-to-Bermuda “Ocean Race,” a 635-mile race, considered one of the world’s toughest competitions. He won it again in 1958 and in 1960, earning a reputation as a capable deep-water racing contender.

His love for competition wasn’t limited to sailing. In 1956, he teamed up with two ex-WWII Air Force pilots, race-car promoter Sherman F. “Red” Crise and Miami boatyard owner Sam Griffith to create a 185-

mile offshore powerboat race from Miami to Nassau. The “World’s Most Rugged Ocean Race” featured a treacherous course across the Gulf Stream from Miami to Cat Cay and the “Tongue of the Ocean” between Chub Cay and Nassau.

Griffith, considered the father of modern offshore racing, and Bertram won the 1956 inaugural Miami-to-Nassau race in a wooden 34’ Chris-Craft. They finished in more than nine hours, averaging less than 20mph. They repeated their victory in a wooden 35’ Enterprise the following year, this time taking almost 11 hours to finish in 30-knot winds and blinding rain.

While in Rhode Island on July 16, 1958, Bertram, who was in charge of the foredeck crew on a 12-meter Vim in that year’s America’s Cup contest, noticed a 23’ runabout gently whisking around the 6- to 8-foot seas and 20-knot winds at the start of the Newport trials.

Bertram recounted the event in his book, “The Deep-Vee Story.” “This little 23-footer stopped every sailor in the fleet in his tracks. No one had ever seen a powerboat performance to approach it...I made a mental note to corner Ray after the race and get to the bottom of this amazing exhibition,” he wrote.

Thoroughly intrigued, Bertram sought out the designer of this remarkable little craft—C. Raymond Hunt. An innovative designer who doodled on an envelope the famous Boston Whaler hull (for

which he was later credited), Hunt had designed this 23’ *Hunter* as a tender to the 12-meter *Easterner*. The 1958 America’s Cup contender also was his design.

Hunt’s high-deadrise, “deep-V” hull bottom (a variation of a 1903 deep-V design attributed to American engineer E.W. Graef) extended the length of the boat rather than flattening it out near midship. It also featured longitudinal “strakes” to help provide lift and throw spray away from the boat, keeping the deck dry. Bertram figured this deep-V hull design just might be the answer to a faster, smoother, more efficient pleasure-boat hull. So he contacted Hunt after the races and commissioned a set of plans for a boat of his own. In 1960, using Hunt’s plans, Bertram built a 30’ wooden deep-V-bottom boat as a utility boat, which he named *Moppie*, after his wife Pauline, who got the nickname as a child.

In a casual conversation, Bertram told Griffith about his new *Moppie*, and the latter suggested this might be just what they needed to recapture their winning streak. The pair had lost the 1959 Miami-Nassau race to a 27’ prototype fiberglass boat.

Although powerboat racing already was a popular sport, most races were lake regattas, which were kind to the smaller, flat-bottomed boats in use then. However, these popular boats were too slow and ill-suited to a rough ocean environment.

An offshore race boat gains most of its speed while it is airborne and needs enough power to lift into the air, ideally riding with just the props in the water. In rough water, the boat lands on the aft third portion of the hull. If the bottom of the boat flattens out near the aft portion, the boat comes down off a wave like a pancake.

A shakedown cruise on *Moppie* convinced both Bertram and Griffith that this hull design, which handled rough seas with ease, was stable in turns and most of all did not pound, could tame the waters in the “World’s Most Rugged Ocean Race.”

