



BACK TO LIFE

With TNT Custom Marine leading the way, *White Tornado*, a classic 1969 Bertram offshore raceboat, gets fully restored—and modernized.

words Jason Johnson



Judging by the reaction from anyone who had any part in the recent restoration of a classic 1969 Bertram offshore raceboat, it's easy to tell that the project was one they will never forget. No matter if it was the person rebuilding the stringers, the one machining the many custom pieces or the guy rigging the staggered Mercury Racing 520 engines, everyone at the late-October reception to celebrate the re-launch of the 31-foot Bertram, *White Tornado*, appeared to be overjoyed after seeing the finished product at TNT Custom Marine in North Miami.

And when the boat impresses the socks off

On the day *White Tornado* was unveiled, Sammy James drove the restored 1969 Bertram with Michael Peters, Cadillac McDaniel and Johnny Tomlinson (from left above), and proceeded to share a laugh afterward.

of people like Mike Thomas, the co-owner of TNT who oversaw the project, and offshore racer Sammy James, who was the head of Bertram Racing in the '60s and '70s, there's no doubt the reactions are genuine.

"I am so grateful that I was able to drive the boat—boy is it a beautiful piece," said James, who got to know the experienced owner of the boat who wished to remain anonymous by



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As shown in the top images, the 31-foot Bertram was a complete mess when Cadillac McDaniel purchased it. Fortunately the crew from Guardado Marine in Opa-locka, Fla., got its hands on the boat and gutted it, rebuilt practically everything, refinished it, painted it and sent it over to TNT Custom Marine to finish the restoration.

helping research the nearly 50-year-old vessel. “Everyone involved did such an amazing job. It’s been more than 40 years since I’ve driven a Bertram so that made it even more special. The fastest we ever had one of those boats was 75 mph and this one—with the drives tucked under in a

fairly conservative setup—ran 78 mph when we were on it at the unveiling.”

James didn’t hesitate to admit that the boat was even nicer than the original.

“It has a nicer paint job, that’s for sure,” James added. “The boat drove really nice, too. It was real stable and it ran

just like it was designed to do.”

Charlie McCarthy, the founder and chairman of the Historic Offshore Race Boat Association, attended the unveiling and said that the bar for restorations has been forever raised by the Bertram.

“The boat in person is superb—well done to everyone



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involved,” said McCarthy, who added that it was great to see so many old friends, including Sammy and Patty James, Alan “Brownie” Brown, Bob and Yoko Saccenti, Ed Cozzi, Johnny Tomlinson (Thomas’ partner at TNT), Cadillac McDaniel, Michael Peters and more.

Thomas, who appreciated the owner’s enthusiasm for the project and its historical significance, said his crew is very proud of the Bertram.

“The boat was challenging in the sense that we were looking at some pretty old photos for the basis of what needed to be done and because you can’t buy a lot of the parts from back then,” said Thomas, who added that he and the TNT crew enjoy doing restoration projects just as much as new rigging jobs. “We definitely kept our machinist busy with this project. It was real neat to be a part of this restoration. If we get the chance to do another one like it with this owner or someone else, we’ll probably jump at the opportunity.”

Obviously the boat is impressive, but considering where it came from to where it is now, it’s downright incredible.

The deteriorating boat was tracked down in someone’s backyard by racer turned classic boat aficionado Cadillac McDaniel, who in turn sold it to well-known boat designer Michael Peters. The international raceboat turned drug-smuggling machine (complete with false bilges and more) was basically a frame



From above: The owner of *White Tornado* said the crew at Guardado Marine did a phenomenal job with the rebuild. At the reception recognizing those who worked on the boat, Cadillac McDaniel showed off a little of the boat’s history and how the project came together at TNT Custom Marine.

bearing little resemblance to its glory days on the racecourse. Peters spent some time cleaning up the rot, glassing in new stringers and rebuilding the entire transom. The undertaking turned out to be a little more

than Peters was willing to take on at the time so he didn’t hesitate to sell the boat when its current owner came calling.

After doing much more research via domestic and international racing enthusiasts,



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From rigging the twin Mercury Racing 520 engines and Bravo One XR drives to machining custom hardware, getting the helm station just right and working with Miami Prestige Interiors to execute the classic race-style cockpit, TNT Custom Marine put hundreds of hours into the restoration of the 50-year-old, 31-foot Bertram.

not to mention examining as many photos as possible, the owner decided to turn the 31-footer over to the talented teams at TNT, Guardado Marine in Opa-locka, Fla., and Miami Prestige Interiors in Hialeah, Fla.

“Considering the shape the boat was in, seeing the finished product at TNT was

unbelievable,” said McDaniel, who has been “rescuing” classic boats for more than 10 years. “I don’t work on the boats—I respect everyone who does—but I sure love tracking them down and finding someone to bring a boat back to life. There’s always a story and an adventure behind each one.

“Fortunately the owner of

White Tornado is ecstatic, and that’s the most important part,” he added. “So many times owners can get frustrated with the process, but that wasn’t the case this time around. The guys at TNT and Guardado took good care of the boat. It came out incredible.”

McDaniel, who hopes others might be inspired to



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take on a project like *White Tornado*, is excited that the 31-footer won't just be a showpiece. Its owner, who has owned boats from Fountain Powerboats, Magic Powerboats and Powerplay Powerboats, plans to use the boat in and around South Florida frequently.

"In all my years of boating I've never had such a good experience at a facility as I did dealing with TNT," he continued. "Without TNT this boat wouldn't be where it is. I was blown away by the accessibility of both Mike and John throughout the whole process. They are both their greatest critics and they hold their work to a super-high standard."

The owner, who opted to install a modern power package to make the boat more current, drivable and user friendly, said everything that had to do with the rebuild and paint application was handled

"Considering the shape the boat was in, seeing the finished product at TNT was unbelievable."

—Cadillac McDaniel

by Eddie Guardado and his crew with Thomas managing the project overall.

All of the rigging and custom hardware, including the fuel caps, engine mounts, dash accessories and more, were handled by the team at TNT. And anything that could be saved, such as the cleats, were refinished.

"None of this would be possible without the amazing people who had a hand in recreating this modern version

of a classic machine," the owner said. "Besides the overall beauty of the boat, the details are impressive. I mean these guys were able to fabricate control handles and machine the splines to fit on a Mercury yacht control box so it looks like an old Morse throttle control."

As you can see from the photos included throughout, this was one comprehensive and challenging restoration project—and one that the owner just might do again.

"As far as I'm concerned, the greatest pleasure I've received from this project is the people I've met like Sam James," the owner said. "I feel like my life is richer for having known him and his wife, Patty. Of course the boat is cool, don't get me wrong, but it's the people who showed interest and helped me along the way who really made this whole process so special." **SOTW**

Sammy James, who was the head of Bertram Racing in the '60s and '70s, said the restored *White Tornado* that he got to drive (below) is nicer than the original (right).

