

Q: WHEN IS A SANGER NOT a Sanger? A: When it's a Miller!

To truly appreciate this riddle, we introduce you to Dr. Mark Alkire, a cardiac surgeon based in Tampa, Florida. Alkire grew up loving the California-style flatbottom. In 1979, right out of college, Alkire purchased an 18-foot Sanger built in the mid-1970s from a machinist living in Louisiana. "The original owner had dropped a rod right through the bottom of the pan, and it was full of oil," he recalls. "I brought it home and told my dad that I'd paid \$3,000. He couldn't believe I spent that much for that oily boat! 'Ah,' I told him, 'but it has all of the hardware!'"

Alkire used the Sanger for the better part of two decades on the lakes and rivers of the Sunshine State. Eventually, Alkire felt it was time to realize his dream of transforming his aging hull into a truly spectacular work of art. After painstakingly researching Southern California boatbuilders, he contacted Jim Miller of Miller Boats, a company famous for its gorgeous V-drives with hand-built wooden decks. "From the East Coast, he familiarized himself with the California boatbuilders and qualified us as a company he could work with," Miller says.

In September of 2001, Alkire hauled the boat across the U.S. to Miller's shop in Santa

got wood?

Jim Miller took a customer's Sanger V-drive, threw the deck in the trash can and built a spectacular new wood deck—along with plenty of other goodies.

by Brett Bayne

Maria, California. "We discussed the project, and found him very simple to deal with," Miller says. "He wanted a beautiful wood deck, but gave us no other parameters. He just left it up to me to rebuild the boat for him." Alkire's willingness to let Miller work his own magic without interference continued through the duration of the project, including any graphics that would be incorporated into the craft. "I even told him to pick the colors," Alkire says. "I'm a surgeon. My patients don't tell me how to do an operation. I don't know how to put a deck on a boat. And, believe me, this boat was on a respirator!"

"He thought of this as the one he wanted to build since

he was a child," Miller adds.

(A side note: After Alkire left the Sanger in Miller's care, he was passing through Mississippi on the way back to Florida when the airplanes hit the World Trade Center on 9/11. "It was scary," he recalls. "I was actually a little worried about getting home all right.")

Examining the hull of the Sanger, Miller quickly deduced that the boat's stringers had delaminated and were desperately in need of repair. "The balsa-core laminate had gotten water into it," Miller says. "He had taken pieces of aluminum half-inch plate and sandwiched them in between the engine mounts and the stringers."

Alkire concedes that the

stringers were in sorry shape. "A lot of these old boats have balsa-core bottoms, and the stringers were literally laid on top and glassed over," he says. "Well, 35 years later, they delaminate—microcracks become big cracks, water gets in, and the balsa core turns to peat moss. You can put in your garden—it's like mulch!" he laughs.

After Alkire dropped off the boat and headed back to Florida, Miller cut the existing deck off and put it out on the trash pile. "We started looking more at the bottom half, and there was nothing stringerwise that we could use," Miller says. "We pulled the transom wood out and scraped every last bit out of the hull." Much of this chore was performed by Jim's 25-year-old son, Justin, who has gone to work for his father full time.

As the old stringers came out, and all-new stringers were built and installed in the hull, the Millers fabricated a jig for the boat to sit on, to ensure that the hull would not change its shape in the process. Aside from the actual hull, the only original things that remained by the end of the restoration were the engine mounts, the rail kit and the engine, including the Casale V-drive (which took a trip to Andy Casale himself for polishing). All gauges, steering, propshaft, etc., were put in a box for Mark to take home ▶





Above: The Sanger as it looked shortly after Alkire dropped it off at Miller Boats. The original blue-yellow-orange color scheme can be seen clearly at this stage. The deck was removed and the inside totally gutted as the stringers were painstakingly scraped out, leaving only a bare hull.

after the project had concluded.

The boat was flipped over and repainted—an important step, because Miller needed to find the new centerline, a tricky process. Miller relocated

the strut in the boat's bottom. "The V-drive was too far forward and taking up a lot of room," he explains. "Mark uses this as a ski boat, so we felt it was wise to remount all of the hardware in different places, not only for the quality of the ride, but for safety reasons as well." The seven-degree strut was changed to a nine-degree, which made for a better-turning boat, and the engine location was changed as well.

After the new strut, shaft log and rudder log were installed, Miller began work on the boat's new deck, which was con-

structed using pomele bubinga wood—a deck that took almost three months to fabricate. "I could build a glass deck like that in five days!" Miller chuckles. He says he spent a great deal of time perfecting the deck, which made for a rounder-looking boat. The transom was altered to adapt to the new deck design. "We made a prototype first so we could actually see it," he explains. The real McCoy followed.

The rig's angled dash, placed in back of the hardwood rolls, was designed to allow for greater knee room. "It's one

of the prettiest ones we have ever done," Miller boasts.

