

SHIFTING SANDS

FROM THE SCRAP CART AT CHRIS-CRAFT TO A LINE OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORT YACHTS,
S2 YACHTS HAS COME A LONG WAY. AND THEY'RE NOT DONE YET.

BY DANIEL HARDING JR.





To really understand what makes Tiara yachts unique, you need to get under the hull.



My quads are burning, and my feet feel like they're on fire. It's counterintuitive but I shove them deeper into the searing sand hoping to find relief in the cooler sand below. I'm trying to keep up with Tiara's Director of Marketing and Communications, Whitney Vishey, on a hike that the marathon runner says is "popular among young people looking for a place to get away from their parents and get into trouble." But on this day, a quiet, midweek afternoon in the summer, the only trouble I see is with my dress-shoe-soft feet.

Sand sticks to my sweaty calves as we make our way up the face of an enormous dune on the shore of Lake Michigan's 1,000-acre Saugatuck Dunes State Park. Heart racing, I finally near the top before turning to look back at the expansive body of water below. It's my first time on Lake Michigan, and the sheer vastness of it—more like an inland ocean than a great Lake—steals my breath faster than the hike did.

Anchored off the shoreline and looking awfully inviting is the newest member of the Tiara Sport line, the 43 LS. With a sunshade covering the bow area and towels neatly folded over the aft cushions, it looks like an oasis on the water.

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Hours earlier I was a few miles and another world away touring the million-square-foot factory that is S2 Yachts, parent company of Tiara. Just driving to the rural Holland, Michigan plant was an experience in and of itself. Winding country roads took me through mile after mile of fields, past horse pastures and more red barns and silos than I could count. I splurged and paid the extra \$20 for the pickup truck from Avis (you know, for journalistic purposes); it was worth every penny. Blake Shelton lyrics cranked through the speakers that fit this place perfectly:



*Right outside of this one church town
There's a gold dirt road to a whole lot of nothin'
Got a deed to the land, but it ain't my ground
This is God's country*

To say this was the last place I expected to find a yachtbuilding giant would be a gross understatement. Nearly 23 acres of covered production space is a hard thing to comprehend, but that's what appeared ahead of my windshield as my phone tried to convince me: *You have reached your destination.*

Pickup trucks and motorcycles fill the parking lot that easily accommodates S2's nearly 700 employees. One of the first boats built by S2 founder Leon Slikkers meets us in the entryway. Not yet familiar with Leon's background, I thought to myself that the beautiful wooden runabout looked a lot like an old Chris-Craft, but I didn't pay it much mind as my tour of the yard began.

For a factory in such a rural locale, I envisioned the plant as resembling some of the more hardscrabble Maine boatyards I'd seen. Not so.

From their ventilation system to their use of robotics, it stands among the more modern yacht facilities I've toured. In one corner, a robot separated and sorted planks of plywood, labeling each with a barcode corresponding to the hull it would call home. Only after a kit was fully packaged would a human employee come and cart it

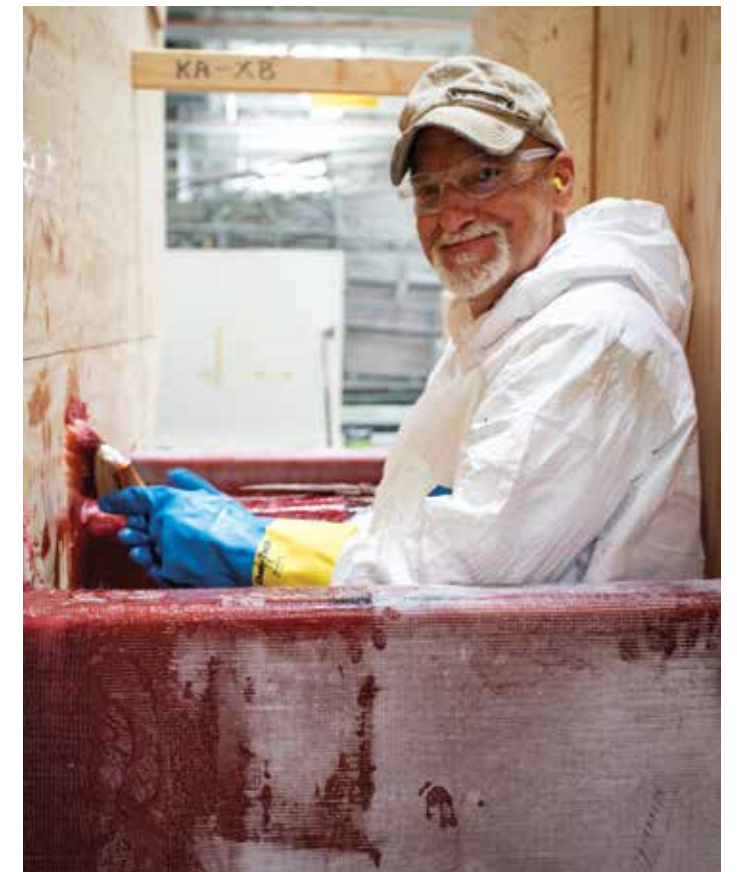
off for assembly. C&C machines, automated varnishers and a slew of other Jetson-style robots were working around the clock. At the time of my visit, the state's unemployment level was at a record low; S2's use of robots isn't intended to supplant their long-time (sometimes life-long) employees, but rather to fill in the gaps of a skilled labor shortage.

