

# Legends Never Die

AGAINST ALL ODDS, A THOROUGHbred BERTRAM RACE BOAT—LONG AGO PUT OUT TO PASTURE—GETS A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. ♦



# If only boats could talk. If only you could sit beside them on the dock as they recounted tales of places they've been, owners they've served, and seas they've battled, now wouldn't that be something? If boats could talk, *White Tornado*, a 1969 Bertram race boat, would have one hell of a story to tell.

She would tell of her glory days as an overseas racing champion; and of a vainglorious fall from grace. She would tell of years spent racing Johnny Law with pallets of drugs stuffed in her keel. She would tell of how she teetered on the of brink of being down and out before being rescued by Cadillac McDaniel, yacht designer Mike Peters, and ultimately by her current owner, Nick.

Flash forward to New Year's Day 2016. Nick, who restored *White Tornado*, stands behind the helm, rolling foam earplugs between his thumbs and forefingers before lodging them deep in his ear canals. He proceeds to tie the straps of his racing cap under his chin; it's a knot that keeps the plugs in his ears and his hat on his head. It's also a look that he readily admits makes him appear nerdy. It's a still afternoon at Key Kargo's Ocean Reef Club. The canal that *White Tornado* calls home is all but deserted—the predictable result of New Year's Eve parties that spilled well into the morning hours.

With a swift twist of the keys, all that changes; like a sleeping stallion awoken by a shotgun blast, *White Tornado* roars to life.

The deep, throaty rumble of the boat's twin Mercury Racing 520s throb as she slips from her berth past the sleepy homes on the shoreline. A few minutes pass and open water now lies before us. Nick pulls back on the throttles, resting the boat in neutral as he fumbles to clip the kill switch to his belt loop. "People have died because they didn't use these," he says.

My heart pounds while I try to exude cool confidence. I clutch the

teak grab rail in front of the copilot's seat with both hands, secretly hoping Nick doesn't notice my white-as-a-ghost knuckles.

He lays into the throttles and the boat lurches forward and onto plane almost instantaneously. Long stretches of turquoise water and small, uninhabited islands blur past as if in a dream, as *White Tornado* settles into a 60-plus-knot gallop. Nick wears a smirk of pride as he pulls the boat into wide, swooping figure-eights.

I take the wheel—being sure to clip the kill switch to my belt (I don't need to be reminded to do so) and push on the throttles. I presumably wear a smirk that says, *Holy s---, I can't believe I'm driving a Bertram race boat!* Any attempt at coolness has been abandoned. It's flat calm and the boat's handling is surprisingly silky for the speeds we're making. Sporadic boat wakes provide fleeting feelings of weightlessness as *White Tornado* bounces atop them. I try to imagine I'm the boat's former driver, Vincenzo Balestrieri, battling the likes of Don Aronow in an open-ocean sprint.

Before Nick was turning heads at the Ocean Reef Club aboard his restored race boat, he was spending hours tapping away on his laptop and iPad, trying to learn everything—and I mean everything—he could about the craft that Mike Peters suggested he restore. The first thing Nick set out to learn was, of the dozens of race boats built by Bertram in the '60s, which boat was his?

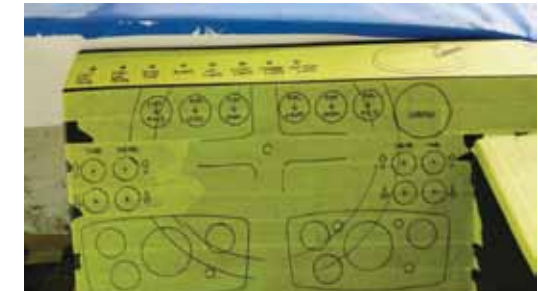
Enter Sammy James, head of Bertram's racing program in the '60s and '70s, who worked to break in the company's new boats. "Es-



**WHITE TORNADO'S** owner, Nick, stands alone at the helm, which is an unusual sight. He gets the most enjoyment from taking various members of the Bertram racing family for rides.