Four days of high winds churned the water before the 1960 Miami-

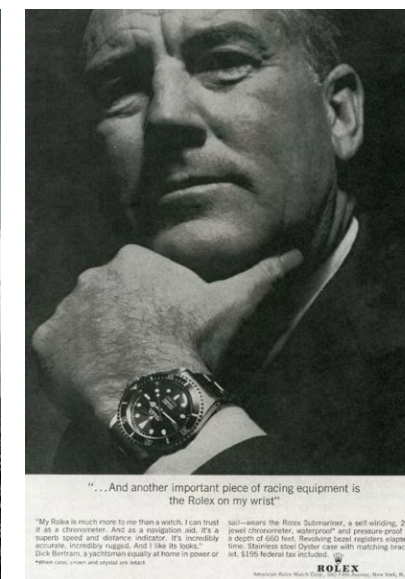
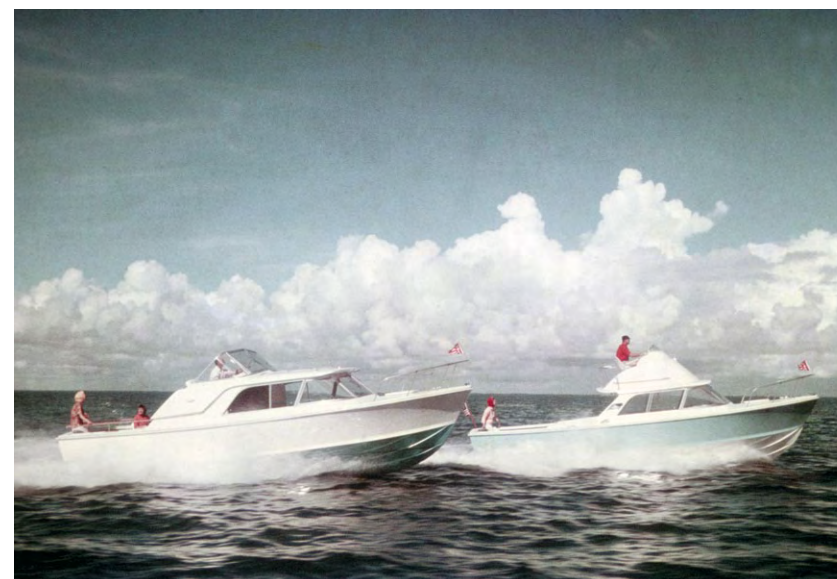
Nassau race, creating ideal conditions for these hard-core competitors and their boat, with winds blowing steadily between 15 to 25 knots. The deep-V *Moppie* performed admirably; after leading the entire way, it crossed the finish line in exactly eight hours. *Moppie* would have finished even faster had a compass not failed, which forced the crew to stop and take time-consuming sun bearings.

Enormous press coverage and fanfare churned an outpouring of interest in this 30-footer, a business opportunity Bertram just couldn’t ignore. He later remarked, “There were so damn many yachtsmen waving checkbooks at me that I had to go into business.”

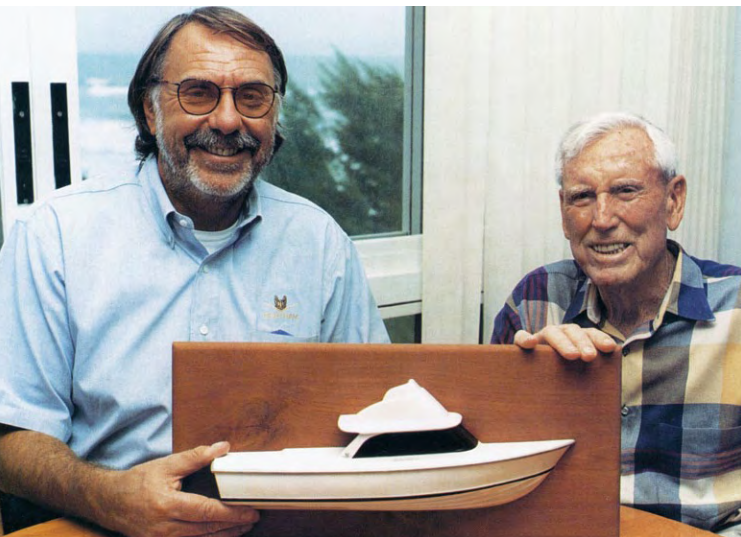
Composite building had gained in popularity since the 1940s, and Bertram was convinced it was the way to go. He used his original *Moppie* as a plug for a fiberglass version, rented a warehouse in a Miami suburb and formed the Bertram Yacht Company. The Bertram 31 made its world premiere at the 1961 New York National Boat Show, with a bottom price point of \$15,900. The strakes, by providing lift, allowed designers to put more weight forward. The resulting design, with an enormous cockpit, was uncommon at the time. Other new design features included wrap-around cabin windows, which provided exceptional visibility from below but created weight problems for the hardtop; this, in turn, forced designers to create a smaller flybridge.

