



RETURN OF THE

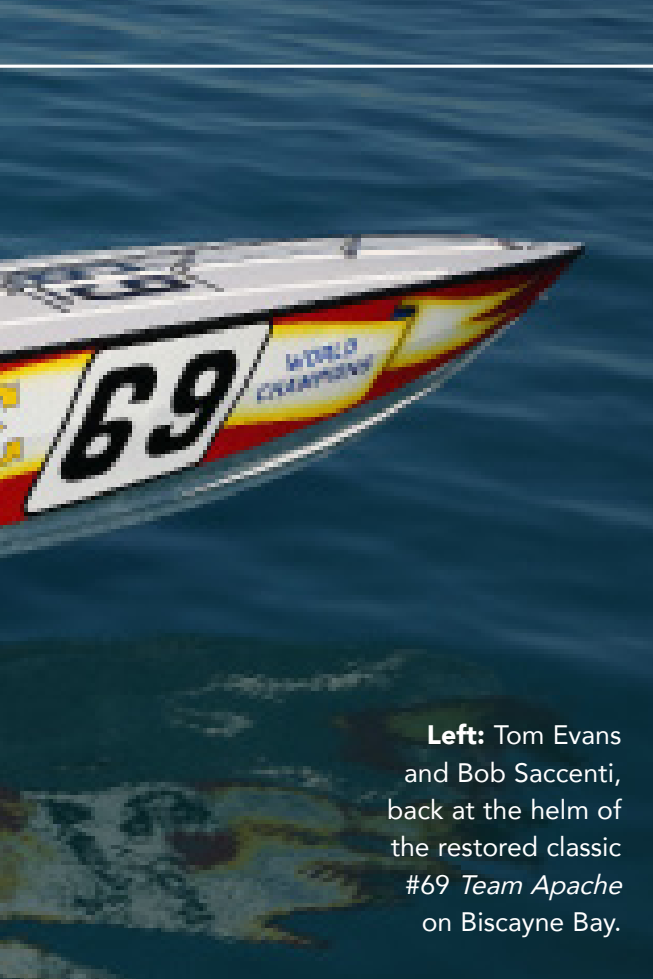
Apache

Back in the early 1980s, when offshore powerboat racing was at its peak, Ben Kramer's #69 *Apache Racing Team* was a well-oiled machine. "We were in sync," says Bob Saccenti, noted throttleman with Kramer at the helm and Tom Evans as navigator. "We each had our job—everyone knew they had to get it right." The team raced in several boats and one became known as "the banner boat" because of its hand-painted flowing white banner with "Team Apache World Champions" lettered in gold on a bright red background. The team won numerous checkered flags and championships before Kramer's racing career prematurely ended.

The boat changed hands a number of times over the next three decades, as many race boats do. Then an online ad caught the eye of a South Florida classic boat collector who always wanted a 41 Apache—not one of the many existing pleasure boats, but a true classic with race heritage. He called Bob Saccenti to see the boat and have it surveyed, since no one would know the boat like the man who built and throttled it, and cemented a notorious portion of his racing career in it. Saccenti approved, the boat was purchased and its resurrection began.

TNT Custom Marine on the Case: Just like the Apache Racing Team, John Tomlinson and Mike Thomas at TNT Custom Marine have had a tight-knit, small team of passionate motorheads who also





Left: Tom Evans and Bob Saccenti, back at the helm of the restored classic #69 *Team Apache* on Biscayne Bay.

Presenting the reemergence of a World Champion thoroughbred: *Team Apache* undergoes a major restoration, and looks better than ever.



Left: Years of neglect and stagnant salt water left stringers, fuel tanks and fiberglass on the Apache in a sorry state, but TNT Custom Marine worked hard to get everything back into shipshape. The entire dashboard, helm and engine compartment was gutted and refurbished. Guardardo Marine worked tirelessly on restoring fiberglass and applying new paint.



