



# Betting on Bay Boats

Launched into the decidedly moderate growth that has defined the boating market since the recession of 2008, Barker Boatworks has deliberately focused on building the best quality small production fishing boats.

**Text and photographs by Marilyn DeMartini**

**F**amily and fishing are the two passions that motivate Kevin Barker, founder and president of Barker Boatworks (Sarasota, Florida). While he didn't originally want his family name on his company or his boats, "all the cool boat names were taken," he recalls. So he followed his father's advice: "You have a good reputation in the business. Why not take advantage of it?" Then Barker's 15-year-old son, Ty, designed the "B" shield logo, branding every boat and communication with an indelible family stamp. Barker laughs about it. "I kind of like that people see the boat and ask, 'What is that?'" It's family.

One of Barker's earliest memories is of fishing with his grandfather on Calibogue Sound—the geographic

inspiration for the model name of his first 26' (7.9m) bay boat. Barker, on growing up in Hilton Head, South Carolina: "I always enjoyed being on the water and on boats. Boats and playing golf—that's life in Hilton Head. I got my first boat at 12, a 13' [3.9m] Boston Whaler, and learned how to take care of it from my dad." Those family memories carried forward into adulthood and determined the course of his life and career.

While moving around the Northeast and to Clearwater, Florida, to pursue a home health care business in the '90s, and working in insurance through early 2000, Barker became a competitive SKA (Southern Kingfish Association) fisherman and a customer of Yellowfin, the

popular Florida-based builder of fishing boats. He often talked to owner Wiley Nagler about getting into the business. In 2006, after Nagler satisfied a five-year non-compete agreement signed when he sold Back Country to Champion in 1998, he called on Barker to work with him on designing a new Yellowfin 24' (7.3m) boat. Nagler ran Yellowfin's offshore larger boat division, and Barker worked on the smaller bay boats, a market he describes as "exploding" in recent years.

After eight years, trying to blend two strong personalities proved stressful, so in 2014, Barker decided to "do my own thing." He had ideas for a 26' bay boat. "I listened to customers and what they were looking for. I'd ask them, 'What would you want if you were

**Above**—Shapely bows of Barker Boatworks' 25'6" (7.8m) bay boat hulls sit side by side on the production line at the company's Sarasota, Florida, shop. Despite increased staffing and productivity in the laminating shop that allow delivery of a boat in four weeks, the company is running with a backlog.

creating a boat from scratch?” Barker meshed those opinions with his own experience and started to design what he considered the “ultimate bay boat.” In basic terms, it would be a modestly sized boat with a hardtop, an upper helm station, and a comfortable, dry ride. He turned again to family to make his latest boating venture reality, tapping his parents as investors in the new enterprise.

Among Barker’s first calls was one to famed yacht designer Michael Peters. “I’m not a naval architect,” Barker says, “and I always had great respect for him. He’s an industry icon, and to have his name associated with my boat is a huge competitive advantage. I saw what he did with *Invincible*, and bottom design was integral to me.”

For Peters, adapting his patented Stepped-Vee Ventilated Tunnel (SVVT) hull from the *Invincible* 33’–42’ (10.1m–12.8m) range into a smaller boat was an opportunity. According to Peters, the SVVT hull solved the problem of stepped V-hulls spinning out in turns. In fact, he reports that his hull is the only stepped hull that the U.S.

Navy has ever built in its fleet. “We had the data [on the hull], and it’s nice to have a spread of ranges,” he adds. [For more on Peters, see “Peters on (Fast) Powerboats, Part 1,” in *Professional BoatBuilder* No. 126 and “Part 2,” PBB No. 127.]

Peters also liked the fact that Barker was actually designing a boat. “The one thing we see a lot of in this business,” notes Peters, “is that the boats out there are put together by talented folks, but they are not *designed*. They *happen*. Barker has a professionally designed boat. I may be a little prejudiced, but we don’t usually work on boats that small.”

