

My FireBug Build...

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By Mike Harrison

In Johannesburg South Africa



Photo 1: My dog, Jessie, signs-off on the chines.

“So, is this the boat you made, Mike?” asked my cousin, pointing over her shoulder at the 30-footer behind her. “No, this one Elaine,” I replied directing her to my Firebug at her feet. “Oh,” she said, “oh....” hand to mouth, pausing. “It’s nice Michael, very nice.... very nice”. Her expression was more like, “Is this what you’ve been going on about - what’s the big deal?”

For a big chunk of my life I too would not have made much of seeing the Firebug that day. I had not yet experienced the joy of sailing, the essence of a sailing boat or the satisfaction that comes with making something.

A Christmas sometime back in the 1980’s awaked me to the concept though – but it didn’t last. I was contemplating what to get as a present for my brother, Noel, who had a strong interest in all things medieval. I joked with my other brother, Graham, that I would love to give him a Viking Catapult. Graham said it needn’t be a joke. He quickly sketched a design after which we went to the closest hardware shop to buy the parts – mostly wooden planks. We built our mini-catapult (about the size of a large wheelbarrow) late into that night.

The catapult looked good and it was a delight giving it to Noel. But, it was a dud. The only shot it fired in anger was its own wrapping, which barely made it across the living-room. What stuck with me, though, was the realisation that one could go into a shop, buy a plank and turn it into something.

My enlightenment faded but was re-kindled about two decades later at another family Christmas – at Graham’s again. He showed me the lounge-unit that he’d made. Nice, I thought without taking too much notice. Then some photos of his kids. The photos were set in frames he’d made from pallet-wood, given a stressed look with a kind of cat ‘o nine tails arrangement he’d hooked up to his drill, stained to look old. I was more intrigued. Upon leaving I noticed his workshop in the corner. In contrast to the clamour of folk saying their goodbyes and the departing vehicles, the workshop looked peaceful and steady, patiently waiting for its operator. I went to take a look. There was Graham’s multi-function work-centre, a work-bench, a compressor and things. A little wooden sword he’d made for his kid from an off-cut lay next to the vice. What was it that grabbed me so much about the atmosphere in there? Was it the warm, woody smell? The relaxed organisation? The sense of industry and anticipation suggested by the tools lying in their last-used position? What did Graham feel like when he was working here? Why did the energy feel so good?

Whatever it was, it was intoxicating and I resolved to do it too. I tooled myself up, took up woodworking and was hooked. At about the same time I decided to act on a sign I’d noticed many times during my daily travels. It featured at a small urban lake and beckoned one to, “come learn to sail here.” Soon I was taking sailing lessons.

The confluence of these, my two new mid-life hobbies, led logically to the next project – a sailing boat. A big one was out of the question. So, I set about researching one that I might be able to handle – and arrived at the Firebug! The “Build a Boat and Learn to Sail” slogan summed up exactly what I wanted to do. I liked the vibe behind the Firebug and its people. I ordered my plans and immediately got feedback from Peter Tait in what has proved to be the start of a valued long-distance friendship forged by exchange of emails.



Photo 2: Jig and stations complete. Ready for the pretty stuff - the chines and gunnels.



Photo 3: Finally the right way up - decking next.



Photo 4: Most of the hard work done, the finer work can begin.



Photo 5: Rounding the mast. I loved watching the shavings curl through the plane (I first tried a spoke-shave but couldn't master it - the plane worked just fine).

Given my limited experience, the Firebug was an exciting but somewhat intimidating project. At first blush I often didn't see something in the plans but after a while I realised that everything I needed to know was there somewhere. I just had to look and take one small step at a time. From these, the boat started coming together. One evening I looked at her still upside down, her chines and gunnel bending around her jig, glowing in the late afternoon sun. It looked so beautiful that I almost didn't want to spoil it by carrying on. But I did of course and after about 6 months Firebug Sail Number 1110, Buggy, was launched and sailed. One of the pictures my brother took of the event shows - all in the same photo - a jet on landing-approach, a train scuttling by, motor-vehicle traffic en route to the highway and pedestrians milling about. Against that busy backdrop is Buggy, sailing with no care in the world other than to celebrate her 'boatiness' and all that is great with being on the water and sailing. We had become part of the Firebug family. I had built a boat and learned to sail.



Photo 6: Like a mother goose and her gosling, Buggy being very comfortably roof-topped on my LDV.