## RECREATING THE HELM

was not as easy as one might think. Nick and the team at Guardado Marine spent hours looking at tiny old racing images to get the proportions and measurements just right.



**AFTER THE CONSOLE** was created, Nick and the crew at TNT Custom Marine spent a lot of time determining where the many gauges should go.

## A LONG WEB

search yielded many authentic Bertram race parts. This display came out of a marine junkyard in the Midwest. One man's trash truly is another man's treasure.

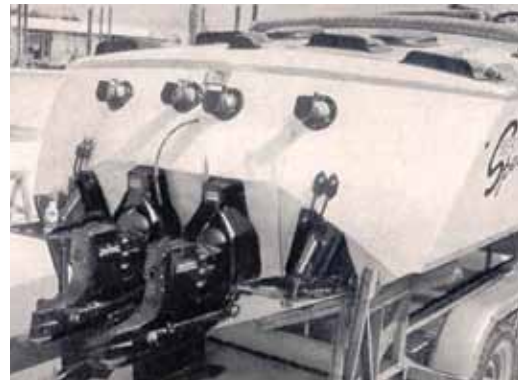


**WHEN DESIGNER** Mike Peters first bought *White Tornado* from Cadillac McDaniel, he trailed it to his home and it felt as if the boat weighed a ton. He would learn that the bilges and keel had absorbed hundreds of gallons of stagnant water. It was a labor of love for the designer to re-fiberglass her stringers.

**WHITE TORNADO** idles up next to her competition—the 32 Cary—in one of her last known races. The Cary's new hull design would replace the more traditional V-bottoms of boats like *White Tornado*.



**THE 1969 RACER** was originally designed to be powered by inboards, but with inboard-outboard power beginning to grip the racing circuit, Bertram designers figured out how to implement the new technology.



**THE BOAT'S** deck was rebuilt to match her original layout configuration, and the team removed a walkway from the helm to a forward cockpit that a past owner made.



## PREPARING FOR PAINT:

Whether you're painting your boat's bottom in the yard or a high-gloss race boat, the key to success is always the same, it's all in the prep work.



## “After these boats stopped winning, many were abandoned. Some were left right there in the parking lot.”



boat, that's *White Tornado*.”

Confirming James's suspicions were powerboat race historians Marco Bertini and Graham Stevens, with whom Nick had connected with online. Both were able to help produce vintage racing photos of the boat competing overseas.

“Those photos gave me a lot of direction with the restoration. Once I got them I was like, now I know how to set up the helm, now I know how the lettering was done and how the flag was done on the side.”

Besides providing insight on how to restore the boat, Nick's tenacious Web research (which, he modestly estimates reached a few hundred hours) combined with the racing knowledge of Bertini and Stevens, and even the assistance of a private investigator, to help piece together *White Tornado's* story, bit by bit.

*White Tornado* was built in the U.S., he learned, and promptly shipped to Italy where she was outfitted. After competing in Europe, the boat eventually found her way back to the U.S., where she raced in the Grand Prix in New Jersey. In this decisive race, *White Tornado* would go head-to-head with Don Aronow's more advanced 32-foot Cary. The Cary's hull ushered in a new era of race-boat bottoms that would suddenly, and unceremoniously, end *White Tornado's* career. She would never race again.

As with many once-great thoroughbreds, the transition from champion to forced retirement was not pretty. “These boats were raced hard,” says Nick. “After these boats stopped winning, many

essentially he tried like hell to break them down,” explains Nick. With his break-in days over and decades having passed since his employment with Bertram, “It's amazing the things he still remembers. And he's just a great guy. I told him about my boat, I told him that under the old paint it had white gel-coat. Sammy, without hesitation says, “There was only one Bertram race boat that was white. If you're seeing white, that can only be one

were abandoned. Some were left right there in the parking lot.”

*White Tornado* had a dark fall from grace. “We think it was used as a pleasure boat before it became a drug runner.”

