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Photo: © Moore Sailboats

Santa Cruz discovers the lighter side of sailing

Local sailors change the face of sailboat design

By Kirsten Fairchilds

Fast is fun. Just ask any competitive yacht racer. Especially those from Santa Cruz County who from the early 1970s to the late 1980s called the Monterey Bay not just their playground but also their testing ground, a giant experimental lab where they proved themselves over and over again. During that time, a revolution was going on in the sailing world, and a handful of people from Santa Cruz were either to thank or to blame for it.

Bill Lee of Bill Lee Yachts, Ron Moore of Moore Sailboats, and the late George Olson of Pacific Boats were among the few who put Santa Cruz County on the map by truly embracing Lee's motto that "fast is fun," especially on water. Those three men — along with Terry Alsberg, the late Carl Schumacher, Ron's brother John Moore, Don Snyder, Dennis Bassano, John Josephs, the late Gary Mull, George Olson's widow Lyn Neale, Alan Wirntanen and Wayne Kocher — made the racing world take notice by designing and building

a class of boat called the Ultra-Light Displacement Boat, better known as the ULDB. Lee explained what the name signifies.

"ULDB was a word coined around 1973 and was a classification of sailboat that already existed for handicapping sailboat races," said Lee, a Santa Cruz resident who moved to the area in 1968. "Displacement" is naval architecture language for how much a boat weighs. When you put a boat in the water, it displaces water. The amount of water it displaces has to equal the weight of the boat."

A 1965 Cal Poly graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering, Lee was regarded as the businessman of the three. Both Moore and Olson built surfboards before switching gears to boat building and often are referred to as the artists of the era.

"George Olson was a water man, Ron Moore liked to go fast and Bill Lee had the good business sense and really capitalized on his fame," said Niels Kisling, Santa Cruz Yacht

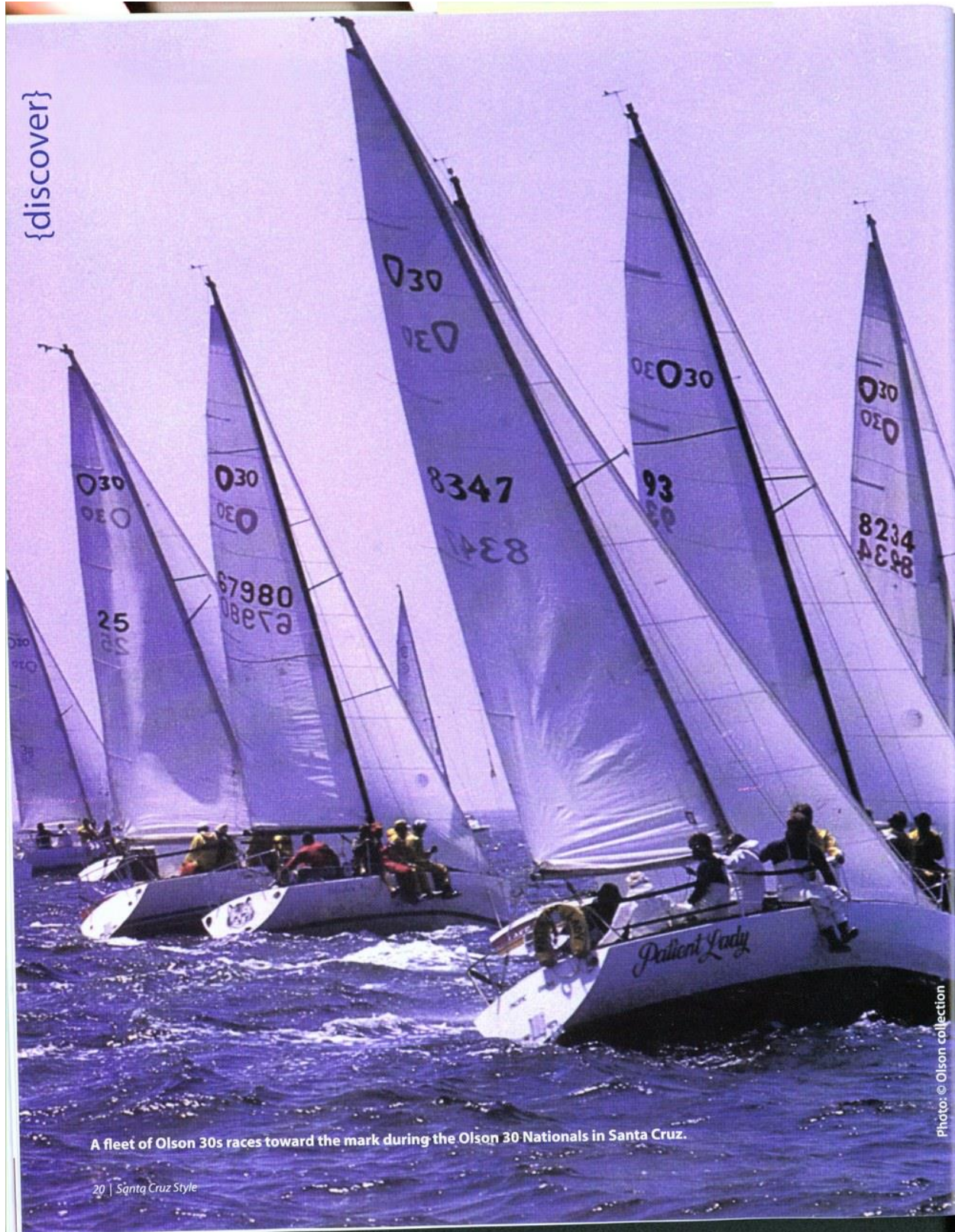
Club's historian. "ULDBs weren't invented in Santa Cruz, but they exploded onto the map here.

