

High Point Enterprise

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Slane builds business on wrecked yachts

By: Walter Taylor , STAFF SPORTS WRITER

Wrecked Hatteras yachts, originally built in High Point, return to town in rough shape.

Heavy trucks tow damaged vessels from Wrightsville Beach to Slane Marine on McWay Drive.

At his 13,000 square-foot shop, Tom Slane draws plans to rebuild a 65-footer. His team of 10 employees works on several large boats in the main building.

"This boat caught fire and sank off Charleston," he said. "Then it fell off the salvage barge. It rolled over and the cabin was crushed. After they got it to shore, it sat through Hurricane Hugo while insurance companies settled the claims."

Slane and his team do more than rebuild wrecks. They customize older boats for more power, luxury and style.

"Our main focus is on Hatteras boats," he said.

Old Hatteras boats are part of the family for the son of company founder Willis Slane. Tom said his father was the first to build offshore fishing boats with fiberglass hulls.

"My dad was in the hosiery business," Tom said. "He used to go to Cape Hatteras to fish with friends from around here."

On one such trip, the weather turned foul. Local charter captains refused to venture out in frail wooden boats. Slane and friends stayed in their rooms and played cards.

"Dad commented that someone should build a boat that could handle bad weather," Tom said. "Then they could fish instead of play cards. That is how it started."

Willis Slane returned to High Point. He hired talented workers from the furniture and textile industries and started Hatteras Yacht in September of 1959.

"Dad launched the first boat in March of 1960," Tom said.

At first, they worked at an old garage on Wrenn Street. Later, Slane built the plant on Kivett Drive. His big innovation was to build boats completely from fiberglass.

"My father passed away in 1965 when I was 10," Tom said. "Three years later, the family sold the business. Now the company makes boats at the New Bern plant."

Tom started his business by restoring an old Hatteras for his own use in 1985. Other owners heard about his work or read about it in boating magazines. In 1990, he started the inland boat yard. By working in High Point, he avoids pricey coastal property and hurricane hassles.

Clients find a one stop shop here.

"A lot of coastal boat yards can not handle the work we do," he said. "They use a lot of outside vendors and contractors for services. We do all the work right here."

Slane's workers start by stripping boats to bare hulls. They fabricate custom parts as needed from fiberglass, metal or wood. For more power they rebuild old engines or install new ones.

Slane said he fills a niche in the boating industry.

"My clients look at replacing old boats with new ones that have the latest technology," he said. "They get sticker shock at new boat prices. So they send their boats here. We bring them up to new standards for less than half the price of new boats. Then the owners have custom boats that are unique and make a statement. Some prefer that to assembly line boats."

His Triad location makes it easy to find skilled labor, Slane said. Every person in the shop shares a love for boating.

"You have to be insane to do this," Slane said. "We are all just a bunch of boat nuts."

High Pointer Bobby Rice started fishing offshore about 20 years ago. He competes in tournaments and works with Slane during the week. He returns to the shop at night and on weekends to work on his own boat, a 1966 Hatteras 65-footer.

High Point craftsmen built that boat to last, he said.

"This boat burned and sank to the bottom," Rice said. "After all these years, the hull and stringers are as strong as new. To restore this boat, I started at the hull and worked my way back up. In a couple of years, I hope to use the boat for fishing."

By then, High Point may have a new boat builder in town. From rebuilding old boats, Tom learned that it is quicker to build new vessels from scratch.

"I plan to start limited production of sport fishing boats," he said. "There is no way we could compete with Hatteras or other large firms. We could be like the traditional builders on the Outer Banks who turn out one or two boats a year."

Tom is now drafting plans for the new boats. Right now, the shop is full of older vessels. First he must clear out some of those boats to make room.

"I hope to start the first new boat this year," he said.

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