

DESIGNERS

Bill Shaw



Steve Henkel photo

Bill Shaw talks about the “philosophy of design” that has carried him through more than 20 years at Pearson Yachts.

Bill Shaw, 58, is Executive Vice President, General Manager, and Chief Designer at Pearson Yachts, one of America’s largest sailboat manufacturers. In the 1950s, he co-founded the Midget Ocean Racing Club (MORC), and worked as a designer under Olin Stephens at Sparkman & Stephens in New York. He moved to Pearson in 1964.

In a recent interview, SAILOR asked Shaw how he manages to design boats at Pearson while dealing with general management tasks at the same time. He explained: “I have a design staff of about seven fellows, and they do the bulk of the work, really. I still participate in the design to the extent that I can put my name on it...and I guide them. Perhaps they have been brainwashed a little bit into my philosophy of design, and thus we get along very nicely.” His

“philosophy of design” sounded to us like an interesting topic, and we pursued it.

Let’s talk about the Bill Shaw “philosophy of design.”

My thoughts about that are pretty simple. I think that cruising boats, first of all, should be rather nimble. I have no tolerance for cruising boats that literally can’t get out of their own way. I think they are dangerous, and the cruisers, particularly, want to have a very able boat because they often get out there either by themselves or with a very short-handed crew. That’s the nature of cruising, as opposed to a racing boat where you’ve got quite a work force to go to bat for you in the event of a serious problem. But when you’re out there by yourself, or with your wife or another couple, who may not be that adept as sailors, the boat has got to speak for itself, in very strong terms. It should be well-balanced

and fast because sometimes you need to outrun trouble. And certainly, it has got to have the ability to sail to windward as well as a racing boat because the alternative may be a lee shore, which is the end of the line right there.

There are compromises between the factors that make a boat fast and those which make a boat comfortable; I am constantly balancing them. And like anyone else, my batting average shows that some of the boats I’ve designed have been good cruising racers and some of them haven’t had as much speed potential as I had hoped for because the compromise was more towards the comfort side.

Your Pearson 35 centerboarder, a nice boat for gunkholing, is no longer being built. Do you feel that the old shallow-draft centerboard concept is dying?

Far from it. To my pleasure, we are seeing a lot of centerboard boats still being pumped out of here. They fill a very important part of the marketplace. It’s those little gunkholes that people like to stick their noses into every once in awhile that make centerboard boats so great. And they sail well too: you can balance them out.

The market dictates what we offer, and if the market wants keel boats, we give them keel boats. Certainly, they’re considerably cheaper than centerboarders, but centerboard boats are far from dead.

With fewer moorings and dock spaces available, do you think a trend will develop toward larger trailerable centerboard boats, perhaps 30 or even 35 feet long?

I concur with the fact that waterfront property is disappearing. I also feel that the idea of putting a 30-foot boat on a trailer is a good one, but I am not really convinced that dragging your boat behind your car is the solution, other than to take it from home to the place where you normally sail, maybe twice a year. The real solution is to have access to the water through a properly designed system. I think systems will be developed that will dry-store a heck of a lot of boats, including big

ones, maybe 40 feet plus. They will be taken out of the water and stored in a "parking lot" a block or so behind the waterfront condominiums, with access to the water. Putting them in and taking them out will be done with new types of hoisting devices and transferring devices that we haven't seen yet, that will make it very, very simple. I believe that will happen very quickly.

Do you feel that Pearson's boats, which tend to be relatively heavy, are somewhat in conflict with a trailerable type of lightweight hull?

Every company, sometimes by default I guess, positions themselves in the marketplace. Pearson has certainly positioned itself as manufacturing long-lasting, cruising/racing type boats. Our market is composed primarily of people who never hear the sound of a starting gun. They want to get away from the race that they're in from nine to five, although a lot of them do go out and race PHRF. So, the weight of our boats has an awful lot to do with what our market demands. For example, here

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is a 28-footer, one of our brand-new boats, with wheel steering in it. Not many years ago, wheel steering was expected only in larger boats. Now, today, it is pretty much part of the scene in smaller boats too. I can make the Pearson 28 a little lighter if I put a tiller in it, but wheel steering is what sells the boat. So it's standard. If I wasn't listening to the marketplace, I could go out and build a 28-footer that had a lot less freeboard. It would be narrower, and it would have just a couple of simple berths down below and a curtain

with a Porta-Potti behind it. It would be pretty light and pretty nimble. The secret is, that's the kind of boat I really enjoy.