A nearly single-file production process, when married to their stringent bar code system, seems to be optimally designed to build boats quickly and with very little deviation. The numbers don't lie. S2, which at the time of my visit was still building a few last Pursuits (the brand was sold to Malibu boats for a reported \$100 million) was hoping to roll 400 boats off the production line by the end of 2019.

As I trace the production line, I spot a sign that causes me to do a double take. Written across a large white board was the abbreviated scripture:

*Oh, that we might know the Lord!!
Let us press onto know Him,
And he will respond to us as surely as the coming of dawn or the rain of early Spring
— Hosea 6:3*

God's country indeed.
S2 Yachts is a family-run business now employing its third genera-



The common thread among the diverse workforce at Tiara is a passion for building the best boats possible.



Patriarch of the family-run business, Leon Slikkers may not be as hands on with the company as he used to be, but that doesn't mean he's slowing down.

Beginning with a single step, and a cart of scraps, Leon Slikkers faced constant challenges along the way, shifting sands and unforeseen obstacles that threatened to send his family business tumbling.

tion, but Leon Slikkers did not only pass a boatbuilding empire onto his family, and by extension his employees, he instilled a faith-based (7th Day Adventist) work-life balance. In their faith, Saturday is the Sabbath and therefore S2 employees (the human ones at least) are not allowed to work that day. No emails, no working a boat show, nothing.

I walk past the sign and move on to where all Tiaras are baptized: A pair of enormous tanks where everything from the radar to the underwater lights are tested before delivery. The only things they don't test, I was surprised to learn, are the engines. For warranty purposes their power partners need to be on hand for that part of the job.

I returned my requisite safety goggles and earplugs and made my way back out into the bluebird country afternoon. I again passed the wooden Slick Craft with a fine mirror shine and thought, damn that's a pretty boat.

That Slick Craft continued to gnaw at the back of my brain after I returned home from the Midwest. It took a few weeks of trading emails with his personal assistant, but I finally scored a phone interview with the 91-year old patriarch of the Slikkers family. How busy could Leon possibly be at his age? Boy, was I in for a surprise.

"Hey Leon, thanks for taking the time to chat. You're a tough person to get a hold of," I started our conversation.

He laughed and said, "Yeah, sorry about that. I'm preparing for a bike race that's close to 50 years old. It covers about 300 miles in four days."

"You're kidding," was about all I could muster.

"I love biking," he continued. "Gives me an opportunity to get out the door. I'm behind this year though. I should have done more training."

"Where does a drive like that come from?"

"I think I got my drive from my mother and my skills from my father. I liked to build things at an early age. That's why I wanted to work at Chris-Craft and work with wood."

That was my *aha* moment. "When I turned 18, I was hired there," he said.

During Leon's tenure at Chris-Craft, he would ascend



The author grabs the helm of the newest member of the Tiara Sport family—the nimble 43 LS.

Diets be damned. A trip to Grand Haven, Michigan isn't complete without a couple (dozen) corndogs from Pronto Pups.



the ranks rapidly, he explained. At the ripe age of 24 he would find himself managing more than 60 people. For the second time in all of about two minutes I was left impressed. I asked him for his secret for managing people at such a young age.

“I think I’ve always had good people skills. I always try to put myself in their shoes. I try to be a part of the team,” he says. “I don’t like to be their boss; I like to work with them.”

His ambition and energy couldn’t be confined to his already skyrocketing career, and he sought to put his few free leisure hours to use.

He explained that when Chris-Craft had a cart full of “useless” scraps of wood they would sell it to employees for \$5 with the idea that they could use it in their stoves to help heat their homes in the winter. Leon saw potential beyond home heating.

“A friend and I would buy scraps from a scrap cart. I put an order in for mahogany battens and we drew up plans for a 14-foot outboard-powered boat. That’s how I got my start.”

In 1955 he would make the difficult decision to leave Chris-Craft and strike out on his own. In his early 20s and newly married, Leon, with the blessing of his wife, Dolores, would sell their dream home to take a chance on his own venture.