Photo 7: Final briefing from friends Andrew and Israel before Buggy's maiden sail.

What had started with taking up woodworking, sailing, building Buggy and all had grown into an ever brightening and increasing sailing-vista. Early in 2015 I bought a keel boat, a Hunter 19, and became a member of a lovely boat club on the Vaal Dam which is just over an hour's drive from my home in Johannesburg.



Photo 8: Bugsy's maiden sail at Victoria Lake Club, Germiston, Johannesburg.

I was due to enjoy a camping weekend there over the Easter of 2015. The Thursday immediately before that I went by motorbike to the shops up the road to get sunglasses. I patted my dogs goodbye, as I always do – saying, “back in 20 minutes, girls.” It would be 3 months. Riding back a car burst through a stop street at speed without stopping cutting directly into my path. There was a car coming in the opposite direction as well. I had nowhere to go. My last thought was, this is going to hit. When I came to, I was lying on the far corner of the intersection dazed and confused. There were people all around me. My left leg looked impossibly skew, inhuman, ripped open and scorched black. My right leg too, lay limp and skew. My whole upper body lay over my left shoulder. I had broken both my legs and crushed my left shoulder to the extent that it required surgical replacement.



Photo 9: Instead of a lovely camping weekend - this!



Photo 10: My brother, Rex, visiting during my recovery.

I, like everyone else, had seen accidents. I had seen people in distress. I had always been on that side of the line – on the outside looking in. The sudden realisation that I was now the one being looked at - that I was the one in a major accident – was stunning and numbing.

An ambulance arrived and spent some time stabilising me where I lay. Afterwards, the paramedics transferred me to a stretcher and then into the ambulance. A clean looking, kind face - the head paramedic - appeared just inches above mine and said, "Michael, my name is Benedict, I'm going to look after you, don't be scared." The words were slow, clear and confident – like drumbeats. It sounded like he really meant it. I didn't know whether to scream, cry or keep silent. I found myself just saying, "OK Benedict" in a tone that also sounded like I meant it and with a calmness that surprised me.

I tried to distract myself by thinking of my most pleasant memory. I thought back to when I was a kid in the 1970's on a family camping holiday alongside the river just before sunset sitting in front of our big green canvass tent, thick with the smell of mothballs and mosquito repellent, a gas-lamp hissing in the background, fireflies floating past (my sister trying to catch one in a glass) and a herd of goats meandering through.

Benedict turned back to his aides, asking "vitals? ok? This stuff (the painkillers)'s not touching sides, give him more." "Look," warned Benedict - speaking to me again, "don't get a fright if you hallucinate, this one's going to make you start seeing flying elephants." I was actually doing fine with my goats, I wanted to say.

From there it was a series of four operations in two weeks and three long immobile months in hospital, the last month of which was in rehabilitation. The physiotherapists scratched their heads as to how to get me walking again since, given the nature of the injuries, we had no anchor point (such as at least one good leg or 2 good arms to hold crutches) to start with.

Like with the Firebug Plans, here too we had to find our solution – and we did. We put the crutches under my ribcage, my left arm just strong enough to hold the crutch in position. I would never have thought as an adult, that standing up and trying to walk could be such a difficult and frightening task.

We slowly came right and today, although my legs are not as strong or flexible as before, they can walk and for most purposes I can function normally. My shoulder is stiff, often sore and lacks range of movement, but it works. Most importantly, I'm sailing again!



Photo 11: Finally sailing again - with my nephew on my Hunter 19 at Vaal Dam (Feb 2017). This was the Saturday pre-race to the popular annual Round the Island race taking place the next day.

All of this got me thinking that it's funny in life that when we like something we try to like it more by making it bigger or by making more of it. We strive after the grand when it's often the little things that bring us the most satisfaction. When I thought of (or think of) my most pleasant moments, it's my goats, it's that feeling in my brother's workshop, it's seeing Bussy on her jig with the sunshine on her ribs, it's the satisfaction of making something with my hands. None of these are important on the scale according to which we would ordinarily judge importance.

That's what I wanted to say to Elaine that day when she seemed so underwhelmed by my boat. I wanted to say that it's not about scale, it's not about wow, it's just that I built this Firebug. I didn't acquire it, it wasn't part of a commercial process. It was carefully and lovingly created. It sails. It taught me something, it took me to a special place and it's one of the best things I've ever done.

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