A Is for Abigail

As part of his final project for the Westlawn Institute of Marine Technology, Bob Buck designed his ideal boat. Now she's a 52-footer turning heads wherever she goes.

Back in my less-charitable past, we used to call them "yups," as in the proud statement, "Yup, designed her myself." We usually used the term while looking over some hideous vessel, often constructed of ferro-cement, that was obviously the apple of its creator's eye. So when word came down from on high that I was to review a new 52-footer called Abigail that a Westlawn naval-architecture student had designed and a Rhode Island yard had built, it was with some trepidation that I opened the file of photographs. Needless to say, when I saw the pictures of this spoon-bowed beauty, I was delighted and eager to sail her.

Owner/designer Robert W. Buck fell in love with sailing early, aboard his family's Owens 40 yawl on western Long Island Sound. Sailing lessons in Blue Jays at the Port Washington Yacht Club followed, then racing in Lightnings and bigger boats. When he was about 18, Bob was crewing on a C&C 35 and met the owner's daughter, Pam, a cute blonde sailing instructor at neighboring Manhasset Bay Yacht Club. They married a few years later. The pair cruised her father's C&C until 1988, when the boat was sold and they bought a J/37, which was followed eight years later by a J/42 that they sailed until 2006. "The J/42 influenced my thinking in the design of Abigail," Bob says.

When Bob, then in his 50s, retired from his law practice, he decided to take the Westlawn Institute of Marine Technology's professional diploma program in Yacht Design. As part of his final project, he had to design a sailboat, which got him thinking about his criteria for the ideal boat. He had no plans to head offshore, preferring coastal cruising, but he wanted the boat to be capable of taking a storm at sea. As he grew more enthusiastic about the plans, it became obvious to him that he'd have to build the boat, too.
The Accidental Dream Boat

I started sailing with my father when I was 4 years old, and I quickly became curious about exactly how sailboats work. How do they go to windward? What makes one boat faster than another? My interest in understanding sailboats, however, didn't translate into a career as a naval architect. Nevertheless, after practicing law for nearly 20 years, I decided to pursue a repressed passion by registering for the Westlawn Institute of Marine Technology professional diploma program in Yacht Design.

I enjoyed the course enormously and worked hard at it, but the undertaking was simply a matter of intellectual curiosity. As I approached the end of the curriculum, I began thinking about what I'd do for the required final project, which involved the complete design of two boats, one power and one sail. I decided the sailboat design should be an attempt to draw my ideal boat. I had no thought of building whatever emerged.

Every design begins by defining the objectives of the boat. As I began dreaming about what I'd do with my perfect boat, I couldn't help but start thinking about making that dream a reality. Once the design began to take shape, I showed drawings to my wife, Pam, who encouraged me to consider having the boat built.

While I refined the design, I approached several boatbuilders. Most weren't very enthusiastic. Aquidneck Custom Composites, in Bristol, Rhode Island, and its president, Bill Koffler, however, seemed intrigued by the idea of helping a neophyte designer build his dream boat. Just as important, Bill and his crew were clearly building boats of the highest quality.

Bill and I negotiated a contract, and six months later, construction began. As the boat progressed, I found myself making the 70-mile roundtrip from my home to Bristol every day. I was busy answering questions, making detail drawings, poring over catalogues looking for that perfect piece of hardware, and occasionally helping with construction. Everyone at Aquidneck Custom made me feel welcome and part of the team.

When launch day arrived, I was understandably excited but also extremely nervous. What if the boat didn't float on her lines? I'd done a careful weight study and updated it as construction progressed, but what if I'd made some silly rookie mistake? As Abigail was lowered into the water, I almost couldn't look, but when the slings went slack, she floated right where she was supposed to. Phew!

A few days later, we set off on our first sail, and the sun was bright and the wind was out of the north at 8 to 10 knots. We motored into Narragansett Bay and hoisted the sails. We bore off onto a reach, then slowly headed up and began to boat up the bay. The boat held a few degrees and began to accelerate. The helm felt perfect. I smiled and thought, it's better to be lucky than smart.

But then I remembered all the smart, talented, and caring people who helped me make Abigail possible. Finding them was my real luck.

Robert W. Buck

The interior, finished in classic Herreshoff style, boasts plenty of stowage, an expansive saloon (top), and a comfortable forward cabin (above). The deck layout (left) is simple and efficient. A proud Bob Buck wears a grin as he steers a creation that he owns in every sense of the word.

The interior, finished in classic Herreshoff style, boasts plenty of stowage, an expansive saloon (top), and a comfortable forward cabin (above). The deck layout (left) is simple and efficient. A proud Bob Buck wears a grin as he steers a creation that he owns in every sense of the word.