“All I had was \$5,000. I found a nice place off the highway where there was an apartment over the shop.”

He and his late wife would live in that apartment for eight years as he built his business with the help of friends he made at Chris-Craft; most would join Slikkers after their day shift ended. Leon speaks fondly of those early days. I got the sense that perhaps it was those humble beginnings, with the possibility of failure looming above his head like

his boatyard apartment, that were his most memorable.

“I often say, You have to believe in yourself and believe in what you’re doing. I had the passion that I felt I needed to follow my dreams,” says Leon. “As you grow, you expand your dreams. You always think, what’s the next step? I never thought [back then] we’d be this big or successful, but that comes like you’d peel an onion.”

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The newest iteration of that trajectory manifested itself in the 43 LS that I found myself aboard the day after my factory tour. The largest of the company’s outboard sport boats—a line that includes 34 and 38 footers—it made its debut at the 2019 Ft. Lauderdale boat show and has enjoyed widespread popularity since.

It was easy to see why. Blasting around Lake Michigan, I was impressed with the performance (46.8 knots at the top end thanks in part to triple 425-hp Yamaha XTOs) and appointments of the 43.

After a morning run up the lake, we met up with a second crew that was running a photo boat alongside us. Sitting down for a fried seafood lunch in Grand Haven, I had the chance to meet Product Manager for New Product Development, Chris Caropepe. While Chris was relishing the day’s mission and the excuse to get out of the office, his two boys, Jake, 12, and Colin, 9 (“and a half”), were perhaps enjoying it more. Full of spunk, as boys that age tend to be, they quickly stole the show—especially young Colin. Strong opinions and random musings from the 9 (“and a half!”) year-old kept our crew entertained for the better part of an hour. Stuffed in a way that you can only achieve from fried food, I would be peer-pressured

by the Caropepe clan to join them in local tradition: eating a corn-dog at the famous—some say infamous—Pronto Pup stand.

Now, I should admit here that I’d never had a corn dog. As a general rule I try to avoid “meats” that come served on a stick. But as they say: When in Michigan. We all stood on a longer-than-you’d-expect line behind locals and tourists alike. I had to shake my head when I got to the front and saw a sign that read: “This is cholesterol country. Health addicts please continue on and have a nice day.”

I didn’t hate it. It had a strange texture and didn’t do anything to help my cholesterol but if you find yourself in Grand Haven, go on and live a little.

Impressed by Colin’s chutzpah, blunt honesty and snack recommendations, I asked him for his opinion on the 43 LS in the hopes of getting a kid’s point of view on this family-friendly cruiser. And boy did I get it.

The first thing he jumped to show me was how to operate the fold-down TV that lowers from the hardtop at the push of a button. “I see that it has ports on the TV so you could even hook up a gaming system back there,” Colin explained. “Xbox or PlayStation?” I asked. He’s an Xbox kid.

Colin then led me to the salon/cockpit, a space we both agreed was our favorite. “Back here is really open and the seat turns so if you’re parked at the beach and want to watch the beach or a sunset you can just swivel it around.” The 360-degree rotating cockpit seating has been stealing the show since it debuted on the 38 LS at the 2017 Ft. Lauderdale show, and it has been a staple of the line since.

“If we go towards the front,” said Colin as he all but dragged me to

the bow. (I couldn’t help but think he would make a fine yacht broker in no time.) In the bow lounge he pointed out the nice mix of textures, cup holders and the table. It’s a great spot for four or five adults to sit and enjoy the view. The forward-facing seating in the bow even sports a raise-up leg rest. I admit, I struggled to lift the rest on my first try; thankfully there was a kid on hand to do it for me. “I got it,” he said as he adjusted the leg rest into place. I had never felt so old in my life. “I’m glad you’re here,” I said. “Yeah, I figured it out,” he replied, his swagger continuing to swell. If you couldn’t tell, he was a fan of the 43, and I have to say, so was I.

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Fast-forward an hour, I was just about ready for a fried-food-induced nap when we nosed the bow of our 43 up to the shore of Saugatuck Dunes State Park and embarked on the aforementioned white-hot hike. Like most things in life, it wasn’t easy, but it’s the hard climbs that offer the best views. Soaking up the expanse of lake and the 43 bobbing close to shore, I got to see this place and that boat from a whole new perspective.

The climb towards being one of the largest boatbuilders in the country wasn’t easy either. Beginning with a single step, and a cart of scraps, Leon Slikkers faced constant challenges along the way, shifting sands and unforeseen obstacles that threatened to send his family business tumbling down.

The path for S2 Yachts, not unlike our hike, was challenging, damn near strenuous at times, but I guess it’s not until you take the time to turn around and look back that you can appreciate how far you’ve truly come. 🍌