

# Boating

## INDUSTRY CANADA



**Neil Gilbert**

Canada's Great Unknown Designer

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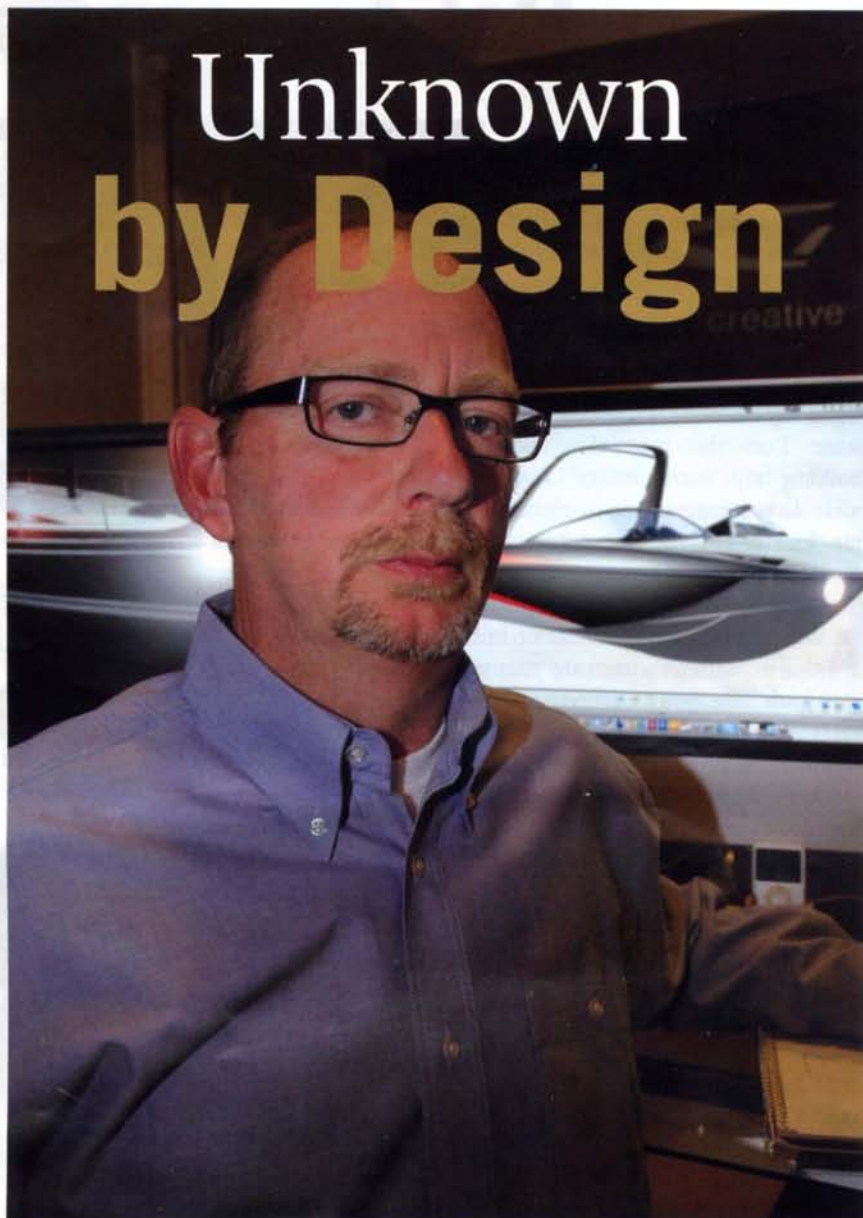
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BY JOHN MORRIS



If we have a common trait in this country, it seems, sometimes, that we all take pains to avoid acknowledging successful homegrown talent. Within our marine industry ranks, we have a single designer who has accomplished the following. He worked for our largest and most successful sailboat builder, C&C, during its stellar run as a world leader in the 80s. He went on to design the Doral line that took that upstart company to huge international success and prestige at the time making it this country's biggest powerboat success

story ever. He subsequently designed a broad range of Champion boats that helped the Kelowna builder to star on the North American stage and turn heads with innovative designs. He has designed and built a further extensive list of power and sail craft. He continues to design innovative and large selling boats today likely making him the most prolific designer Canada has ever produced and placing his designs among the world's most popular. But can you name him?