At long last, Miller was ready to do some glassing. When the boat was prepped, Jim and Justin applied resin by cloth, the old-fashioned way, glassing the deck for several days. "We continue the process by using heavy grit sandpaper and shape it perfectly, working down with a shaping paper and then a 1,500-grit hand sanding and then polish it. It's not a sprayed surface; it is acquired through mechanical means." This laborious process results in a product that lasts forever,



according to Miller. "It's a wonderful thing to learn how to do."

Continuing the process, Justin Miller applied graphics to the side of the boat. The Millers decided to use a light yellow that changes to a cream-yellow blend, as well as a pearlized red and orange, along with a checkerboard motif—a gorgeous design. The paint line was configured specifically for Alkire's boat.

New upholstery was added, courtesy of Miller's wife, Cheryl. The upholstery was not limited to the seats in this boat: even the floorboards and the foot

pedal received a bit of cushion.

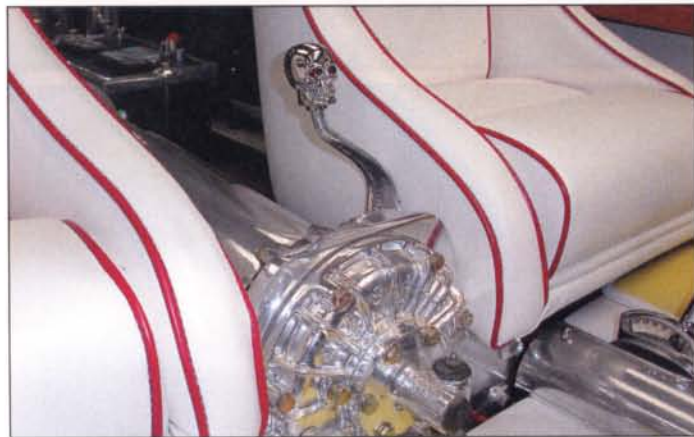
The new dash sports all-new Rex Marine steering wheel and gauges; new hardware was courtesy of Glenwood Marine of Gardena, California. One of the coolest details of the revamped Sanger is the skull on the shifter, a personal touch courtesy of Justin Miller (along with the iron cross on the dash with the key switch). The engine, a stock Chevy 502 with B&M blower, was one of the few things left untouched (although the blower was polished), as Alkire planned to tinker with it back in Florida.

When the boat was completed, Miller did several on-water tests at nearby Lopez Lake. "The boat rode beautifully," he says. "In the past, the problem was that it wouldn't turn to the right very well, because the rudder was offset. We reset the cavitation plates, and it now turns wonderfully to the left and the right."

In February of 2003, it was finally time for Alkire to drive back to California and pick up his dream boat. "I really try to look at people's reactions to my work," Miller says. "He had this great big smile...he didn't even

After the new transom and all-new stringers are installed, the boat is flipped over and the bottom painted. A new deck, fashioned from pomele bubinga wood, was fitted to the Sanger hull. Near right: The unfinished and completed dash, fitted with Rex gauges and steering wheel. Note the upholstered floorboards and foot pedal.

know what color it was going to be." Miller went through every detail of the boat, from top to bottom, discussing the myriad changes to the Sanger that ▶



Close-up views of the deck and graphics reveal Miller's months of excruciating hard work. The "skull shifter" can be seen between the bucket seats. At center right, pieces of the original deck can be seen in the litter pile. The finished boat is a genuine work of art.

was now essentially a Miller hybrid, including alterations to the fuel, electric, mechanical systems. Miller's months of toil had paid off with an eye-popping, one-of-a-kind rocket, a Sanger with a Miller custom deck and too many personalized touches to list.

"I just thought it was tremen-

dous," Alkire says. "He had completely changed the look of the boat. There's a certain balance that had to be achieved. He'd made the deck a little bit longer and had raised the transom a bit. You could really see the artistic sculpting he had done, the way he had taken into consideration the boat's length versus its width versus its height."

The boat was originally equipped with a 427, then had a LS-7 454 high performance Chevy crate motor. The 502 is its third motor, and so far it has run pretty strong, according to Alkire, who recently added a set of roller rockers in it. "They're bulletproof," he says.

Alkire says he hopes for a

V-drive renaissance, "the way there has been for those mahogany wooden boats," he says. He likens it to the way some love old Victorian homes. "They're not insulated, the wiring and plumbing are in sorry shape, and the windows don't meet code," he says. "You either fix the house, or it gets torn down. The charm in old houses is like the charm in these old boats. They just don't make 'em like that anymore."

And repairing these old hulls, he adds, is critical. "You have to make a decision to do something. You have to adopt the boat and make it a member of the family and make it functional, or it'll sit on the trailer

and end up getting tossed out. That's the bottom line on all of these old boats. They wear out! Either fix them, or they'll wind up in the landfill."

Alkire likes to bring his boat to a local lake with a couple of hundred acres to boat on. "There's a lot of alligators in it, though," he admits. "Recently, there was a guy playing Frisbee with his Dalmation out there, and, well, an alligator ate the Dalmation. Seems like this happens at least once a year." Alkire, who has seven children (ages 3 to 23), uses the boat mainly for skiing and wakeboarding; he enjoys boating with his wife, Karen Raimer, an obstetrician. ■