Barker explained that in addition to the running surfaces, Peters helped with the topside design. “We did this together. He understood that it was our boat, but he helped us to do it right.” Barker boats are known for providing a dry ride, being a little wider at 9.3’ (2.8m) and capable of more offshore operation—the main difference between a Barker and the competing 24-footers. “Offshore, [a small boat] gets a little uncomfortable,” he says. “We designed for comfort;

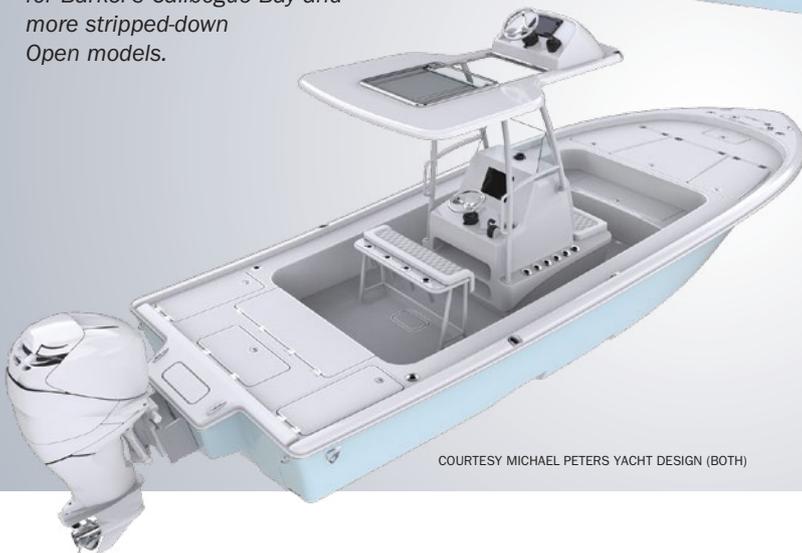
it just takes a couple of feet [610mm]. We can have all the greatest features, but if the hull doesn’t run or perform, if it beats the hell out of you, it’s not going to work. That falls back to Michael Peters. We’ve been lucky to work with him.”

Peters gives plenty of credit for the success of the boats to the marketing of the Barker Boatworks company. “Kevin is very strong on the relationship end, but the promotional end is still staggering. He showed real polish at the boat shows, constructing his booth like a dock, with wood and markers—that’s impressive. You don’t see a lot of new builders doing that. He’s quality-minded and doing a good job, but the growing pains are harder than people think,” he adds.

As Barker set up his company, having an attractive showroom was central to his plan, and Sarasota, his family’s home, where his kids were in good schools, was where he intended to stay. “Southwest Florida has great boatbuilding heritage,” he says, citing brands like Wellcraft, Chris-Craft, and Donzi. And so there are great suppliers and subcontractors nearby.

“Marine Concepts

South Florida yacht designer Michael Peters designed the complex stepped running surfaces of the hull that serves as the base for Barker’s Calibogue Bay and more stripped-down Open models.



COURTESY MICHAEL PETERS YACHT DESIGN (BOTH)

### Particulars

	Calibogue Bay	Open
<b>Length:</b>	25’6” (7.8m)	25’6”
<b>Beam:</b>	9’3” (2.8m)	9’3”
<b>Fuel:</b>	90 gal (341 l) 125 gal (473 l) opt.	90 gal 125 gal opt.
<b>Weight:</b>	4,500 lbs (2,041 kg)	4,250 lbs (1,928 kg)
<b>Draft:</b>	14”–16” (356–406mm)	14”–16”
<b>Fresh water:</b>	15 gal (57 l)	15 gal
<b>Max hp:</b>	627 hp (468 kw)	627 hp



Kevin Barker invested heavily in the 8,000-sq-ft (743m<sup>2</sup>) Sarasota showroom that has become his company's window on the market for high-end bay boats. Note the B-shield logo, designed by his son Ty.

does my molds, and my upholstery supplier, my tower supplier are all just a few miles from here," he says. "When I saw this space [his current showroom in Sarasota], I said, 'We're taking this!' We were going to design a boat for the higher net worth individual and wanted a nice environment. This showroom gives us that."

The adjacent space for the rigging shop, electrical, and tower installation is also immaculately maintained. "I want this to be like a NASCAR engine shop," Barker explains. "Every other week, I'm at the airport picking up a customer flying in on his own airplane. We're at the higher end of the food chain. The way our boats are built, the materials we use are always the best we can find. If something new comes up, we'll test it and use it. We don't want our customers to question our quality." Barker and his vendors are always looking for

new materials and components. Each year he attends the International Boat Builders' Exhibition and Conference (IBEX) to ensure that if something is seen as "better," his boats will be incorporating it.

