

REBIRTH OF A SPEEDSTER

A classic Glasspar G-3 takes off after a rigorous restoration.

by **KARL BEISEL**

As a boy I spent many weekends "running" the Elizabeth River in and around Portsmouth and Norfolk. My brother was nearly always with me and we often cruised with neighborhood friends and others we met on the water. We were living in the midst of a boating evolution, in which outboards had reached a tremendous 80 horsepower and speed was becoming more and more attainable.

The Corvette of the water was the Glasspar G-3 ski boat, whose classic

'and stylish lines were unmistakable even from a distance. These sporty 13'7" speedsters belonged to serious "top doggers" who paired them with Evinrude or Johnson 75s or occasionally with Mercury 80s. The boats were crowd pleasers sure to attract pre-launch attention and conversation. The talk was a sort of boating-in-itself. Sighting a G-3 was akin to sighting a whale, with all the accompanying excitement and adrenalin flow. I studied the boats and knew those that ran in my home waters.

By the time we were teenagers, my brother, Chris, and I had a jet-

black 1963 model Glasspar G-3 that saw plenty of action on the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River.

Boating has changed from those early days of small-scale "muscle boats." But my heart still pounds even today, some 25 years later, at sighting a G-3. Now I usually spot them on land, typically in commercial storage lots. There the boats are displayed for sale, all with signs of

Purchased for \$200, the Glasspar G-3 ski boat was rough and old but held those classic 1960s lines.



PHOTO BY KARL BEISEL



age and neglect. I stand amazed at uninformed latter-day owners not acquainted with the attention the boats once enjoyed. To me, the classic lines are ageless.

Chris and I have spent many Sundays reliving in memory those days of G-3s running the Elizabeth River. We both have toyed with the idea of finding and restoring one of the boats. Sure enough, one day he called to tell me that emotion had overruled logic. A very used vintage 1961 G-3 was now parked in his driveway. He had parted with a humble \$200, not knowing what a restoration project could entail and wondering what to expect from a craft that had seen 28 years of use, abuse, and weathering. But the vessel was a part of boating history. Restoring it would be a keenly interesting project and I was anxious to live it with him.

Chris meticulously examined the boat in every detail, even videotaping the process. He dismantled the craft and inspected for structural problems. The floorboard had rotted and disintegrated. The hull was filled with mud, leaves, and sludge of unknown age. It smelled. The project would not be a simple fix, paint, and polish effort. Some things neither of us even considered. For example, in the early '60s outboards had 15-inch shafts accommodating boats with 15-inch transoms. Because outboards had changed, the boat's transom would have to be raised. No make-

shift modifications would be acceptable. He found all sorts of other flaws and engineering shortcomings.

After cleaning the boat, Chris began repairs, with me as an intensely interested observer full of opinions and ideas. The first step was to saw out what remained of the rotted floorboard. This was major surgery. Using a reciprocating saw as a scalpel, Chris severed the segment and removed it. He cleaned and dried the

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exposed double-bottom, then examined the hull beams. Although the original flooring was ¼-inch plywood, he replaced it with ½-inch sheet for a firmer feel. All wood was wrapped in fiberglass.

Back to the future: A magazine ad for Evinrude outboards from 1960 shows the speedster as it was meant to be.

The next part of the restoration effort involved some major problem-solving. The transom presented a genuine dilemma. The boat had a 15-inch transom, but modern engines have 20-inch shafts. The engine Chris was planning to put on the G-3 was heavy—heavier than any that existed in 1961. Built in Richmond until 1967, G-3s were designed for 138-pound outboards. The restoration called for an engine that tipped in at 278 pounds. So the transom would need to be both raised and strengthened.

Through trial and error, Chris spot-fitted ¼-inch plywood to the measurements of the inside transom. He cut five identical patterns and successively glued and screwed them to the inside of the original. Left with a cut-out (the area above the original lower transom and behind the new taller inside addition), he fitted and filled the space.

continued



On the boat's trial run, the motor roared to life and Chris took off for a tour of the Elizabeth River and Lynnhaven Inlet.

PHOTO BY KARL BEISEL

The entire mass, now 3½ inches thick (nearly double the original), was covered with several layers of fiberglass. The thicker transom then required that he shorten the motor well to maintain the boat's original look and proportions. The engine was a bolt-on, so clamp size was not a consideration.