Neil Gilbert's story includes

Campion, Doral, Vector and Malibu, but let's start with sail, because that's where Neil did. Right out of school, he was an ardent sailor and would-be designer (won the Sea Cadet Championship and the 1981 Shark Worlds with brothers Ralph and Cam). He was fortunate enough to get encouragement from a family friend, George Cuthbertson, one of the Cs in C&C, ultimately joining that company during its long reign as the country's flagship boat brand. Neil earned his papers as a qualified boat builder and then as designer working on a re-fit of the Canada's Cup winner Evergreen and production boats. He was project manager for the C&C 27 Mk V, the last boat to come out of that company as it then existed and subsequently designed and marketed the fairly radical Gilbert 30 of which 11 were built in Oakville and sold to sailors who loved them.

In the 80s when the sail industry encountered some rough seas, Neil was invited to join the booming action at Peter Hanna's Doral Boats in Grand-Mère, Quebec where the mandate was to make the Doral brand stand out in the world market. Neil learned his chops by designing runabouts and bowriders, watching as they got built in droves in the factory below and sold in large numbers. Doral added to its line and Neil penned sexy looking 'bar of soap' gems with auto-styled dashboards and features that owners adore. Picking just two leading examples, every Prestancia 30 or a Boca Grande 35 is a Gilbert boat or an updated version of his original.

As the historians out there will confirm, the powerboat industry caught the same flu that burdened sailing and in the subsequent contraction, Doral was absorbed into Cadorette, previously a cross-town rival in Grand-Mère, the small town that dominated power manufacturing in Canada for years (it's only other claim to fame is that Jean Chrétien, a Doral customer at the time, comes from neighbouring Shawinigan.) No problem, Neil moved down the road and re-worked the combined fleet.

In the 90s, the boat world rebounded and started flexing its happy dance. From its perch in idyllic BC, Campion



We asked Neil about the future. "People's love of boats will remain, but the boats themselves will change radically. Electric power can propel boats at even 80 mph thanks to battery technology – that's coming for sure," Neil predicts.

Marine sensed a new rush to the showroom and started its own makeover. Neil went west to create a hot line-up and did every Champion from 93-96 including the one at your cottage. He brought in ideas and added pizzazz inventing and learning from other industries. Neil feels that simply looking at other boats just doesn't cut it. "If you're looking in the industry for inspiration you're already behind. I think my hallmark is to be inspired by things around."

That catalog complete, Neil continues his prolific ways from his Kelowna base recently completing a string of wakeboard beauties for Malibu helping the California manufacturer capture the heart of the shredding community.

So where is it all headed? Neil says there's a lot more to boats than getting from the dock to the island these days – your boat is a water-based platform for holidays, sunning, reading, partying and more. Owners make suggestions: could the seat slide over here and then turn around this way?

So the designer has to incorporate those changes or better yet, anticipate them. "People's love of boats will remain, but the boats themselves will change radically. Electric power can propel boats at even 80 mph thanks to battery technology – that's coming for sure," Neil predicts.

He is currently working with a US company that is leading the way in battery and electric motor development. This is fueled (pun intended) by the

panicky automotive industry but there are huge benefits to the boating world too. Neil feels that despite the inertia of the boating industry and cautious consumer, the time for electric power is upon us. Since you're adding modern lithium-ion batteries and a light motor in place of a V8 or two and the consumable fuel tank, there are strong weight advantages to electric. The shifting ballast of the fuel is eliminated. The actual cost of fueling up via a 15-minute push-charge is dramatically lower with electric (at least until it starts being taxed at carbon fuel rates).

Needless to say, there is adaptation required in the marketplace for electric boats to be viable (like bringing power dockside) but this is no dream and can help the industry in so many ways, especially in growing boating, according to Neil. "I feel it's important work. I am not a tree hugger, but if that technology is here I think it's only responsible to explore it."

But what is the future for Neil? Shouldn't the Gilbert brand be a bit more famous? "Nah, I'm the designer. The important brands are the brands of the boats and especially the people who are proud to own them." ●

*You can see Neil's conventional, electric and other marine designs, learn more about what's on the horizon and 'meet' Neil himself via his blog writing. Visit [www.gilbertcreative.ca](http://www.gilbertcreative.ca).*