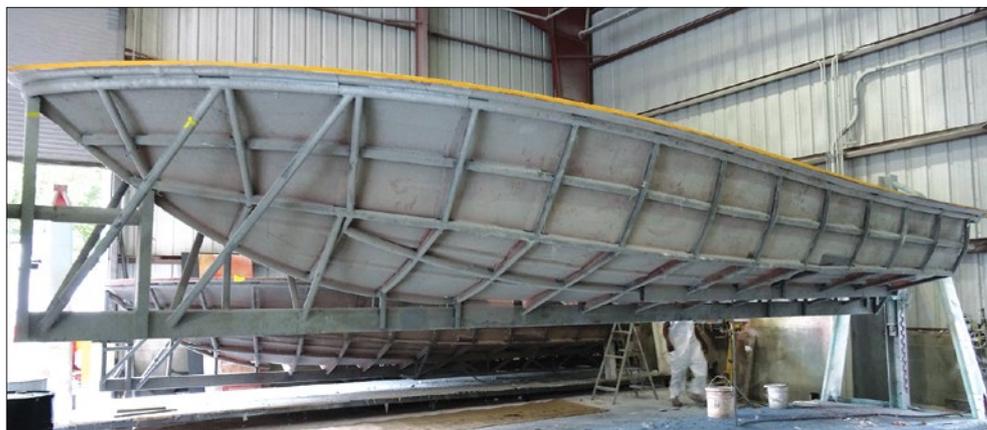
Barker Boatworks has spent "upwards of \$1 million" to design and build molds and to construct an 8,000-sq-ft (743m<sup>2</sup>) showroom and the nearby 10,000-sq-ft (929m<sup>2</sup>) lamination shop. For the latter, Barker was fortunate to find an existing boatbuilding facility that was wrapping up operations. But even with that space, he sees expanding lamination as his most essential production challenge as he faces a number of boats in various

stages awaiting completion. "Molds sitting inactive overnight are wasted time," he says. "And that is holding up deliveries." Barker's planned solution is adding a shift and expanding his staff to better utilize the shop space and time. Every minute counts.

In nearly three years of operation, the company has delivered 34 boats. But, "I'm behind," Barker says, with an eye on the 38 boats he has on order and a 12-month backlog. Really, his numbers aren't bad considering the six to eight months spent in design before launching his first 26' Calibogue Bay boat at the 2015 Miami International Boat Show—just seven months after starting the company in July 2014. While it has taken up to six weeks to build a boat, current deliveries are being accomplished in just four with his increased staffing and space in lamination, a schedule Barker intends to continue.

"We have the best customers in the world," Barker says. "To be as patient as they've been says a lot. Getting the business up and running is a lot harder than I expected." Plus, continuing legalities from his split with Yellowfin plague both builders. An appeal of a suit won this year by Barker proves a drag on business, while both companies move forward with their own brands and some overlap in model size and style.

During my visit to the shop I met one of those customers, Luke Hammer, an experienced boater, diver, and fisherman, who was getting ready to take off for the Florida Keys on a fishing weekend. The boat had been at



Neighboring Marine Concepts built the sophisticated tooling necessary for resin infusion hull construction, which Barker favors.



Ninety-gallon (341-l) aluminum fuel tanks are mechanically fastened to the structural grid of stringers and transverse frames before being foamed in.

around the Keys and offshore. “You don’t get stuck in-shore when you get 4’ waves. And the fishing well works; you can stand up—there’s no stooping,” he said. He also commented on the layout, attention to detail, and the extras he was able to add to the boat, including lights under the hull for lobster fishing, a FLIR thermal imaging camera, recessed under-gunwale speakers, and a pull-down ladder.

At the shop I also met Barker’s wife, Sarah, a former flight attendant, now the office manager. As the company got traction and grew, she easily made the transition from stay-at-home mom, and the couple balances parenting and business as a team. The kids come by the office after school, and the oldest, Ty, works with his dad while on school vacations. Barker often tosses questions to his wife, and she answers, completing his thoughts or helping with details. Two dogs, Sadie and

Barker for a few maintenance details, and Hammer proudly told me about his newest boat, hull #1 of the open model. When asked why he chose Barker, he went right to his sea trial. “I

didn’t get wet in 3–4’ [0.9m–1.2m] seas at over 60 mph,” he reported. According to Hammer, the boat’s sea-keeping abilities and topside design details make it the best boat for all

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Stella, relax in the office, contented with an occasional pat and adding a familial feeling to the showroom. Barker's phone is constantly buzzing. "He helps everyone," Sarah says. "Even Yellowfin customers still have his number and call, and he always takes time to help them with questions. That is why so many of his customers followed him here."