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Above: The completed hull was shipped to Ocala for Gail Paik to work her magic, hand painting the “Team Apache” design she created over 30 years ago.

work in sync, getting every job done to perfection. They began in a garage shop as teenagers and have grown the business to a full service rigging shop and marina on 135th Street and Biscayne Boulevard in Miami. The duo took the racing world by storm with Tomlinson at the throttles of World Champions like *Drambuie on Ice*, *Bacardi Silver* and *Performance Boat Center/Jimmy John’s*. Thomas ran the shop and they worked together whether on land or on the water, racing and rigging their sponsors’ and customers’ boats. Over the years, TNT became the performance force and preferred shop for international powerboat aficionados.

Having already completed one impressive renovation for this boat collector (the spectacular *White Tornado* Bertram, raced by Italians Vincenzo Balestrieri and Francesco Cosentino), the owner again called upon TNT to undertake the Apache’s reconstruction.

TNT stripped the boat from top to bottom. “In these kinds of renovations, you have to always expect surprises around every corner,”



New authentic props, drives, trim tabs and Latham Steering completed the Keith Eickert power package.



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Above: The crossed American flags and Apache hatchets recall the warrior image of *Team Apache*.

Above right: The dash, updated with modern technology, recalls the clean and authentic racing look, thanks to Cutting Edge.

Above right: Analog gauges complete the retro look.



SACCENTI IS BACK AS FLORIDA PERFORMANCE BOATS



"I got bored!" Bob Saccenti laughs, as he explains how after a long and illustrious career as a powerboat builder and racer, he got back in the game.

Turns out that Peter and Carlos Repo, of Fibertech Fabricators, sons of one of his long-time colleagues in his boat building days, nicknamed "Repo," were building boats in a Pembroke Pines shop from a 21' Apache Scout mold that Saccenti had created. They asked if he wanted to help them and he saw it as a good opportunity to put his skills to work. Ironically, the boys' father used to bring them to the shop and tell them to, "Go help Bobby!" Now they are following in their mentors' footsteps and Saccenti feels he is working with "family."

Not contented to build a 21' boat, Saccenti suggested they go a little bigger and asked his buddy, Charlie McCarthy, Sr. founder of the Historic Offshore Raceboat Association (HORBA), if he'd sell him the 27' Aronow mold that he owned. "Charlie said, 'No, but I'll give it to you!'" Saccenti again laughs. "So I went up to Massachusetts and got the mold and we started building the boats."

Following the outboard rage, Saccenti made a deal with Evinrude to use the company's new performance models on the boats and he is delighted with the performance. Once word got out that he was back in business, he started getting calls for new boats, refurbishing older race boats, and now he is as busy as ever. "I love what I am doing," he says, "Restoring old boats and building a few custom boats for selected discerning customers who can't find what they want on the market."

Saccenti thrives on the exciting heritage of the boats he works on as much as doing the performance boat work himself. He is thin, spry and filled with energy. "This is what I have always done—this is what I know and I love it!" he says. Getting back into the business made him want to get back into a race boat and maybe start a new team. "But my wife, Yoko, says, 'No!'" he chuckles, so he'll keep building and rebuilding the future, based on the past, which he remembers as clearly as if it happened yesterday.

For more information, call Florida Performance Boats at (305) 965-7428.



The team gets ready to rock at TNT Custom Marine, which managed the entire rebirth of *Team Apache*.

says Thomas. “You fix this, clean this up, then something else happens. It’s harder than building a new boat from scratch.”

A lot of bloody knuckles go into this work. For example, when removing the trim tabs, they found saltwater corrosion behind the plate, “like a cancer, eating it away,” says Thomas. Since they don’t make those Kiekhaefer Aero Marine offshore dual-ram trim tabs any longer, TNT started searching and luckily, a connection of Saccenti’s found a brand-new pair, still in the box. Similarly, when they examined the fuel tanks, they looked OK from the top, but the bottom had rotted out, necessitating fabrication of new ones to fit the old boat. Amid the broken stringers, rotted wood and outmoded, worn-out dash and upholstery, the boat’s “bones” were still intact, as was its heritage, so a top-notch group of vendors collaborated to restore it to its glory days.

