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# The Wizards of Oz

The craftsmen at Australia's McConaghy Boats have come a long way since their early days building slick Sydney skiffs.

Inside the belly of *Leopard 3*, the 98-footer that consumed a huge swath of McConaghy Boats' shop floor.



BY HERB McCORMICK  
PHOTOS BY ANDREA FRANCOLINI

**J**IM SWARTZ IS SMILING. Illuminated by florescent lights above the nondescript plant floor of Australia's McConaghy Boats, Swartz is seated in the mocked-up cockpit of his new STP 65, *Money Penny*, the carbon hull of which had been popped from its female mold two days before. Glancing at the tidy but plain surroundings in a basic suburban industrial park north of Sydney, one would be hard pressed to conjure the roster of grand-prix raceboats that have come forth from this rather tight and ordinary space. It includes an unparalleled fleet of winners and record-setters with such names as *Pegasus*, *Morning Glory*, *Wild Oats*, *Alfa Romeo*, *Leopard*, and on and on. But Swartz knows, and his grin suggests, that he appreciates the significance.

"I chose McConaghy for this project because of the other products they've built that I've seen around the world," says Swartz, whose previous *Moneypen-*

*ny* was a Swan 601. "It's actually a little bit awe-inspiring thinking you're coming down the same track that some of the other great yachts of the world have come down, from the same factory."

When asked what other yards he'd considered for his new Reichel/Pugh design, which represents a considerable speed upgrade for the *Money Penny* program, his answer is firm and immediate. "None," he says. "There was no question in my mind that I wanted to build a quality, ocean-going racing yacht. And that this was the place to come."

Increasingly, it seems, more and more owners are reaching the identical conclusion. In addition to the aforementioned sleds and canting-keel maxis, in the last few years McConaghy has also produced notable designs ranging from the Owen Clarke-designed Open 50 *Artforms*, to the R/P IRC 55 *Rima2*. These are in addition to the recent spate of yachts produced in their new division in China, which opened in 2005 and is responsible for *Rima2*, the China Team's International



Using good old-fashioned craftsmanship and tools, *Leopard 3* takes shape.

America's Cup Class entry, as well as another pair of R/P creations, the IRC 55 *Yendys*, and the TP 52 *Patches*.

In 2008, McConaghy Boats China will deliver the firm's first Volvo 70 for the Green Team, Ian Walker's fledgling Irish-based syndicate (as well as starting work on a powered 40-meter trimaran), while the Australian arm of the company will roll out *Money Penny* as well as a new

*Shockwave*, a R/P IRC 69 for long-time Aussie client Neville Crichton.

Which begs the question: Do these guys ever rest?

"Well, you get to the point where you're just treading water, and the next thing you know, you're taking on another project and it's back over your head again," says McConaghy's general manager, Jono Morris. "But it's all pretty exciting."

These days, Morris and partner Mark Evans, who oversees the Chinese concern, are the brain trust behind the firm's

day-to-day operations. Longtime stalwart Steve Moxham, whose expertise fashioning keels and handsome components has put a distinct stamp on the McConaghy brand, also serves as a director of the enterprise, and is a presence on the shop floor several days a week. The fourth member of the directorship is company namesake John McConaghy, who pokes his head in now and then, but for all intents and purposes is enjoying his retirement, often from the deck of his own boat, cruising Australia's Whitsunday Islands.

**T**he McConaghys were sailors, and John built his first boat with his dad in that staple of Aussie family life, the backyard shed.

By the mid-1970s, the boyhood hobby had become a full-time occupation, and while he produced all sorts of dinghies and small multihulls, from Sabots and 470s to Tornados and A Class cats, where he truly made his name was in the wild class that was exploding on Sydney Harbor, the 18-foot Skiffs. The McConaghy-built boats, at first crafted of cold-molded plywood and cedar, were always light and quick. But when he advanced his construction techniques by sandwiching foam cores and Kevlar skins into vacuum-bagged composite hulls—and later, after traveling to the United States to source aerospace-grade materials, incorporating something called Nomex honeycomb into the mix—it was clear that the McConaghy skiffs were, figuratively, miles ahead of the rest.

This much was confirmed when, on a McConaghy boat, a young buck called Iain Murray clinched the 18-foot World Championship in convincing fashion. "Everyone wanted to buy McConaghy's skiffs," says Morris, "because they won."

While they still race "eye-tines" in Sydney, the arc of the company might've peaked with Murray's victory had it not been for a supremely competitive local yachtsman named Peter Kurts, who in 1979, searching for an edge, commissioned from McConaghy a 39-foot IOR design from Ed Dubois called *Once More Dear Friends* that utilized the same composite-construction methods and materials employed in the skiffs. Remember, we're talking 1979.

"In those days, timber and aluminum were still considered high-tech," says Morris. "The other Dubois boat of the era that was really fast was *Police Car*, which cleaned up in the '79 Sydney Hobart, and

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that was all aluminum.”

But *Once More Dear Friends* was every bit its match, enjoying several successful seasons that culminated with a spot on the Australian team for the 1983 Admiral's Cup. Moreover, *OMDF* launched a decade's worth of IOR commissions for McConaghy from the top designers of

the day, including German Frers (*Bondi Tram*, *Di Hard*), Ben Lexcen (*Hot August Night*, *King George*), and Bruce Farr (*Drakes Prayer*, the first *Wild Oats*, *Madeline's Daughter*, *Great News*).

