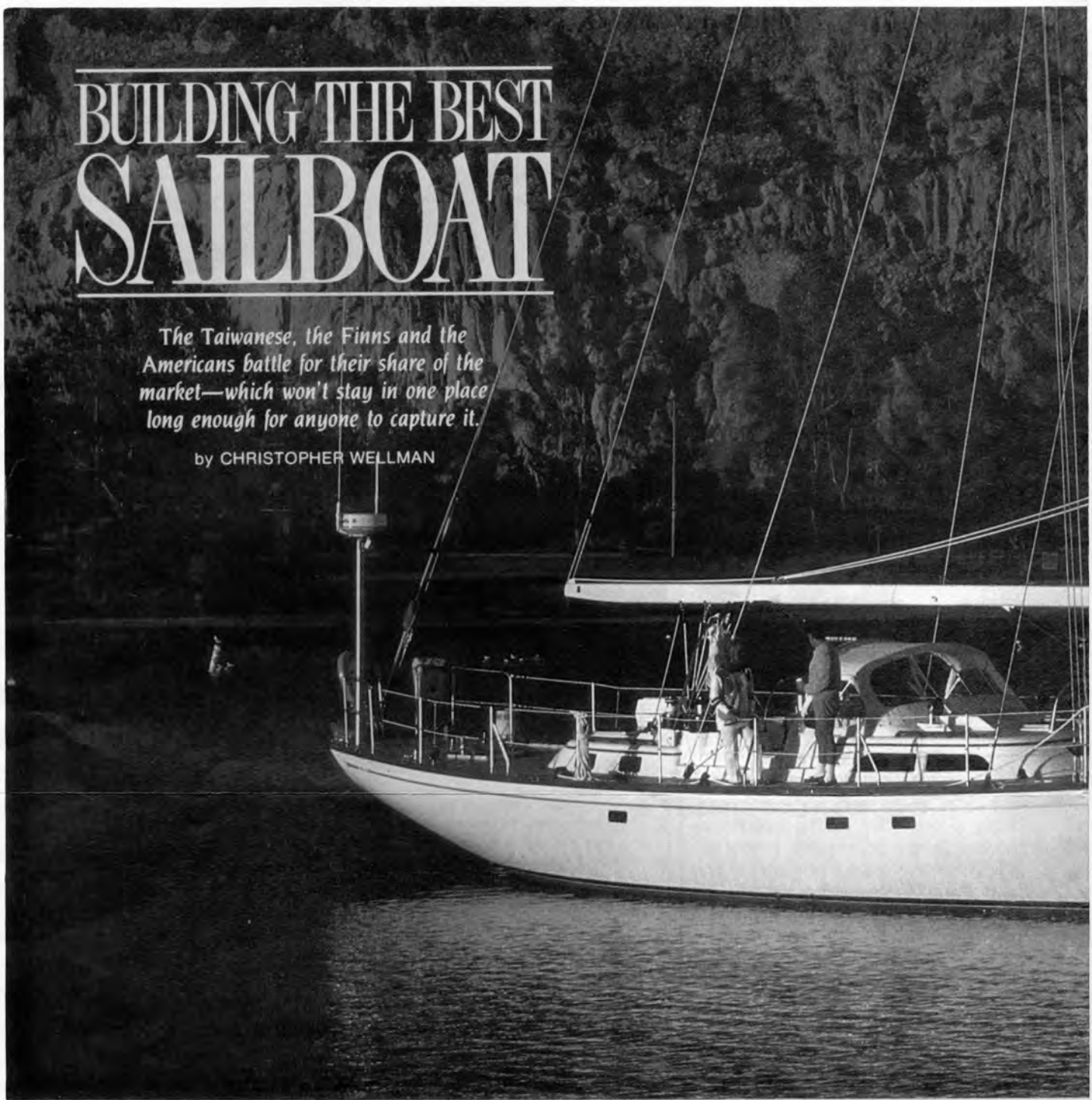


BUILDING THE BEST SAILBOAT

The Taiwanese, the Finns and the Americans battle for their share of the market—which won't stay in one place long enough for anyone to capture it.

by CHRISTOPHER WELLMAN



Slightly smaller than the combined size of Massachusetts and Connecticut, Taiwan has the largest concentration of boat-builders in the world—a remarkable fact, considering that pleasure boating is banned in Taiwan because of friction with nearby mainland China. But despite this and other limitations, the Taiwanese have forged an industry that today is second to none in the world.

The first Taiwan-built sailboats started trickling into the western United States in the late '50s and early '60s, mostly for ex-servicemen who had traveled to the Orient in search of

cheap labor to build their boats. Returning to the U.S., they often found that they could sell the new boats for up to twice what they had paid; in no time, they were ordering more.

From a meager base of 28 boats in 1971, exports have grown to more than 1,600 in 1987, with a value well beyond \$200 million. The United States, with an insatiable boat-buying market, accounts for more than 80 percent of all of Taiwan's sailboat production.