You designed a boat years ago, the 32-foot Pearson Screech, that did well in racing and didn't have many amenities. How did she fit into the Pearson family?

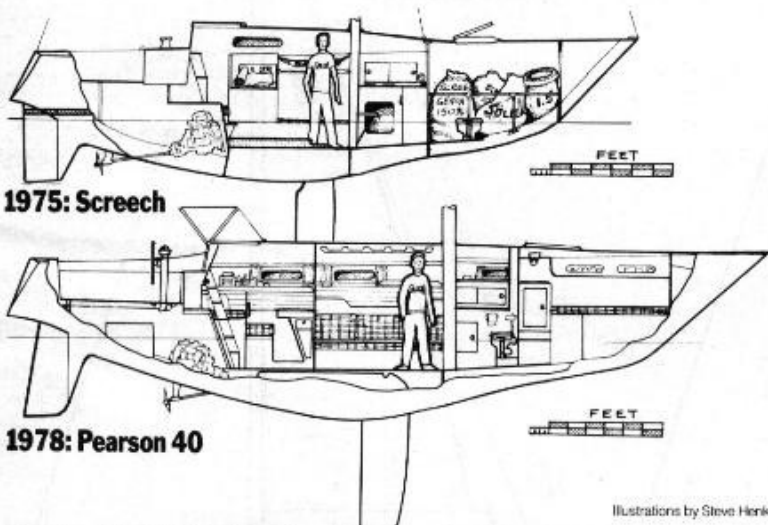
She was a little racing keel-centerboarder, a one-off boat. She did very well in racing around here, and then went to the Great Lakes, up around Green Bay. She stayed in the Bay, and was Boat Of The Year there for about three or four years running. She was great; I loved that boat. I thought she was a very, very good-looking boat. But she had practically nothing down below; my wife hated her. The Screech wasn't particularly light; in fact, she was a relatively heavy boat. Ballast was inside in the sense that it was in the vee of the hull as opposed to being bolted onto the outside. The ballast actually consisted of bird shot that we poured in and then glassed in place. It wasn't as dense as solid lead, but it was dense enough, and it was inexpensive.

Why didn't you produce it?

The market wanted a bigger size, so we took the hull form, expanded it, and it became the Pearson 40. And also, we've been in this business for close to 30 years, and when you say the name "Pearson," the customer identifies with a wholesome, good-performing cruising boat, not a racer.

Every once in awhile, you have come out with a flush-deck boat. The Pearson Lark had a flush deck, didn't she?

Yes, that was during a period when flush-deck types of boats were sort of popular. On the West Coast, they were very successful, and of course, in a small boat a flush deck gives you a tremendous amount of interior volume. When you get to a big boat it becomes immense. The 40 had a wonderful interior and a deck that was a terrific working platform. The visibility was outstanding, and



Illustrations by Steve Henkel

Beauties of the flush deck are shown in cutaway drawings of the Shaw-designed Screech and Pearson 40. The Pearson Screech, a one-off Shaw experiment that became Boat of the Year in the Great Lakes area in the mid-1970s, was a flush-decked keel-centerboarder with an unusual bottom shape. "If you pick up a quohog," says Shaw, "and sort of look at it on end, that was the shape of the boat." Market research indicated a larger size boat of that type was wanted, so the flush deck and bottom shape were retained but expanded, becoming the Pearson 40. Shaw notes that a flush deck provides "tremendous interior volume...I've always been partial to that type of design."

the working surface was marvelous. I've always been partial to that type of design.

The market doesn't like flush-deck boats any more, I guess.

They're not as popular as I would like them to be. I guess it is part of our whole philosophy here as a nation. Americans will tolerate deviations from the norm only so much. I am not so sure that there are so many pioneers out there anymore. The buyer likes change and likes innovative ideas, but not radical ideas. How many times have you seen the radical attempts fail? Even though they were good. Look at the automobile that Chrysler built back in the thirties, the Airflow, or whatever they called it. It laid a big goose egg. It was just too far away from the norm....

From what you've said, I would guess that the next new designs

coming out of Pearson would be along conventional, traditional lines.

I think our current trend is being portrayed by our 36 and our 28. They are cruising boats, but on the other hand, if you look at some of their numbers, for example the sail-area-to-displacement ratio, they're above what a similar type boat 10 or 15 years ago might have had. The boats that we're producing today as cruising boats can also be raced; they are not just pure cruisers. They've got a lot more performance in them.