McConaghy closed its mad dash through the '80s with a pair of significant milestones, the combination of which required



**Wild Oats XI**, a 98-foot Reichel/Pugh design, is rolled upright in the shop to allow builders to finish the cockpit (left) and interior. The boat was built in less than 10 months so it could compete in the '05 Rolex Sydney Hobart Race.

a move to its current location in the New South Wales suburb of Mona Vale. First, in 1988, it scored the contract to build the 80-foot Frers maxi, *Windward Passage 2*, a revolutionary carbon-fiber/honeycomb one-piece monocoque assemblage that, at the time, was the largest such structure in the world. A year later, the company signed on to produce the first generation of new, 80-foot America's Cup Class boats for a pair of Australian syndicates, a job that extended its evolving mastery of composite technology into spars, deck gear, rudders, and steering components.

The next 18 years were an eventful period of upward mobility as McConaghy continued to blaze trails, first in the IMS class and later with the no-holds-barred canting-keel thoroughbreds. They knocked off a number of performance cruisers, a Whitbread 60 (*Silk Cut*), 10

Farr 40s, and several dozen more 18-footers. And they became the primary source for custom steering systems, wheels, rudders, and other components for clients ranging from the majority of America's Cup contenders to Wally Yachts to Volvo campaigns like ABN AMRO.

Remarkably, though the China factory is equipped with autoclaves and CNC milling machines, the Australian operation—though it does a fair share of outsourcing to independent contractors—works the majority of its magic via a single curing oven and plenty of compressed air. "As long as you have a large enough oven to build the right molds and the right tools, and you can get a big enough vacuum pulled on the job, it's more to do with the people and the techniques that you develop than the equipment that's available to you," says Morris.

Addressing the personnel part of the equation, Morris admits, is an ongoing challenge, particularly in Australia. "Over the years we've had a lot of guys learn their trade here, and once their skills reach a level where they can market

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**Wild Oats XI** won the Sydney Hobart's triple crown in '05: the race record, line honors, and IRC overall, and then repeated line honors in '06, bolstering the reputation of McConaghy Boats and its partners, Steve Moxham, Mark Evans, John McConaghy, and Jon Morris (l to r).

themselves, they're off all over the world, working on Volvo and America's Cup campaigns," he says. "The salaries they earn there are just something you can't compete with in the commercial sector."

It's one of several reasons, along with overall costs in general, that the venture

in China was so alluring. "The quality of workmanship is outstanding," says Morris, "and the workforce is keen to learn, to develop a new trade and skills, and to persevere with the company. The staff turnover there is a lot lower."

Moving forward, Morris says the Chinese subsidiary will allow the company to offer custom McConaghy products at a somewhat discounted price, with perhaps fewer bells and whistles than boats built Down Under. "Plus, in terms of how much we can take on, we're quite lucky in the sense that we've always been restricted by the amount of



space and people available [in Sydney], which is no longer an issue," he says. It will also permit the business to explore fresh new avenues of opportunity. For example, McConaghy China is well into a production run of Bladerider Moth dinghies, a project with economies of scale that would've been impossible to address in any sort of cost-effective sense in Australia.

Make no mistake, however, the company's bread and butter, and the foundation on which it has mounted its reputation, will continue to be the high-profile one-offs like *Money Penny*, the complex female mold for which was painstakingly crafted and then 3-D scanned at regular intervals—with the scans overlaid on a computer against the designers' original hull file—to ensure it remained rigid, true, and, well, according to plan.

"It's a more expensive process," says Swartz. "But it leads to a much higher quality product in terms of the hull shape really conforming to the design goals."


"If you go to all the trouble of making the female mold, then you pull it out and still have to fair it anyway, you've defeated the purpose," says Morris. "But I think

we're all clear that this boat's going to be a glamour."


It's also clear that *Money Penny* will be the latest in a string of them. Morris and his mates at McConaghy have had a ring-side seat at the grand-prix racing arena for nearly three decades now, and the view has been fascinating. "As the different rules develop, the boats seem to take huge leaps and bounds in terms of performance," he says.

"We're at the stage now where we're almost getting canting-keel performance out of conventional-keel boats, which is pretty mind-blowing," he added. "I sort of wonder how the designers manage to keep that pace of development going. It all revolves around the fact that they're so driven to minimize weight and maximize stiffness by using new materials like carbon and PBO. It has a snowballing effect; every aspect snowballs back to the performance of the boat."

What was left unsaid was that the designers would be unable to push the creative envelope without cutting-edge builders bridging the gap between conceptual theory and waterborne reality. In Australia, John McConaghy's sprightly skiffs led the way. ♦




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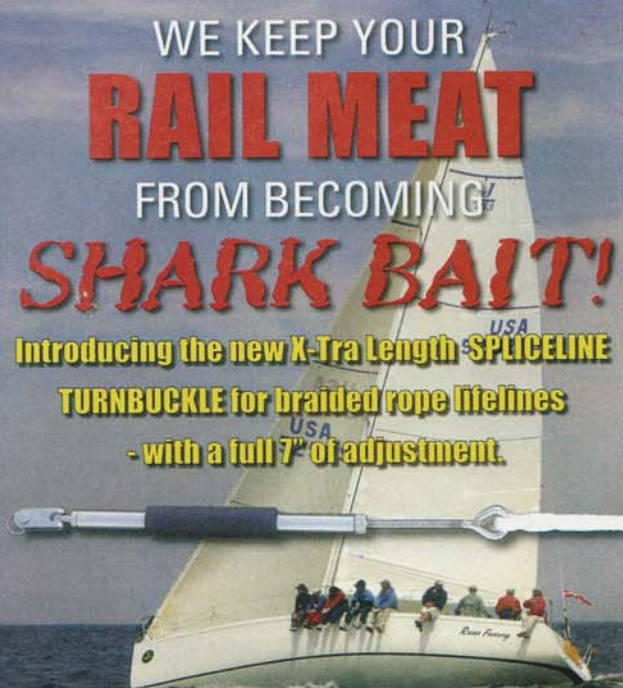


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