“And you can tell them that Bob Saccenti still has the ‘Magic Throttle Arm!’”

—Bob Saccenti

Steve McGinnis of Progressive Racing Engines in Miami Gardens refurbished the Keith Eickert engines, including fabricating new intercoolers to replace the leaking aluminum equipment. The boat’s engines had originally been built on GM big blocks, which had later been replaced with Merlin 575 blocks. But under McGinnis’s professional watch, the engines now look like finely polished jewelry and run like hell on wheels—complete with new BAM Marine transmission and Mercury #6 drives that of course had to be “cajoled” in to replace the old #3 drives.

Recalling his work for Kramer and

Apache, Eickert reflected, “That was quite a time in my life—quite an experience!” After leaving Mercury Racing in Wisconsin, Eickert moved to Florida to work with Preston Henn and Rocky Aoki. As always, Saccenti had his eye out for talent, and when he formed Hawk Marine with Jerry Jacobi, they recruited Eickert, and then he went on to become part of the Apache team. As you can see, many race boat projects are a “six degrees” to Bob Saccenti. (More on that history later.)

MC Engineering’s Mike Cuzno, a retired marine fabricator who has a 5,000-square-foot shop in Gainesville,

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Evans and Saccenti shared a lot of memories—and laughs—on this ride.



“You fix this, clean this up, then something else happens. It’s harder than building a new boat from scratch.” —Mike Thomas

was called on for all things that “got lost” over the years—including hinges, which he recreated from memory, the drive shaft cover, wind faring and an engine step plate. “I can make just about anything,” he notes, and has worked with TNT and other race teams and boat builders for about 30 years, handling the “devil in the details” work from templates and measurements to fit exacting specs.

The dash was outmoded by new technology that didn’t exist in the 1980s, so Cutting Edge in Fort Lauderdale came to the rescue. Jeremy Moening grew up around engraving in the marine industry and artistically combined old-world skills with 21st century technology, CNC routing new aluminum panels, anodized with a brushed black finish and an engraved logo. The Apache dash is now functional, but still appears authentic.

The upholstery followed suit, with Miami Prestige (the “go-to” family-owned marine interior business since 1971) taking on the challenge. Roger Delarosa even came out of retirement to help direct Reinier Lopez’s current team on this project, duplicating the cockpit from pictures. New bolsters, cushions and floors were installed and now the black cockpit has the menacing look that earned this team its tough to beat reputation.

With the boat renovated and rigged, its crowing glory was to be the paint. But Guardardo Marine in Opa-Locka still had their hands full, replacing and repairing rotted stringers and spent copious hours of labor, completely refinishing the hull. Eddie Guardardo and his team perfected the fiberglass and repainted the hull, preparing it for graphics.

Wanting to be as authentic as possible, the owner was discussing computer reproductions of the original banner art. Some other Apache owners had tried for

replication, but to create a truly authentic renovation, Saccenti suggested the original painter, Gail Paik. Paik was an intrinsic part of Team Apache over the years. She had married Tom Evans and was the “den mother,” organizing the team to ensure perfect race preparation—and, of course, dynamic artwork on its boats.

Saccenti tracked Evans and Paik down in Ocala, FL. The couple was fascinated to hear about the banner boat renovation and Paik agreed to re-paint the graphics she had created over 40 years ago. TNT trailered the boat from Miami to Ocala, where they rented a paint bay and from memory, and Paik recreated the original Team Apache graphics. “I can execute the design I created—it’s a gift I have and this was a labor of love,” she smiled proudly.

A Little History: There are many stories about the origination of the Apache brand, but “this is the real story,” laughs Saccenti. “I know because I was there—I was the founder!”

Saccenti’s entry into the boat-building industry began with a New York teenager’s dream to go to the Brunswick, Mercury service training to learn about marine engines—but he needed a recommendation to get in. A family member knew Don Aronow from his New Jersey construction days, and at that time, he was making his name as a boat builder in Miami.

Aronow wrote the recommendation, saying that Saccenti worked for him. Saccenti excelled in school, and even laughs that the Mercury guys would try to get him to talk about what Aronow was building. Keeping his “cover,” Saccenti would say, “Oh, I can’t talk about what he’s doing—sorry!”

