



WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

Pontooners Temp Fate on Lake Michigan

Twenty years ago, most of the Boating staff was reluctant to consider the pontoon as a real boat. True, a pontoon is buoyant and could move under its own power, but was it really more than a floating patio? Usually propelled by a 20 hp Evinrude outboard and trailing a cloud of two-stroke smoke as it chugged around the lake on a sunset cruise, a pontoon was, in our jaded eyes, little more than an excuse to drink beer.

Well, times do change and so have pontoons and our attitude towards these very versatile, very sophisticated boats. These days you can get a pontoon built for luxury, for speed or one built for a party. However, pontoons still leave us wondering why, for example, if you want to go 70 mph you wouldn't just get a nice fiberglass V-hull speedboat? The reason, I think, is that pontooners are a different breed of cat. I was reminded of this when one of our favorite pontoon boat owners wandered into the Lake View Inn last weekend.

Upon crossing the Lake View threshold, Malcom Sohm was greeted with a chorus of "Goof, Goof, Goof!" by the crowd at the bar. Known to all as Goofy since the day, on a dare, he rode his minibike for a lap around the halls of Oshkosh High School—after he crashed, the principal pronounced him goofy, and it stuck as a good nickname—the man is a full-blown pontooner. Decades ago he commissioned a custom pontoon and, dissatisfied with its performance on the choppy waters of Lake Winnebago, he designed what I believe were the first lifting strakes for pontoons. He received a patent in 1999 for his T.A.P. Fin System and has been awarded several more since. His patented design has been licensed by some pontoon manufacturers and worked around by others.

Goofy slipped off to North Carolina a while back, so it was a surprise to see him in the Lake View. I guessed he was up to something.

"Buddy, this summer is the 25th anniversary of my Lake Michigan crossing, and I'm going to do it again in July," said Goofy. "You've got to join me."

A few years ago I used this space to tell the story of Goofy—once again on a dare—crossing Lake Michigan in his GS26 pontoon, an 87-mile voyage from Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, to Frankfort, Michigan; a real adventure because the boat was not equipped with GPS or even a compass. There was no cell phone, and the two-stroke Mercury 200 outboard guzzled fuel. He followed another boat with a chart plotter, piloted by a hung-over crew that got way off course. Goof had to burn every drop of fuel from his 43-gallon tank plus six extra gas jugs he stowed on deck. The 6-foot seas made it extra exciting.

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"A lot has changed in 25 years," said Goof. "I've lined up a triple-tube Godfrey Monaco 255 with a V-8 Merc 300, a 61-gallon fuel tank and GPS. We'll cruise like kings! Run over for breakfast and turn around and come back!"

From behind the bar, Wally rolled his eyes and started humming "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." But I can't turn down Goofy, and what could go wrong? In a modern pontoon this should be a piece of cake. I might still reserve a rental car in Michigan.