

Love of the Game

by Justin Shell

A man approaches you and says, "I'll give you \$10 for an hour of work." Being a financially savvy individual, you weigh the opportunity's cost versus the benefit from other activities you could be doing during that hour. While you're pondering this offer, a second man approaches and offers you \$9 for an hour and a half of work. You say, "Why yes. I'd love to work more and get paid less." Who in his right mind would say that?

Most designers in the recreational boating industry, that's who.

In the last four years, naval architecture students who graduated from Webb Institute, in Glen Cove, New York, and entered the recreational boating industry averaged 10% lower salaries than graduates entering other fields, while simultaneously averaging higher working hours.

So why do we choose to take the path of more work and less pay? As a young designer looking for direction in my career, I've pondered this question repeatedly. My answer is probably the same one an aging baseball player gives when asked why he continues to toil in the minor leagues: "Because I love what I do."

Then someone asked me, "Why do you love it?" I had to give it some thought to identify the exact reasons. Sure, the tumultuousness of the industry has forced me to relocate five times in the last three years. Yes, I could probably get a stable career with a regular paycheck and a set work schedule doing overly specific, slightly repetitive work. But I would not be satisfied with that lifestyle. Is everyone in the industry like this, I wondered? Perhaps the best way to get an answer was to ask.

A brief, unscientific survey of 12 of my fellow naval architects and designers in the yacht, commercial, and

government sectors regarding their motivation produced some interesting results. None outside the small-boat building and yachting sector cited "Type of Work" as the sole motivating factor when accepting a job. Additionally, no one changed professions from the yachting industry to a different industry by choice. (Some—myself included—were forced to change jobs due to the economic downturn.) The survey also showed an average drop in yearly income of more than \$10,000 for recreational-boat designers when compared to those in other industries. Well, perhaps they make up for it in benefits then? Further comparative research revealed that the predictably diminutive size of small-boat design offices translates to a much smaller employee benefits package, if there is one at all. What about work hours? Recreational-boat designers I surveyed averaged 45 hours per week. Clearly, monetary compensation, benefits, and a regimented work schedule are not what draw designers to the field.

Where statistics had failed to explain the phenomenon, perhaps personal accounts would succeed. I asked several self-employed designers why they do what they do. One response was: "Because there is something wrong with me." I got a good laugh out of that, but there was more to it. When the designer thought more about it, he said it was just in his blood. He grew up loving boats and always wanted to be around them. I recognized in him the same passion that drives me. It has been growing since my earliest memories fishing on Lake Erie and was later cultivated by boating on Chesapeake Bay. Maybe we were born or raised with a predisposition for it.

Then I called an old friend and previous employer, Michael Peters, owner of Michael Peters Yacht Design in Sarasota, Florida [see his two part article on fast hull designs in *Professional BoatBuilder No. 126 and No. 127*], because I knew I would get a thought-provoking response when I asked him why he does it. Peters didn't disappoint.

"I always feared getting a *real* job," he said. To avoid that fate he decided to focus on a hobby that quickly grew into a healthy obsession. He added that it was purely character driven, and a youthful independence and slight rebelliousness led him to shun a life of safety, stability, and repetition and, instead, to just do what he wanted. Lastly, he said that the freshness of each new project makes every workday different and exciting.

What stood out was not something the designers I talked with specifically verbalized, but was evident in the way they spoke about their work: they loved their jobs. Regardless of exact reasons, everyone I talked to who has chosen a career in the recreational boating industry and stuck with it remains passionate about what they do.

Maybe no single explanation can sum up why each of us has that passion. Maybe it's just love of the game. **PBB**

About the Author: A 2008 graduate of Webb Institute, Justin Shell has worked at four naval architecture firms in the past three years, earned a Master of Yacht Design degree in January from Istituto Europeo di Design, in Italy, and currently works as a project manager at Quantum Marine Engineering of Florida and as an independent small-boat designer.