Barker agrees that he will make every attempt to help people, but while he often does weekend sea trials or assists customers with an issue, he always works around his three kids' sporting events—football, basketball, cross-country, soccer, and lacrosse. Their complex schedules are tough to coordinate with customer demands, but "I won't miss a game," Barker insists. And then each weekend they are home, the family goes out on the boat to fish or hit the sandbar. "It's all because of them. That's why we do this," he says.

**B**arker Boatworks is a series production builder, but each boat is virtually custom-built. "We will do anything except change our molds— whatever the customer wants," Barker says.



*In the lamination shop, hull and deck tooling are readied for infusion. In the foreground are molds for smaller hand-laid parts and components.*

To start with, there's no wood in a Barker. Hulls are vacuum-infused cored composites—a combination of biaxial, triaxial, quad, E-glass, some Kevlar, PVC foam, and 100% vinylester resins.

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**Above**—Laminate materials in Barker's shop include various weights and weaves of E-glass, Kevlar, and carbon fiber.  
**Right**—In the shop a builder finishes a hand-laid console unit.



About half the hulls are built with carbon fiber laminates as an option to save 700 lbs–800 lbs (317.5 kg–362.9 kg), roughly 20% of the boat's weight, and to add strength.

Lamination schedules for the E-glass and carbon fiber boats were

informed by Barker's past production-boatbuilding experience, as well as by Michael Peters's recommendations. The team also worked with Chris Noonan of Composites One, a supplier of high-tensile filaments, and Jordan Haar of VectorPly, a major

player in composite reinforcements—all professionals who Barker trusts and respects.

Smaller parts, including the console, leaning post, hatches, fish boxes, headliner, and livewells, are hand-laid. It's time-consuming, but in Barker's

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Barker's crew has grown to fill two shifts in the laminate shop to help meet the growing demand for their boats.



estimation, the employees take pride in their craftsmanship on those components, and the results are worth the effort.

Barker sees boatbuilding as a combination of new materials and tried-and-true methods using fiberglass and resin. Vacuum infusion makes a difference in the integrity of the hull, he explains, but with the inclusion of the Kevlar and carbon fiber blends, advanced

materials technology adds to standard cored construction as well.

After the lamination shop, workstations on the shop floor include:

- Assembly: installation of fuel tanks, through-hulls, bilge plumbing, trim tabs, wiring harnesses, jackplate, power poles, and rubrail.

- Finishing: inspection and correction of any imperfections.
- Rigging: installation of tower frame, hatches, trolling motor, batteries, and engine. Console and engine are fully completed.
- Quality Control: water test of boat and all systems using a 75-point checklist.

Some tasks and components are subbed out to highly specialized shops. For instance, Stuart, Florida-based Marine Digital Integrators (recently acquired by SeaStar Solutions) handles the construction of Barker's electrical harness systems. The company specializes in proprietary advanced plug-and-play electrical and battery-management systems that integrate with leading display manufacturers. This outsourcing saves rigging time, and according to Barker, "All the links are perfect. It took us a lot of time to set up the systems, but

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**Left**—Shown here, electrical harnesses made by Marine Digital Integrators in Stuart are some of the systems components Barker subs out to a selection of the many specialized shops in South Florida. **Right**—Hatches are lined with foam flooring material that acts as a gasket to seal out water and prevent hatch and door rattles.

now we have that dialed in; everything is bench-tested, and it is the best way for us to build boats.”

One of the details that struck me most about Barker Boats is the precision of workmanship; from the automotive-inspired diamond-stitched upholstery to the smooth inside surface of the bait boxes and wells, finish

is key. The bilges are impeccably finished as well, and all wiring and conduit are accessible, an important factor for experienced boaters who’ve had to address some electrical issue while under way.

The undersides of all hatches are lined with AquaTraction, a foam flooring system with UV-protected acrylic

adhesive. The material serves as a gasket, making hatches rattle-free and avoiding traditional rubber gaskets that rot. AquaTraction is also used inside the console and on the footrests.