After graduation, he made a trip to

the Miami Boat Show to personally say thank you to Aronow, who was at the top of his career with Cigarette Racing Team. In response, Aronow gave him a job. Again, Saccenti excelled, learning the trade, building boats, working for the master and racing with many teams; he built his reputation as an illustrious racer “with the magic throttle arm.”

After years at Cigarette, Saccenti starting his own business, Race Headquarters, with Aronow’s support who often lent his protégé his crew to assist with customers who wanted to go racing and needed assistance in building a boat. By this time, Tom Evans had started rigging boats for Saccenti and was rapidly learning racing through OJT. Born into a roofing business family, Evans’ father saw his inclination for boats and engines and got him a boat that changed the course of his life, from climbing on roofs to climbing under boat hatches.

In the late ’70s, one of Saccenti’s clients, a Golden Gloves boxer who was of half Cherokee Indian and half Irish decent, wanted a fast boat, so Saccenti created two presentations of team graphics that would portray his personality. One was a charging bull, inspired by the popularity of the hit movie *Raging Bull*, while the other was American Indian-themed. “I always liked the Apache tribe because they were fierce fighters, so we created this Apache warrior face with a headdress. That’s the one he picked and that is how the name Apache started,” he explains with almost incredulous joy.

As Saccenti planned to build the new Apache boat, he approached Aronow about a 41’ hull that he had, but couldn’t use, due to one of his non-compete contract clauses as he started and sold boat companies. He gave Saccenti the 41’ Aronow-designed mold, which became the first Apache pleasure boat called *Warpath*, and the Apache Powerboat Company began. The logo was then refined by Gail Paik, who by then had become a part of the team, based on a gold coin that Saccenti had.

Paik, a petite and powerful woman, hit the 1970s offshore racing world by storm. As an airbrush artist from L.A. in the textile business, she took a trip to

Florida with her then husband, who built a powerboat and wanted to visit family and friends in the marine business. They met Tom Adams from Signature Marine who asked Paik if she would paint a logo on a leather jacket—which led to boat hatch. Once she put large-scale paint on fiberglass, she fell in love with the work and a new genre of boat graphics began.

“I loved boats!” Paik exclaims. “No one was doing exotic paint jobs then. DuPont was just coming out with boat paint and they put stripes on the side. It was so boring! I tried spraying the boat paint with an airbrush and started doing murals on boats, quickly becoming very successful, putting the owner’s name, number and personality on the boat.”

At that time, Paik caught Saccenti’s attention. “She was this dynamo little Asian woman with long black hair, air-brushing boats in high heels,” he recalls, “I had to have her work with me.”

“I was given a lot of power,” says Paik, “It made me into a bit of a monster, but I love to create. It was flattering when people used to copy my art, but no one would imitate the Apache feathers—that was ours. Apache put me on the map,” she adds. “All these years later, people still have an affinity for Apache—it has its own mystique.”

By this time, Saccenti had teamed up with Ben Kramer in a shop on Thunderboat Row and he took Kramer out for a ride in the *Warpath* pleasure boat. “We cranked it up for a test in rough, blue water, ran it about 90 mph and the boat was unbelievable!” Saccenti exclaims. Kramer was enthralled and excitedly said, “Let’s go racing!” and another new chapter in Saccenti’s racing career was about to explode.

“We were wild hippie-like kids, but we followed Bobby because he was a great leader,” says Paik. Elaborates Saccenti: “When you have the right crew and teams work together, everyone in sync, you win races. Ben was the most intense. He wanted, and we all wanted, only to be first. If he was at it today, boats wouldn’t be going around in circles. We’d be racing from New York to Miami and running to Bimini.”

After running *Warpath* for a year and

winning a number of races, including the World Championship in Key West, Team Apache built the “Banner Boat” that they ran for one year, plus other race boats, including the Apache Cat that won a National World Championship. With Kramer driving, Saccenti throttling, Evans rigging, Eickert in charge of power and Paik in charge of the team, Team Apache had a great run of about six years, traveling around the world, living to race.