While the original advantage was the low wages, Taiwanese builders soon became just as renowned for their use of exotic woods such as teak, which is so plentiful on the island that disposable

shipping cradles were built of it.

Whether through foresight or plain blind luck, Taiwan consistently reflects the market's needs. When the fuel crisis of the '70s brought the powerboat market to its knees, Taiwanese builders, who already had a reputation for building fuel-efficient trawlers, continued to prosper. And lately, with the trend toward quality cruising sailboats instead of racing yachts—a market shift that has brought hard times on many builders—Taiwan, already known for its performance cruisers, remains on top of the heap.

If anything is to prevent the Taiwanese from taking over the world sailboat



market, it will be their lingering reputation for once having built shoddy boats. Part was the fault of foreigners, who were largely interested in quick profits; part was because the Taiwanese had no boating knowledge of their own, and part was because they had little competition.

Early Taiwanese boats were often unprofessional and unseaworthy in design, with crude installations and substandard equipment that was often impossible to repair or replace after delivery stateside. In one case, an owner drilled into what he thought was a solid lead keel, only to find that it was filled with millions of pachinko balls that

poured out in a rusty stream. Other owners had similar frustrations trying to replace broken hinges or find replacement parts for winches.

A second generation of importers entered the picture in the 1970s, bringing with them a new concept: quality control. Many of these importers even put their own managers on site at the shipyards to insure that the construction and outfitting of the yachts would meet American standards.

One such importer, Pacific Asian Enterprises, established such a high standard that its line of sailboats could only be compared with the very finest semicustom yachts from America and

The Mason 64, Pacific Asian Enterprises' most recent import, is designed and built to satisfy specifications dictated by Lloyd's of London (above).

Scandinavia. When PAE first came upon the Shing Sheng yard, it was building mostly junks for local use, but had the potential to move into yacht construction. The company started with traditional plans from the boards of Al Mason, a noted American designer, then invested considerable sums to teach yard workers how to use fiberglass, wire a boat, install bulkheads, and create exquisite furniture-grade joinery.



PAE's Mason 44, an updated version of the Mason 43, features a larger and deeper cockpit, as well as an improved dodger arrangement on deck (above); the galley (right) and salon now boast fixed windows.

The Taiwanese government, meanwhile, witnessing the surge in boat-building, established free trade zones that permitted companies such as PAE to import duty-free American-made engines, winches and other marine hardware, assuring top quality as well as readily available spare parts for future owners.

PAE today has imported more than 200 yachts that stand at the pinnacle of quality. According to company partner Joe Meglin, "Our main competitors are and always have been Hinckley, Alden and Swan." The first two are small-volume, high-quality American



builders; the last is a Finnish company considered by some to be the Rolls-Royce of sailing yachts.

The most recent PAE import is the Mason 64, an adaptation of the company's earlier 63-foot motorsailer hull into a gorgeous offshore cruising yacht with fiberglass hull, laid teak decks and spacious interior; as many as four separate cabins include an oversize owner's stateroom. As a tribute to the quality of her construction, a Lloyd's +100 A1 certificate is available, affirming that the boat was built to the stringent Lloyd's of London yacht specifications, which include frequent spot-checks by professional marine surveyors during various stages of con-

struction.

Most American buyers, though, will probably be more interested in one of the smaller PAE imports, such as the Mason 33, a traditionally pretty little yacht that one broker calls "sweet and saucy." Aside from its conservative lines, the main distinguishing feature of the Mason 33 is its superb finish, inside and out. All interior corners are carefully rounded, the teak is joined with nearly invisible seams, and the electrical and mechanical installation is flawless. Even the lockers are finished completely, an example to the many boatbuilders who leave these unseen but important areas in a raw state.

A larger sister is the Mason 43, equally traditional but with accommodations for up to nine in a two-cabin arrangement that was conceived for offshore sailing and cruising for two families. Again, PAE construction standards have resulted in a finish that is comparable only to custom yachts.

Because the old Shing Sheng yard (renamed Ta Shing) acts only as a subcontractor to provide the various Mason yachts for PAE, it retains the right to build boats for other importers. Several current models reflect the quality that comes out of the yard.

One of these, the Taswell 43, began with a design by British naval architect Bill Dixon. The 43 is the first in a series of performance cruisers, the second of which, a 49-footer, is soon to arrive in the U.S.

The deck arrangement of the Taswell 43 is based around a center cockpit that gives the crew good visibility as well as more than average distance from the water. Inside, three alternate accommodation plans are available. All start with a spacious aft owner's stateroom, complete with queen-size berth and a private head with shower. One plan features a wraparound galley facing a circular lounge area, while the second tucks the galley into the passageway to the master stateroom. Forward, the guest stateroom can be fitted with a traditional V-berth, or a double berth offset to one side. Both arrangements feature a private head and shower compartment.