Just as the transom work was completed, a number of very fine cracks appeared where the transom meets the bottom. The fine cracks eventually expanded to a full one-inch gap that ran almost the entire lateral span of the boat. It was horrifying! The transom's wooden reinforcement did not join the bottom. It terminated an inch above it. So Chris filled the void with heavily reinforced fiberglass, improving on the original workmanship.

It's funny how often a five-minute fix will turn into a repair that takes much longer. How can it take three days to tighten a loose bow-eye? At one point, the deck cracked while Chris was working on the bottom. Definitely discouraging. But the boat held such charm, and the challenge was so great, the work continued on.

Chris had the seats and windshield custom made. Both were missing when the boat was purchased and replacements have not been available for more than 20 years. Finding a windshield was tough. After researching the process, my brother had a thin bendable likeness created. Then a Norfolk plastics fabricator was hired to heat shape a smoked plastic copy to the boat's contours.

Neighbors observing the boat's metamorphosis often stopped to chat about the "miracle." Their

stares and glares at the ugly hulk turned into happy faces. But kids were still laying bets that the boat would not float the big engine (no faith here). By any measure, the G-3 had returned from disaster. Its smooth and flowing lines were regaining their proud and classy attitude.

The project began as interesting but rapidly progressed to insane. Chris and I talked about the boat daily. The entire restoration was videotaped. But as efforts came to an end, we realized that restoration is much more time consuming than producing a new boat would be. The work began in April with a planned July launch. July became September as work expanded to fill virtually every weekend and many weeknights.

Eventually the boat was ready for a professional finish. The newly applied surface turned out to be better than either of us expected. It covered all the minor imperfections and blemishes. The boat shined and

gleamed, new again. In our minds, the boat yearned for a big block Evinrude! Yes, the rumbling sound and smell of gas and oil would bring the project to completion.

Trim in the latest "island colors" of turquoise and deep pink was next on the schedule. The color worked wonders with the new finish, bringing the lines right into the 1990s. Final touches included the windshield on the bow and an Evinrude 115 for the transom. The G-3s were rated for 60 horsepower, but those limits were obviously designed for sissies and weaklings. We had the engine trimmed in colors to match the boat. Also, to enhance performance, the engine was raised. After all, this is a speed boat.

On the last day of September at 11:32 in the morning, Chris and I, along with half the neighborhood, took the boat to the preappointed launch ramp. The boat traileder beautifully. We weren't surprised when the rig caused a stir on its arrival. "What kind of boat is that?" "It should really move!" "Very nice." Just like my own words many years ago. Had we just passed through a time tunnel?

Five and a half months of meticulous work slid gracefully into a near glass-like body of water. The engine rumbled to life. This moment was a major event—it had been years since a "new" G-3 speedster had run these waters. Chris idled out as the engine began picking up speed, then suddenly roared to a plane. I saw the bow rise higher than I remembered. For a moment, the boat seemed to stand on end. There was wild cavitation! The propeller suddenly gripped the water and the G-3, along with 28 years of history, blasted into warp speed. With his hair locked in the swept-back position, Chris flew down the Elizabeth and out of sight. Later the boat held its nose in the air and pranced through Lynnhaven Inlet.

My brother and I are not the only ones with a devotion to the classy little speedsters, the G-3s. One of the mechanics at the marina in Virginia Beach where we took the motor to be tuned the week before launch said, "A friend of mine has a



After extensive structural work on the hull and transom, the boat was undercoated (above). All the effort was worth the final result (below)—a true classic rescued from the brink of destruction.



PHOTOS BY KARL BEISEL

boat just like this." At first I couldn't believe it, but then I realized how many had been made.

The mechanic took us to see his friend's boat—probably a 1962 model G-3 (there were subtle trim differences) standing on its side, totally devoid of flooring or supporting beams. Although it was nothing but fiberglass molding, we knew it could be fixed, restored like my brother's.

Was it for sale? Chris and I tried to buy it, but the owner would not sell. He had owned the boat for seven years and still planned to restore it. I thought about the seven years it lay wedged between his house and the fence, and I really

doubted he would fix up the boat. When I asked him why he had bought it, and he answered that he had skied behind a G-3 as a boy, we all understood. □

Karl Beisel is a price analyst with NASA in Washington, D.C. His brother, Chris, who restored the G-3 speedster, is a bank official in Virginia Beach, Va. They want others interested in G-3s to know that there's a G-3 owners association which can be contacted at 2205 Russet Leaf Lane, Virginia Beach, VA 23456.