Barker Boats installs coal tar epoxy-painted aluminum tanks with tabs that are secured to the stringers before the tanks are foamed in. Each tank has



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Barker's so-called pilot hatch helm station allows the helmsman to sit in upholstered comfort on the T-top with an unobstructed view for fishing and navigation.

two 2" (51mm) fuel fills so that the boat can be fueled from either side.

Bay boat and open models feature an assortment of options for storage, bait boxes, and insulated live fish wells. The boats have a 15-gal (57-l) bow baitwell and a 45-gal (170-l) stern baitwell; an additional 40-gal (151-l) floor baitwell is optional. All have numerous rod holders, cup holders, fiberglass leaning posts, Taco seats,

Odyssey batteries, and Livorsi or Lopolight LED navigation and courtesy lights. Barker says customers have their choice of Garmin, Raymarine, or Simrad electronics. A digital switching system is standard, because gauges have fallen out of favor with Barker's customers. All engine data are transposed and displayed on a multi-function display of choice. The company installs JL Audio or Wet Sound

entertainment systems and has built special molds for recessed speakers so they do not snag any lines.

The helms have Edson comfort-grip stainless steel steering wheels [see "Reinventing the Wheel (and the Pump)," PBB No. 158], bench or bolster seating, and the rear bench has a flip-up backrest. The 8' (2.4m) Power-Pole Blade edition (for anchoring in shallow water) is standard.

The open model has room for 10 passengers and has two optional 15-gal transom baitwells. The open also has under-the-gunnwale rod storage for six rods and lockable storage for four more. Garelick dive ladders are a plus for divers.



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**Left**—Behind a forward-facing passenger seat that opens upward on hydraulic rams, the Barker console houses a cramped but private marine head. **Above**—Fully kitted out, the Calibogue Bay model sports two helm stations, a head, a total of 100 gallons (378.5 l) in bait wells, and out-board power between 300 hp and 627 hp.

The Barker tower system is noteworthy. Called a pilot hatch, it resembles a small flybridge and offers an outstanding perspective for the helmsman, ideal for sighting fish and

providing an unobstructed view while driving. The top station is easily accessed via steps or a ladder. When asked if any other builders are using this feature, Barker responded with a

grin. “Now they are!”

Engine options vary, and while many prefer Mercury 300s or 350s, the 557-hp and 627-hp Seven Marine engines are also available, providing

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Curiously, Barker's next project is a total departure from his bay boat base. He is creating a 40' (12.2m) catamaran to branch out into a new market. "Everyone is building bay boats now. Many customers are multiple-boat owners, so builders want to keep them in their brands," he explains. "We are going to build one heck of a fishboat!" The walk-around cat will have either twin or quad engines, and with helm seating in two rows will accommodate six comfortably. Extra features include a sun pad, bow seating, and a side-entry console, raised 12" (305mm) to provide more room, with options for a head and storage or nap space. The leaning post will be

located behind the helm seat with a live well, storage, and tackle boxes aft. Hull #1 is anticipated for the 2018 Miami International Boat Show.

Peters was surprised by the catamaran addition but is working again with Barker on the design. He notes that it is a challenge to build because space is more confined. "The Freeman Cat has everyone in the fishing community talking," he says. "The cat concept has been around for 50 years. It was big in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, but it's never really taken hold in the U.S. Here, the ratio is 10:1 V-bottoms to cats, but it's a good idea and an effort to have something different. We're trying to bring design to the project. It's a totally different hull than a cat raceboat."

Peters also chuckles about the boat-building industry. "There are no market surveys. People just want to 'do it,' and whether it works is anybody's

guess. You still have to win over customers from bigger manufacturers," he says.

And that's what Barker plans, one customer at a time, by building a boat that suits each customer's needs but, more importantly, his *wants*. Family and fishing—two passions that feed off each other, and Barker is counting on fishing not just to feed his family but to make the Barker family name the new go-to brand for fishing boats. **PBB**

**About the Author:** Marilyn DeMartini entered the marine trades representing World Championship offshore racing teams such as *Drambuie On Ice*, *Lucas Oil*, *Outerlimits*, and *Statement* powerboats. She managed PR for *Latham Marine* and the iconic *Cigarette Racing Team* for a decade. She has written for numerous marine publications, including *Yachts International*, *Showboats*, and *Invictus*.



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