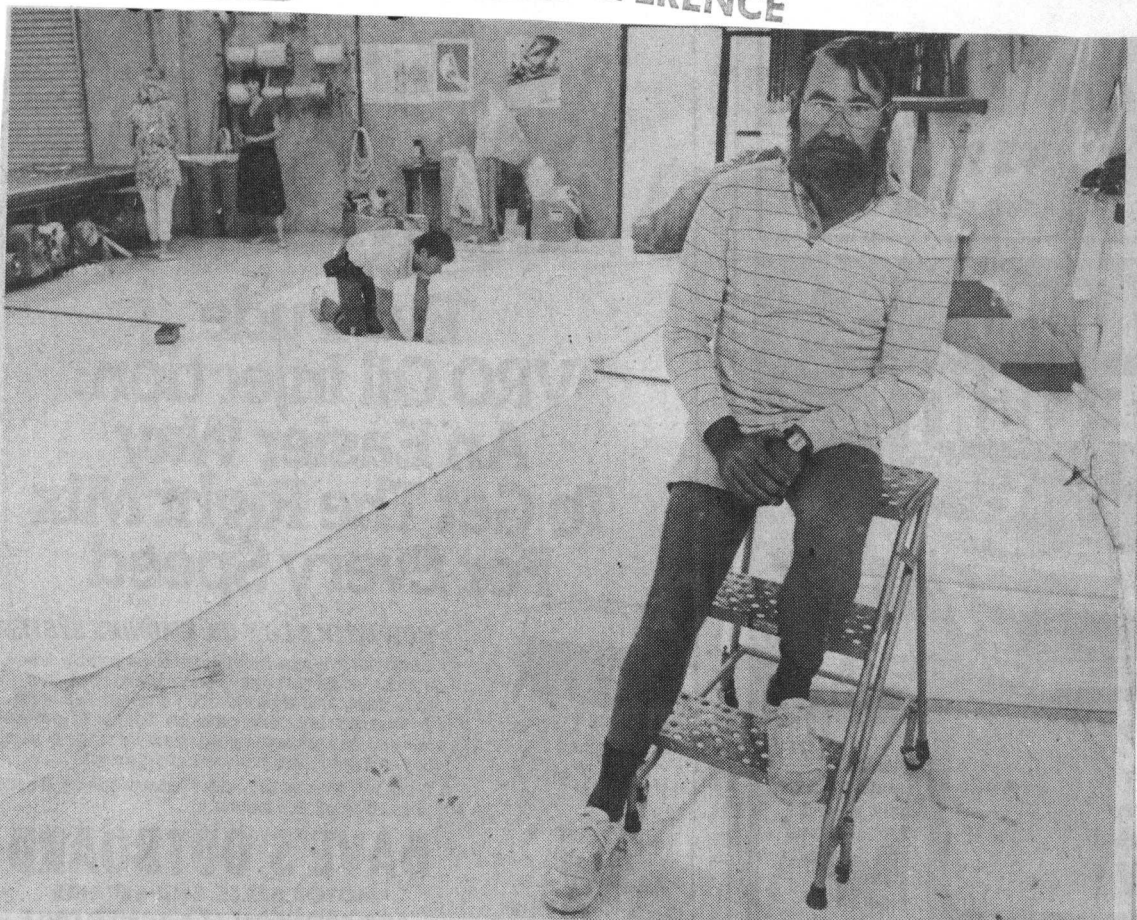


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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

After years of hard work, Kurt Larsen has earned his firm a national reputation.

Lofty goal becomes reality

Larsen Sails no longer a small, 'Mom and Pop' operation

By MARK SIMS
Sentinel Correspondent

GONE ARE the days of iron men and wooden ships, of Tea Clippers and canvas sails. Modern technology has affected every aspect of transportation, in many cases making older methods obsolete, but in others improving them.

Such is the case of sailmaking; a craft that has survived for more than 3,000 years and has benefitted from technological advancements, rather than becoming a victim of progress. The modern sailmaker, with time-worn traditions still fresh in his mind, has been able to use such advents as computers and the latest in synthetic materials in a blend of old and new to produce the finest and most efficient sails ever hoisted.

Firmly grounded in sailmaking tradition, yet equipped with the finest machinery made and thoroughly versed in the most modern techniques, Larsen Sails has emerged as a high-quality sail loft with a growing reputation as one of the best

private firms of its kind in Northern California.

Larsen Sails, the oldest and only existing sail loft in the Monterey Bay area, started amid the rather humble surroundings of Kurt and Sue Larsen's garage in 1970.

"We started in 1970," Sue said. "Kurt did all the selling and designing, and I did the sewing, basically building dingy sails and doing minor repairs. "We had never worked as sailmakers before, so we just had to teach ourselves as we went along."

And what the Larsens have learned has earned them a growing reputation. "We still fight the label of the 'Mom and Pop' sailmakers," Sue said. "What people don't realize is that we are earning ourselves a national reputation."

As Larsen Sails' reputation spreads, so grows the demand for its product. The volume has increased so rapidly that the loft has had to switch locations several times; first was the move from the garage to the building upstairs above O'Neill's Yacht Center, then in 1981 to the current location on 17th Ave. The

move up isn't over yet, for Larsen Sails is in the process of looking for a suitable building site in the harbor area where they can erect an even larger building to house its growing demand.

Building a reputation, like building sails, isn't easy. Bob White, Larsen's sales and marketing manager, said that "My biggest problem at first was having people come up to me at boat shows saying, 'Who the heck are you guys?' That's changing, though. Through our success in the racing fleets and among cruisers, we have been able to make our quality sell itself."

Larsen must compete for customers with some of the biggest names in yacht racing: North, UK, Sobstad and Hood. But Larsen Sails refuses to charge big-name prices.

"People such as North sails have lately tended to sell people on the latest 'high-tech' look," said Kurt, "an image which has no real breakthrough qualities. We emphasize that when you use our sails you can still win races, plus our prices allow

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Larsen Sails has growing reputation

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you to get a sail and a half from us
vs. the other big-name lofts."

"The typical attitude we run into
everyday," said White, "is that
everyone seems to believe that if it
costs more it must be better. Well,
that just isn't so."

In fact, Larsen has been so suc-
cessful that it has been approached
by the big sailmakers in attempts to
be bought out.

Just how fast are Larsen Sails?
Just check last year's S.C.O.R.E re-
sults and you'll find that Larsen Sails
was aboard nearly every winner in
every division. The sails have been
used to capture local, regional and
national titles in everything from
Moore 24s to Santana 35s.

Making sails is only one aspect of
the loft. "We are not a production
loft," Sue said. "Everything we do is
custom tailored." Being skilled in all
areas of cloth construction, Larsen
Sails has made several unusual
items. At one time, Larsen Sails
worked as a government contractor
making covers on land mines for the
Army.

Currently Larsen's is again doing
something out of the ordinary. "We
have opened the loft for Canadian 12-
meter crews," Kurt said, "so that
they can make their sail repairs and
adjustments."

Why is the firm lending a hand to a
potential rival for the America's
Cup? "The Canadians are forced to
live on donations," Kurt said. "We
let them use the shop and only
charge them for the materials they
use at cost. Other lofts in the Bay
Area were charging them \$40 an
hour. Let's just say that we are doing
it in the spirit of yachting."

That is the true spirit of sailing:
competition, for sure, but fairness,
too. It is the spirit of tradition as
well.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Gary Daubresse measures a main sail for an Olson 30.