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# *Rudder*

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# LEGACIES ON THE WATER, VAN DAM CUSTOM BOATS

By Bob Denver,  
Van Dam Custom Boats



Opposite. *Dreamboat*, a customized sedan. Come see her at the ACBS Vintage Boat Week!. Clockwise above. *Star* at sail. *Dreamboat*'s hull and pilothouse under construction. Launching *Star* 1981. *Flicker*.

Fallen from a stack of archives, a design of a boat was found by the daughter of Fredrick Ford, a Naval Architect of the Great Lakes region. “When the smaller design slipped from the stack of my father’s drawings we were just beginning to catalogue after his passing in 2014, I saw a 31-foot powerboat I knew I wanted to show Steve (Van Dam),” said Susan Ford. This design is what inspired the latest launch at Van Dam Custom Boats, *Dreamboat*. But it wasn’t fate or luck that brought that boat design to the hands of the crew at Van Dam Custom Boats. Naval Architect, Fred Ford, and founders of Van Dam Custom Boats, Jean and Steve Van Dam, partnered on many boats in the early stages of what’s now become the craftsmanship of “The World’s Finest Wooden Boats.”

After opening their first workshop in 1977, Van Dam Custom Boats started their portfolio with the construction of five commissioned sailboats. *Star* (1981) and *Star’s Echo* (1990), two of those sailboats, were designed by Fred for he and his family. *Star’s Echo*

was specifically crafted for his daughter, who also commissioned the latest launch from Van Dam Custom Boats, *Dreamboat*. “I’ve known Steve since he built *Star* for dad and *Star’s Echo* for me,” added Susan. The partnership between Fred and Steve produced a gallery of intricately customized boats. Fred and Steve again worked together in the late 80s to build Van Dam’s first power boat – *Flicker*.

*Flicker* was a catalyst for success, creating waves for the company to enter into the powerboat market. Simply specializing in the craftsmanship of cold molded custom boats, Van Dam has no limitations to the type of build requested. Their last three commissioned builds have ranged from a 44-foot sailing yacht, a 24-foot gentleman’s racer, to the latest launch, *Dreamboat*, a 38-foot sedan cruiser.

The design team at Van Dam and Naval Architecture Firm, Donald L. Blount and Associates, took Fred’s original design and created the plans for *Dreamboat*. *Dreamboat* is capable of playing with boats much bigger than her own 38-foot stature. The boat is powered

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by twin Volvo IPS drives that cut through the waves of the Great Lakes. Volvo’s joystick and dock assist systems help make this boat incredibly nimble and intuitive to use in close quarters. A Seakeeper stabilizing system has been added to eliminate boat roll and pitch while on the water. The lighting and Garmin electronics package are cutting edge, and the Czone digital switching system make the electrical components completely customizable. Van Dam goes to great lengths to keep almost all the fabrication for their boats in-house. The metal hardware alone that Van Dam designed and fabricated throughout the boat is truly amazing. From custom port lights, hinges, chocks, cleats, and bow rail, to name a few,

the metal craftsman at Van Dam have blended art and functionality perfectly. The same holds true for the paint and bright work throughout the boat. The beauty of this boat and dedication of its team knows no bounds, and the designers and craftsmen are always up for the challenge to build the world’s finest wooden boats. “Once you’ve owned a Van Dam boat, you’re spoiled for life because nothing can compare,” said Susan Ford.

At the start of 2021, founders Jean and Steve Van Dam sold the business to the second-generation leaders, Erika and Ben Van Dam. After 44 years of business, Jean and Steve decided it was time to hand the helm to the next generation. “We couldn’t be more excited at the opportunity to lead this business into the future. We are incredibly fortunate to have such an amazing team, both in talent and attitude, and we are especially grateful to Susan for continuing the legacy our fathers started,” said Ben Van Dam. ►





***“There are no replicas or repeats. When you own a Van Dam, you own the only one in the world,”***

*Dreamboat hull under construction. Dreamboat’s steering wheel. Cabin. Cockpit.*

The succession has been in transition for years, with Ben serving as president of the company since 2016. Jean and Steve remain as pillars of the company’s identity, taking on the roles of consultants, cultural ambassadors, and regulars in the shop when they’re not cycling or skiing. “Through Ben and I, second generation in both families, the creative partnership between my dad and Steve continues as *Dreamboat* comes alive in the hands of the world’s best boat builders,” said Susan Ford.

Crafting “The World’s Finest Wooden Boats” since 1977, Van Dam makes only one of each custom build. “There are no replicas or repeats. When you own a Van Dam, you own the only one in the world,” states Jeremy Pearson, Sales Manager of Van Dam Custom Boats. “Each of our boats are privately commissioned and built specifically to the wishes and needs of their owner. Every detail in the boat has been considered

and our design team and craftsmen relish the opportunity to dive into the details. We walk through the process with our customers from concept to creation, and beyond.” Van Dam Boats have a lifetime guarantee and are built for generational enjoyment. “The design team at Van Dam Custom Boats, have created a living legacy in *Dreamboat*,” said Susan Ford, “From dream to design to delivery, if you love boats, this is your dream team!”

*Dreamboat* was delivered in the spring of 2022. She resides in northern Michigan and will be present at the Antique & Classic Boat Society’s 2023 Annual Meeting and Vintage Boat Week in Bay Harbor, Michigan. 🚩

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Photo Bob Kays