A few years ago, we built a heck of a lot of boats designed with the major emphasis on cruising. But the general theme in the country at that time was sort of anti-race. Sailors said: "I don't even want to be associated with that grand prix type of thinking; I don't want a boat that looks that way." Today, I think the trend is more into the compromise boat or the dual-purpose boat — the

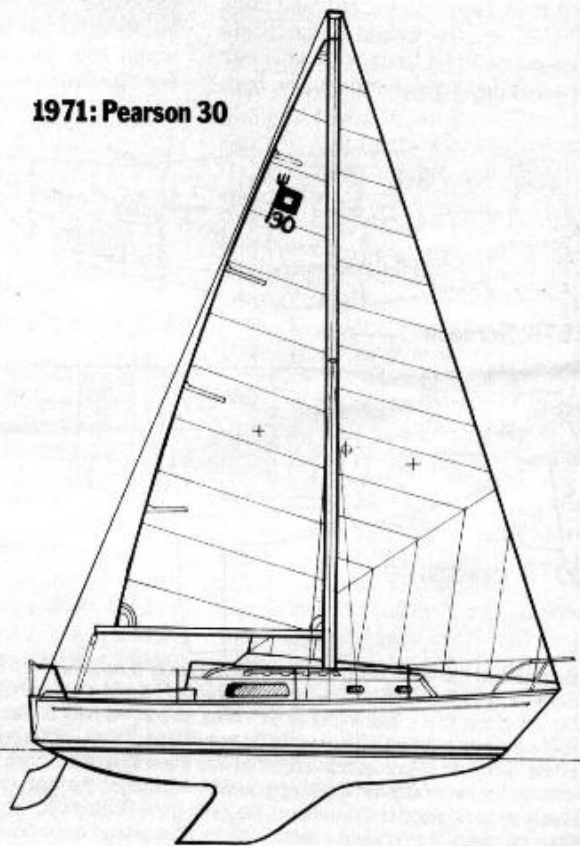
boat that can cruise well and race well, too. It's part of a trend in our society: a lot of us drive automobiles today that look as though they could

Evolution of a Pearson 30-footer:

Shaw's first design for Pearson, the centerboard Wanderer, had the large overhangs and relatively small sail area prevalent in the 1960s. By 1971, the sailboat market was calling for more speed and more interior space, and Shaw responded with the beamier, longer-waterline Pearson 30, yielding more space down below. Speed was helped by a long waterline as well as by lighter weight and increased sail area. In 1980, Shaw edged toward the high-performance end of the market with the tall-rigged, even lighter-displacement Flyer. Then in 1982, Shaw introduced the Pearson 303, with a still longer waterline, but he reverted to heavier displacement, producing the "moderate" SA/displacement and ballast/displacement ratios reminiscent of the original 1966 Wanderer (see "Spec Check").



1966: Pearson Wanderer



1971: Pearson 30

win a serious rally, but how many people really go out and do that? It's part of a fashion. That's the best way I can describe what's going on.

Nevertheless, there are still sailors who think about tradition, and in a high percentage of cases, they grew up in a boating family. Those who didn't, often get into sailing from a wholly different angle. They say: "Gee, I can't find waterfront property. The next best thing is to get a boat; that will be my summer home." Their plane of reference is entirely different, and this raises one of the problems we have with this business today: the average American's perception of sailing. The American Sailing Association did a "man on the street" survey, and came up with some interesting things; while a lot of people think

sailing is wonderful, they also have some negative perceptions:

- It's clubby — you have to belong to a club to get into it;
- It's terribly expensive;
- It's terribly dangerous;
- It's very, very complicated — it takes years to learn;

...all of which is pure nonsense. It's partly our own fault; we've done a very poor job as an industry of promoting sailing. Think of the new guy who says: "Gee, I think I'll get involved in sailing," and then looks at a