“It was our everything. Your family would never see you, but we knew we had something amazing going on and we couldn’t think about anything else,” Saccenti says. “We were serious—after the race, we could go crazy, but not before.”

The team had a ritual. Evans would

go, and would then ride in the helicopter during the race. They won races and kept winning—and even when they came in second, they had wild stories to share.

Getting the Band Back Together: In February, as the owner prepared to have a video and photo shoot of the test drive to document the resurgence of the boat, he called Saccenti, Evans and Paik and asked them to come to Miami for a reunion. When Saccenti approached the boat, sitting on the trailer, he patted its side and said, “It’s OK, Daddy’s here!” As the trio met at TNT, they looked at each other with déjà vu and delight. Getting into the boat was like old times, except that Paik was in her husband’s old position, and he was taking Kramer’s place at the



Bob Saccenti, his wife, Yoko, Gail Paik and Tom Evans.

stay up all night going over everything in the boat; in the morning, he and Saccenti would fly over the course in a helicopter, evaluating the race course and water conditions. At the driver’s meeting, they would misinform the other racers about the conditions while they perfected their setups. Eickert would pull each spark plug, doing a reading to make sure each was just right. Paik would have their uniforms and helmets lined up and ready to

helm. Saccenti was right where he was used to being, the throttle in his hand.

As I flew overhead in the helicopter, with Forest Johnson leaning out the window shooting video, I could hear the roar of the engines, feel the glory and saw the joy in the boaters’ faces—reunited as if they had never been apart. The boat ran flat out into the chop, hopping small waves, getting some air and reflected

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off the bright Atlantic waters. They took wide and sharp turns and then stopped for a moment as steam flowed from the exhaust. As we held our breath, Evans hopped out from the helm and nimbly slid through the slat in the engine hatch, just like in the “old days,” disappearing for a few minutes. Then he remerged and Saccenti restarted the boat, getting back up on plane without a hitch. We breathed

a deep sigh as the boat headed due west. We imagined them headed to Bimini for another race and not wanting to return to shore.

When we did get back, the team was regaling each other with old stories and talking about the morning’s experience, like it was just yesterday that they were Team Apache. They are all trim, enthusiastic and lively—just a little older, but

still as much fun. “It was just like old times,” Paik laughed. “The two of them together again was wonderful! They have the same language—they were delighted to be in the boat again.”

“He knows what I’m thinking, I know what he’s thinking,” Saccenti laughed. “We don’t have to talk. It’s been a long time, but we were together for a long time too!” Evans agreed: “That was just the way we used to do it—go out for a test, straight out!”

They talked about the Key West race in 1985 with big water and crashing waves. “Ben kept pushing my arm to go faster, then we hit a rogue wave,” Saccenti recalls. “I had the boat trimmed out and we went up in the air—it was probably for a split second, but it felt like five minutes! Wondering what I was going to do, I felt the boat coming down and saw blue water coming over the nose—I knew we would stuff and get hurt. We all crouched down in the bolsters, but I still had the throttle in my hand, so I hit it hard and the boat came up. I saw Tom and Ben’s eyes like silver dollars, then we said, ‘Let’s go!’ and raced ahead to come in seconds behind the first boat.”

Paik relayed how when they got back to the dock, she ran out, expecting to see the boat split into toothpicks. The guys were all sitting on separate picnic tables, in a daze, just trying to get their breath, and Eickert ran up to see how the engines survived. “That was a testament to the strength of fiberglass,” Paik said—not to mention the strength of the team.

To see this group now, well into their golden years, but still lithe and loving life, was a glimpse into the golden years of racing. It was a time when offshore racing was truly offshore—when racing beat up boats and bodies, and when a generation of racers built a legacy that extended to future generations. And perhaps that is what keeps them so young, still tasting the excitement that they lived over 40 years ago.

“And you can tell them that Bob Saccenti still has the ‘magic throttle arm!’” he laughs, the magic still evident in his gleaming smile as well. **SB**

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