"ULDBs can be traced back to before the late 1960s, but the whole era in Santa Cruz is always referred to by sailors as the ULDB revolution," Kisling continued. "Santa Cruz was Ground Zero. Others were sailing these big, heavy boats made out of solid fiberglass called 'lead sleds.' The Santa Cruz guys created a better way to sail by revolutionizing sailboats by making the hull lighter, which made the entire boat lighter, but still maintained a ballast-to-displacement ratio of around 50 percent, which yielded a pretty stable boat."

Moore, who described himself as a "seat-of-my-pants engineer," began building ULDBs with his brother John before deciding

(Top) A Moore 24 sailing downwind and surfing down the backside of the swells. The ultralights tend to excel in these conditions.

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A fleet of Olson 30s races toward the mark during the Olson 30 Nationals in Santa Cruz.



Photo: © Bill Lee collection

The "Wizard" himself, Bill Lee brought ultralight sailboats into the limelight with his revolutionary design of *Merlin*.

to work on his own. He went through a series of processes before arriving at the lighter yet durable fiberglass composite that he used instead of solid fiberglass.

"In general at that time, boats were built out of solid fiberglass," said Moore. "Using solid fiberglass cannot produce a light product. The real cool boats are all composite, which can mean fiberglass, Kevlar and carbon." That lightweight composite made all the difference for sailors in search of speed.

"ULDBs opened the door for a performance level not yet seen at that time," Moore continued. "We were all looked upon as kooks by the traditional East Coast boat manufacturers and sailors, as well as the boating community overall. Santa Cruz was this little geographic area, but it was the only place in the world producing all of these fast boats."

Two of the most famous ULDBs were Olson's *Grendel* and Lee's *Merlin*.

"George was the first out of the box — he really got it going," said Don Snyder, regarded by many as one of the best sailors and navigators of the era. "*Grendel* was a 24-foot design and was probably built around 1968. I consider it the first Santa Cruz ULDB. That was the start of it all, and it's still in the harbor to this day."

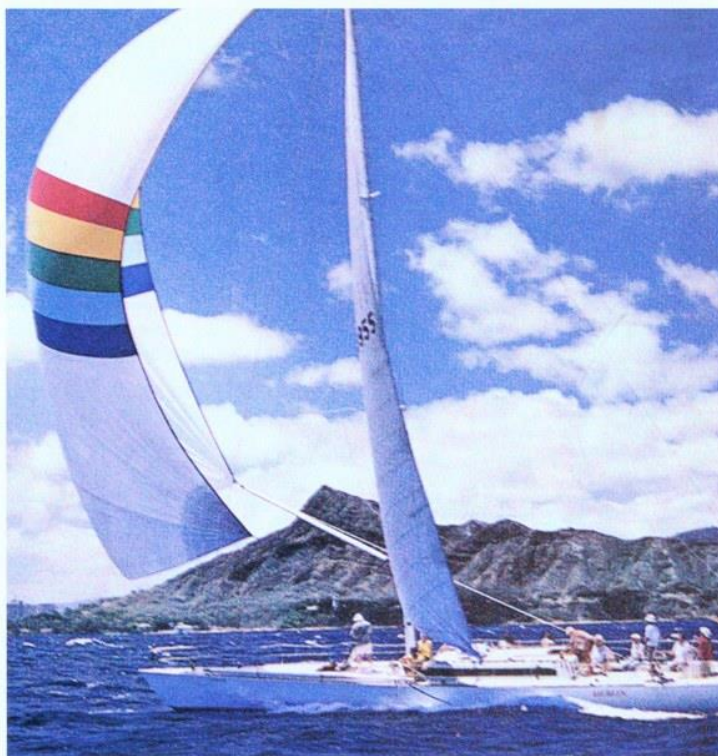
"From there eventually came the Moore 24, and in 1978, George, Dennis Bassano and I developed a 30-foot boat that ultimately became the Olson 30," Snyder continued. "Bill

Photo: © Bill Lee collection



Photo: © Olson collection

Designed by George Olson, *Grendel*, named for a character in the poem *Beowulf*, is thought by some to be the first of the ultralight sailboats.