The prototype was an instant success and orders flowed in at an overwhelming rate. In the 1961 Miami-Nassau Powerboat Race, once again Bertram and Griffith were victorious with a Bertram 31 fiberglass boat aptly named *Glass Moppie*. After the 1961 Miami-Nassau Race, many “glass” Bertrams went on to win numerous offshore races.

These early offshore races played a large role in the development of hull design, strake placement and component-part placement in each Bertram. It was an era without computers, GPS navigation and cell phones, when trial and error, dead reckoning and true grit were



LEFT: The Bertram 31 was built in a number of variations, including the Express and Flybridge Cruiser; Dick Bertram, the racer, became a sought-after commodity for brands such as Rolex
 OPPOSITE: Dick Bertram, Carlton Mitchell and Sam Griffith won the 1961 race with the original *Glass Moppie*; a new Bertram on the way to a boat show and Pauline Bertram christens the first-ever Bertram



ABOVE: Ferretti Founder and Chairman Norberto Ferretti and Dick Bertram shared passion for boating; Bertram, which built its legend with a Hunt hull design able to tackle any kind of sea conditions, grew its reputation as a builder of tough boats, including this hard-core Bertram 46

the tools of the testing ground. Johnny Bakos won the 1962 Miami-Nassau race in a 25' Bertram with stern drives—a first in offshore powerboat racing.

The hull design yielded other sizes and models. Aside from the 25' line added in 1962, Bertram introduced a 38' line in 1963 and a 20' inboard/outboard model in 1964.

Bertram decided to build a production facility across the street from his yacht brokerage offices on the site where the Bertram manufacturing facility still operates today. Interestingly, the main building was also designed to operate as a food-processing warehouse in case things did not work out.

There was no need for that. By 1971, just 10 years after production began, Bertram Yachts delivered its 1,000th boat.

After Bertram's racing partner Griffith died in 1963, friends held a memorial race from Miami to the Bahamas and back on February 4, 1964. Bertram won in a 31' Bertram named *Lucky Moppie*, his first win as a driver. Later that same year, he won again driving the same 31' Bertram in the third Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio race.

By that time, he had not only established himself as a champion-caliber offshore powerboat racer, he had become a celebrity. A billboard in Times Square featured him advertising Camel cigarettes. He appeared in ads promoting Rolex watches and was featured extensively in the boating media as an accomplished powerboat and sailboat champion.

The Bertram factory team stopped racing briefly when Bertram left, but resumed after Nautec purchased the company from its founder. Peter Rittmaster, who became president, began racing in 1967, and in 1969 won the 222.5-mile Hennessy Grand Prix off Long Island in *American Moppie*, but only after Sam James, Bertram's director of dealer services, dove into New York Harbor to remove large chunks of wood splintered around the props.

After the Whittaker Corporation purchased the company in 1968, James continued the factory racing tradition and went on to have his best season in 1974—taking the checkered flag in three races.

On April 28, 2000, Bertram died, leaving behind a boatbuilding legacy and colorful past. The Bertram factory was never used as a food warehouse. ■

WHAT'S UP WITH BERTRAM TODAY?

Alton Herndon, whose long and distinguished career began at Hatteras (Bertram's perennial opponent in the longstanding Shootout), became Bertram's president in 2010. Today, Bertram operates under the umbrella of Italian boatbuilding giant Ferretti Group, which acquired the all-American Bertram company in 1998. An innovator in boat design and construction with an in-house engineering department, Ferretti contributed to the introduction of many new models, including the Bertram 360, Bertram 390, Bertram 410, Bertram 450, Bertram 510, Bertram 511, Bertram 540, Bertram 570, Bertram 630 and Bertram 700. The latest models—introduced in 2010—include the Bertram 540 sportfisher and two versions of the flagship of the line, the 175,000-lb. Bertram 800 (see *Yachts International* December 2010 edition for a review).

For more information, visit bertram.com.