When asked how he knew this to be the case, Nick took an uncharacteristically long pause, weighing his next words carefully. “Well, there was a lack of willingness of prior owners to acknowledge they owned the damn thing. That, coupled with the fact that it had a faux deck system built into it that was supposed to hide whatever. The midsection of the boat ‘deck’ could be removed and ‘cargo’ could be lowered to the bilges. And the forward hatch was enlarged. They made it much larger than it was in its racing day. After that it sat. I'm pretty certain it spent a lot of time running at night.”

Further research indicates that *White Tornado* spent much of the late 1990s sitting abandoned in a Florida field. A man named Cadillac McDaniel—a well-documented boat nut whose boatyard provides life support for many an aging yacht—had seen her in Miami at one point but soon lost track of her. Years later he was towing a boat up near Boynton Beach when he happened to spot her again, this time resting on a trailer that was tucked back in the weeds. He would not let *White Tornado* disappear a second time.

Two years later, in 2010, decorated designer and *Power & Motor yacht* columnist Michael Peters was visiting McDaniel, saw the boat and bought her. He brought her home to begin the resuscitation process on the broken-down boat. “Now mind you, all the stringers were rotten. Since Michael was a young kid he'd been working with laminates. So he and a friend replaced the stringers and the transom, which was rotted as well,” says Nick. “Michael replaced the whole reverse transom and finally got to the point where he realized, after spending nights and weekends on a 31-foot boat, he now faced recoring all the decks.”

The next turning point of *White Tornado's* story would take place in a booth of an Outback Steakhouse. Nick had been opining to Peters how disappointed he was that the ocean-racing circuit of yesteryear was being replaced by 150-knot poker-run catamarans with huge, air-conditioned cockpits. “That's when Michael asked if I ever thought of restoring a classic race boat,” says Nick. “He told me about its unique propulsion package. It was originally designed as an inboard-powered boat, and what they did was cut a hole in the

bulkhead and move the port engine forward to accommodate [the up-and-coming, more powerful] I/Os.”

The fact that the boat had a foot in both the inboard engine and I/O worlds intrigued Nick. He bought the boat.

“I immediately thought, This was an old race boat, I have to do it justice,” says Nick, “I want to restore it to what it was back then. And once I embraced that mindset, it became a treasure hunt. I thought the restoration could be fun, but thought the research might be even more fun.”

The boat was delivered to Guardado Marine for fiberglass work then TNT Custom Marine in Miami to complete the exhaustive rigging and repower work, while Nick continued researching. Tapping away on his keyboard late into the night, he tracked down original engine controls from the '60s in a building in Mexico City. There were eBay finds, and many parts had to be fabricated.

But while he wanted the exterior to be as perfect as possible, compromises were made to *White Tornado's* propulsion system. “I wanted to enjoy the boat with 2015 technology but have it look like 1969,” Nick says. “I wanted to use Mercury racing engines that were un-

### THE PROS

REPOWER & RIGGING : TNT Custom Marine;

[www.tntcustommarine.com](http://www.tntcustommarine.com)

FIBERGLASS & PAINT: Guardado Marine; [www.guardadomarine.com](http://www.guardadomarine.com)

UPHOLSTERY: Miami Prestige Interiors;

[www.miamiprestigeinteriors.com](http://www.miamiprestigeinteriors.com)

### CONTEMPLATING A RESTORATION?

“I thoroughly enjoyed the process, and there's a lot of ways to do a restoration,” says Nick. “If you want it to be to the level of *White Tornado's* restoration, hire the pros and get out of their way. Write the checks. Do tons of research on the companies you're hiring. And you'll need to give the companies you're working with the information they need. You need to be available for your vendors and yard. If things are going well, smile, nod, and leave.

And you'll need to have a basic level of trust and respect for your yard, without that you have nothing. The folks who did *White Tornado's* restoration, like TNT Marine, Guardado Marine and Miami Prestige...I left with more respect for them than I could have imagined. And if you don't enjoy meeting marine experts and hanging out in different shops, then this kind of project isn't for you.”