The Taswell is lighter than the Mason, with a fin keel and spade rudder often seen on ocean racing yachts, as well as a shallower canoe-style hull form. The result is somewhat less interior space, though this problem has been minimized by increasing the deck height.

Like her various Ta Shing sisters, the Taswell is built to construction stan-

dards that meet the American Bureau of Shipping specifications; a certificate of inspection is available at extra cost.

While the Taiwanese sailboats found their niche in the U.S. market as a result of low prices, Nautor of Finland has taken the opposite tack with its Swan series, designed for the buyer for whom price is no object.

Swan yachts have traditionally been the elite of the sailing world: not necessarily the fastest (although one won the 'Round the World Race), never the most

were done by Britain's Andrew Winch, a specialist in luxury yachts.

The final product will be unsettling to some conservative Swan admirers: The traditional wedge-shaped cabin, a distinguishing feature despite its compromise on headroom, is missing. Replacing it is a stylish cabin surrounded by what could be best described as "gull-wing" windows, wrapping up onto the cabin top much like the doors on the classic Mercedes. The result is a striking appearance, as well as an airy interior with a skylight effect.



The MASON Lends itself to customization. Above is an example, MASON 44 #12 "AQUILA CHASE", featuring a full electronics package.

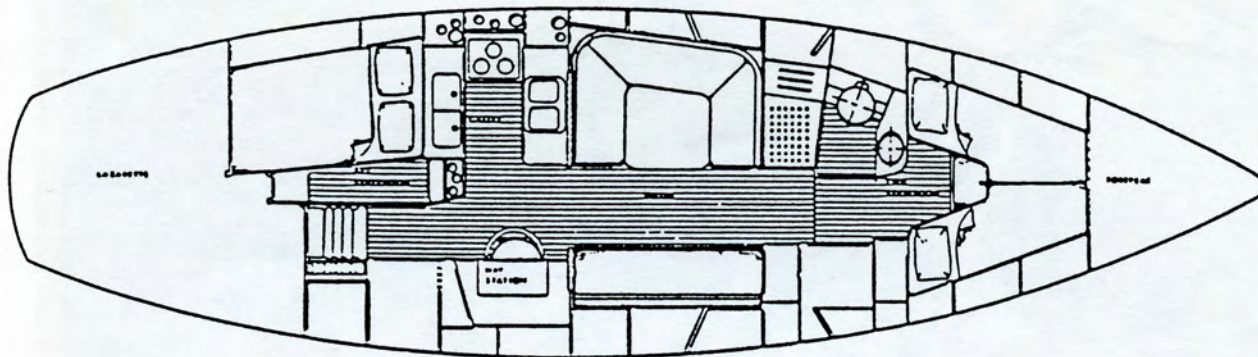
avant-garde in styling, but always distinguished by solid construction, immaculate detailing and understated luxury. A case in point is the Swan 36, a brand-new offering for the American market.

Two decades ago, when Nautor was an obscure boatbuilding company in Pietarsaari, Finland, it took a giant step in commissioning the prestigious New York naval architectural firm of Sparkman & Stephens to design a 36-footer. That first boat not only became a classic, but established Nautor as the world's quintessential yacht builder.

This time around, Nautor chose German Frers Jr., an Argentine naval architect who had once trained at S&S, to draw the lines; the styling and interior

The accommodations are for two couples in separate cabins sharing a single enclosed head; the central salon has been designed to maximize the lounge area under the large windows. More fiberglass is used than on earlier Swans, though the effect is still Scandinavian, and the teak glows with a soft luster.

Swan, like the builders of luxury automobiles, doesn't go in for lengthy option lists, so the boat is well equipped in its standard form. With a sailaway price of about \$250,000 delivered to the U.S. East Coast, it should appeal to those who can afford the best.



What conclusions can we draw from looking at these new imports from Taiwan and Finland, as well as their American-made competitors? The most obvious one is that Taiwan has come of age: No apologies need be made for owning a modern Taiwanese yacht, which now competes on an equal footing with the finest semicustom models.

And finally, cruising is here to stay. For too long, sailors have been made to jump through the hoops of various handicap rating systems, resulting in ill-shaped boats that were sleek and fast but difficult to sail. But no longer. While

MASON 44 (Plan A)

Where To Order

Barcelona Trading Co.
326 First St. Suite 21
Annapolis, MD 21403

Phone: (301) 268-7333
FAX: (301) 268-1110

many of the companies are still using the phrase performance cruiser to suggest the best of both worlds, the vast majority of today's yachts, both foreign and domestic, will never see a starting line. Which is fine with most owners, who are more concerned with comfortable, dependable sailing than with cumbersome systems that add a knot or two to their cruising speed.

Chris Wellman is a Florida-based writer who has contributed to a number of boating publications.

Barcelona Trading Company
326 First Street Suite 21
Annapolis, Maryland 21403