With Hawaii's Diamond Head in the background, *Merlin* sets sail for home after winning the 1977 Transpac. Bill Lee wanted to design a boat that would arrive before the welcoming parties were over. To his delight, he arrived before they began.

Lee brought the boat out of Santa Cruz so to speak and showed it to the world. When he built *Merlin* and we sailed it to Hawaii in the Transpac, it was like 'Wow!' The whole world noticed."

Indeed, when Lee and his crew sailed *Merlin* to victory in the 1977 Transpacific Yacht Race (Transpac) — a 2,225 mile race from San Pedro, California, to Diamond Head on Oahu — the sailing world was forced to take notice. The crew was made up of Lee and six Santa Cruz County residents including Snyder as navigator, Bobbo Larson, Dave Wahle, the late Rob Wade, Jack Halterman, Phil Vandenberg, and the late Harvey Kilpatrick of Monterey. *Merlin* set a new course record of eight days, 11 hours, and one minute. The time stood until 1997, when the late Roy Disney broke it in another boat designed by Lee: *Pyewacket*, a Santa Cruz 70 ULDB.

According to some of those involved, the heyday of the Santa Cruz ULDBs began to decline in the late 1980s.

"The economy of this country had been booming, but by 1987, discretionary cash flow was going away," said Neale, a co-owner of Pacific Boats along with her husband



Photo: © Olson collection

George Olson, one of Santa Cruz's most creative: His designs ranged from surf boards to amusement park rides.

George and Wirtanen. "All of the boat companies went away, except for Ron Moore."

Lee mentioned the skyrocketing price of real estate as one factor in the demise of the local industry. Moore also noted that big out-of-area companies started mass-producing copycat boats at a clip that couldn't be matched by individual local builders.

"When the East Coast got hip to what we were doing out here, they countered with a new line of boats and a powerful manufac-



Photo: © Bill Lee collection

One of the first sails aboard *Merlin* featured a who's who of Santa Cruz sailors; (front row) Dee Smith, Phil Vandenberg, (center) Tom Blackaller, Bill Lee, Harvey Kilpatrick, Bobbo Larson (back row) Don Snyder and Tom Carr.

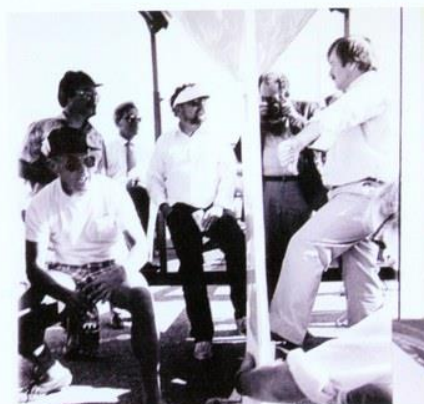


Photo: © Moore Sailboats

The launching of the first Moore 30, (Front, L-R) Ron Moore, Bill and Bob Simkins, Bill Lee, Arnold Wechter and Gary Mull.



Photo: © Moore Sailboats

George Olson, Ron and John Moore prepare for the maiden voyage on *Summertime*, which was the prototype for the legendary Moore 24.

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Photo: © Bill Lee collection

Bill Lee's 68-foot *Merlin* under full sail could reach speeds up to 26 knots.

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Photo: © Moore Sailboats

The crew of a Moore 30 hikes out while racing in the Corpus Christi Channel. The Moore 30 left a field of much higher-end sailboats in its wake.



Photo: © Moore Sailboats

Ron Moore, who describes himself as a “seat-of-my-pants engineer,” built some of the fastest boats of the era.

turer,” said Moore, whose business survived by his decision to begin producing custom fabrication for the composites industry as a whole. “All of a sudden, they’re producing boats similar to ULDBs at an alarming rate. It was a small piece of pie anyway, and then to carve it up even smaller was too much.”

Although the heyday ended decades ago, the hundreds — perhaps even thousands — of ULDBs designed and built in Santa Cruz County proved they were anything but a flash in the pan. ♦



Photo: © Bill Lee

One of Bill Lee’s first successes was his 30-foot *Magic*. Bill placed first with *Magic* in the MORA (Midget Ocean Racing Association) race from San Francisco to Ensenada.

Photo: © Olson collection



News of the Olson 30 spread to Southern California and soon they were making their presence known in the Santa Barbara Channel. John Thawley's *Masquerade* of Ventura was one the first to let other sailors know that "fast is fun".