**THE FIRST OF** many times the new racing engines were lowered into the boat. The owner estimates that the engines were taken in and out six times each as the mounts and exhaust system were fabricated.

**THE SECOND** Mercury Racing engine is lowered into the belly of the beast. This powerplant would give the restored Bertram a top end just under 70 knots.

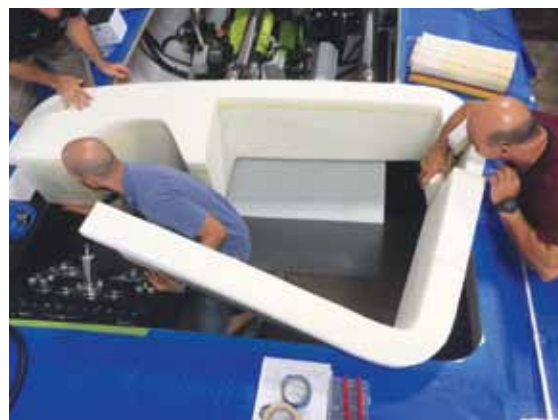


**2015 MERCURY** racing drives are flush-mounted to her transom. Despite the passing of decades, the appearance of racing drives has changed very little.



**EDDIE GUARDADO** (second from left) and the team at Guardado Custom Marine pose in front of *White Tornado* before she leaves the shop and heads for TNT Custom Marine.

**THE TEAM** at Miami Prestige dry-fits the upholstery in the cockpit. Like many aspects of this restoration, it required tweaking.



**THE SEAT** to port rests atop the forward part of the port engine. Miami Prestige recreated the bright upholstery.



### OLD RACING PHOTOS

provided by racing enthusiast Marco Bertini revealed exactly where the type should go and how the colors originally looked.



## Watching Balestrieri Jr. behind the wheel, with his hair blown back, was, in Nick's words, "very emotional."



der warranty for two years and came with an updated manual. I also wanted digital throttle controls."

Nick would end up getting everything he wanted and more by the conclusion of the exhaustive two-year restoration. From a top end of 69 knots and an exterior that's a mirror reflection of her old racing days, she has been brought back to life in jaw-dropping fashion.

With thousands of man-hours and a couple checkbooks invested in the project, you'd think Nick would be grabbing ahold of *White Tornado's* helm and spending his days blasting across the water, reveling in

the restoration. It's what you'd expect from most people, but Nick, as it became immediately apparent to me during our day together in Ocean Reef, is not like most people. No, his newest passion is paying homage to the boat's heritage by bringing a special group of passengers aboard.

One of the first people he invited was Sammy James, who had put *White Tornado* through her paces nearly half a century before. Aboard the boat at the same time, Peters wrote of watching James at the wheel in his January *Sightlines* column. "A bit reluctantly, Sammy, at the age of 77, slid over to the driver's bolster and took the wheel," Peters wrote. "I could see a transformation in his face, his eyes, as he gripped the throttle. The years peeled away as the speed increased, and Sammy got her up to top speed. Those of us in the boat, at that moment, were more thrilled about watching Sammy run *White Tornado* through her paces than the boat itself."

Then there was former *White Tornado* driver Balestrieri's son, who visited from Rome. Vincenzo Balestrieri Jr. was never able to see his father race, but after some coaxing, he climbed aboard and took the helm. The chance to drive a boat that his father had once raced was most likely an opportunity that he'd never before fathomed. Watching Balestrieri Jr. behind the wheel, with his hair blown back, was, in Nick's words, "very emotional."

*White Tornado* slowly—yet loudly—winds back through the Ocean Reef Club canals; Nick's hung-over neighbors throw him nods of approval and thumbs up. He neatly ties the boat up to her bulkhead. As we make our way into Nick's home to watch some old racing footage, I look back at *White Tornado*. *Damn shame you can't talk*, I think to myself as my eyes trace her historic racing lines once more.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. What does matter is that thanks to a fanatic owner's vision, *White Tornado* has been able to transport an old Bertram racer back to his glory days, and allowed a son to race in his father's wake. Moments like that say more than words ever could. □