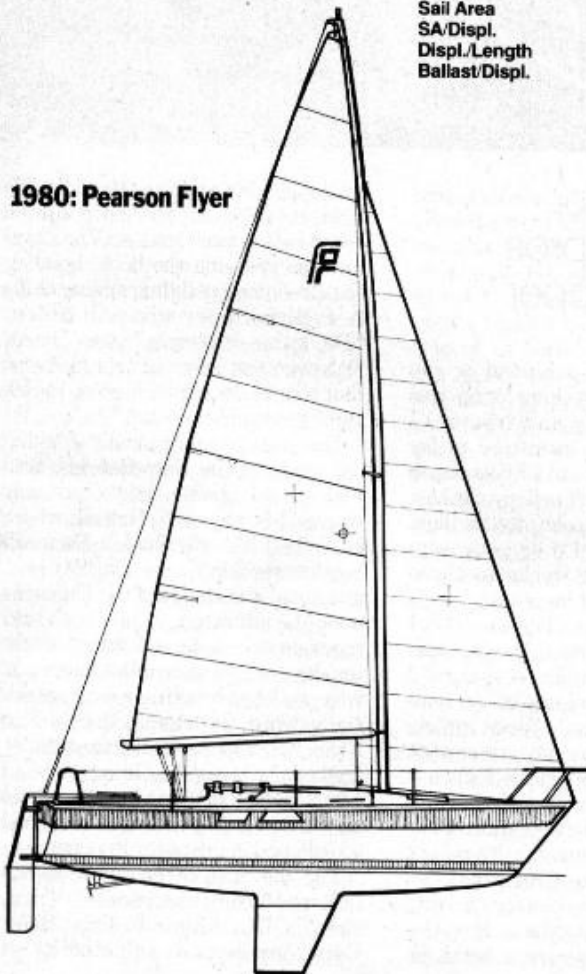
typical heavy-weather racing picture on some sailing magazine cover and says: "My God, I've got to get 26 friends who will sit on the weather rail getting soaking wet and say, 'why isn't this wonderful?'"

It's like teaching school. We have a new generation of students coming in all the time. We need to get back to the fundamentals of sailing and what it is all about, what the real joy of sailing is, how simple it can be. It's something we have got to keep reminding ourselves. — Steve Henkel

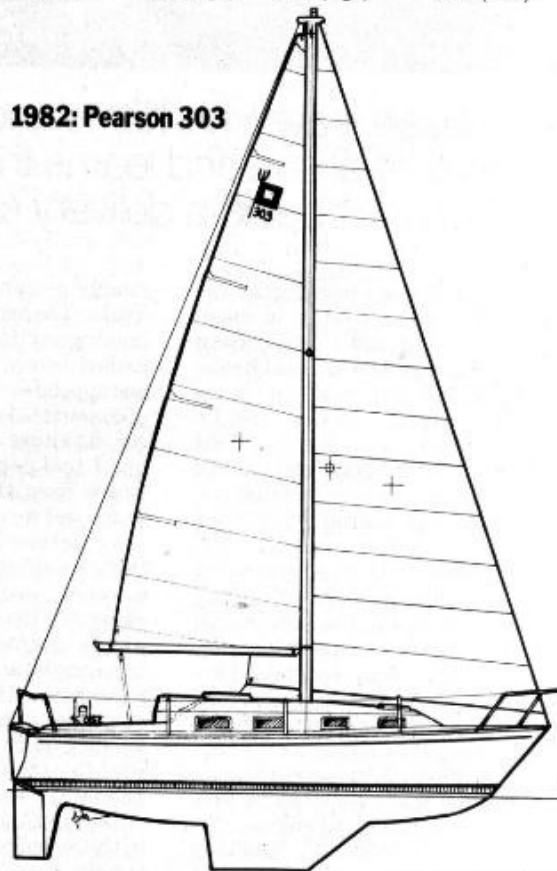
SPEC CHECK ✓

	Wanderer	Pearson 30	Flyer	Pearson 303
LOA	30' 3"	29' 9½"	29' 11"	30' 3½"
DWL	23' 4"	25'	25'	25' 4½"
Beam	9' 4"	9' 6"	11' 1"	10' 11"
Draft —board up	3' 6"	NA	NA	NA
board down	6' 9"	5'	5' 9"	4' 4"
Displ	9,800 lbs.	8,320 lbs.	6,135 lbs.	10,400 lbs.
Ballast	3,800 lbs.	3,560 lbs.	2,700 lbs.	3,500 lbs.
Sail Area	421 sq. ft.	444 sq. ft.	456 sq. ft.	456 sq. ft.
SA/Displ.	14.7 (mod)	17.3 (high)	21.8 (very high)	15.3 (mod)
Displ./Length	344 (heavy)	238 (med)	175 (light)	284 (med)
Ballast/Displ.	39% (mod)	43% (high)	44% (high)	34% (mod)

1980: Pearson Flyer



1982: Pearson 303



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