

as seen in  
**extreme boats magazine**



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**PHOTOS** LON DIEHL

# McLeod DESIGN GROUP

When Mark Twain said, "Name the greatest of all inventors... accident" he described Michael McLeod. McLeod Design Group is the boating interiors company that has revolutionized seating for manufacturers Formula, Baja and Sunsation, and for many aftermarket powerboat customers in between.

Whether by 'accident' or fate, McLeod had "go fast" and design in his blood. Early in his career, he "hung out with all the crazy guys—rebels, who wanted to change the world!" While the others went to work at GM or Ford, McLeod worked under the tutelage of Heinz Prechter at American Sunroof Corporation, whose work included custom interiors for limousines and other automotive prototypes. He also worked with the Ford LeMans Racing Team in the 1960's and developed ergonomic seats for racers that would be both safe and comfortable—long before ergonomics became a household word.

McLeod then went to American Motors, but after creating the interior for the sporty Javelin and Jeep Wagoneer—and even some wild Gremlins with blown engines-- the final straw for his automotive career came when American Motors dumped the Javelin for the geeky Pacer. McLeod started to look for other options where he could use his talent and the fateful accident occurred. He went boating with a friend's buddy who was building powerboats. A little spin around inland Michigan's Lake Belleville turned into a life-changing experience, as the rookie driver who knew only how to go fast, accidentally, ejected McLeod from the back seat. Mike saw the light, realizing that the marine industry needed him and his ergonomic background.

His search led him to Formula Boats where he felt he could make a big improvement over their in-house interiors. Mike originally met with Grant Porter (now Executive VP, then, Product Development Manager, in the company parking lot so he wouldn't upset his upholstery staff. McLeod was probably lucky to not get booted when explained his reason for selecting Formula as his first prospect. However, Porter was open-minded. "At that time we made all of our upholstery, and were reluctant to look at an outside supplier. Mike showed us an innovative bolster seat that we started installing in our 302 performance boat," he reports.

In 1984, Formula introduced two new boats, the 419 and 356 and they wanted a new interior design. Since they thought McLeod's new concepts were too radical, he developed a "conventional" seat that remained in Formula's production until 1992. Then, another new boat was brought on line and the company wanted something more exciting. When he pulled out his proposed design from 1984, in a new light and decade, Formula said, "That's more like it!" and has used that seat until today.

"He is one of the most talented people I've ever met!" says Sam Blythe of Formula who has worked with McLeod over the years, "He is artistic in his approach to upholstery and has improved our product so significantly that due to his influence, we are on another level from most manufacturers. He is a perfectionist," he adds, "There is no line between insanity and genius—he is insane!"

"They all tell me I'm nuts," McLeod laughs, "I just go by ergonomics 101. The faster the boats go, the more focused we need to be on ergonomics. Stability is the major issue,"



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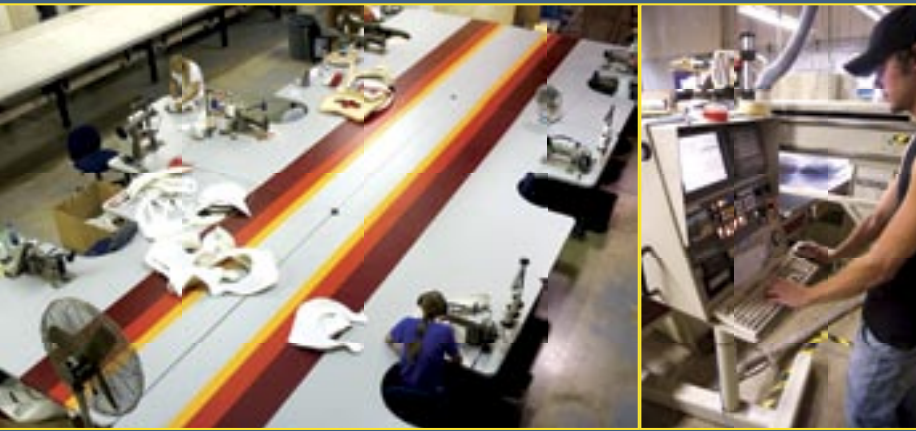


# interiors



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he says, having had that importance again stressed to him through another accident—a rear-end collision in 1992 that left him with nagging back injuries. A dedicated fitness buff who has worked out since he was 16, McLeod understands how the body works and what makes it comfortable. Consequently, his seats have support for the arms, neck and hips at the proper points, facilitating correct posture. The footrests are an extension of the bolster, compensating for the height differential. His drop-seat cushions pivot in line with the hip joint, providing comfort whether seated or standing. “Most [drop seats] are comfortable either one way or the other, but not both,” he says, explaining each feature, “My headrests are sculpted for the nape of the neck—right where you need support so you don’t snap your head from hitting a hole in the water.”

Everything is scientifically engineered for the body to take impact and that is accomplished by working with McLeod’s own version of the crash test dummy, “Oscar.” He designs around this 6’ tall design tool, sculpting a foam seat that wraps the lumbar area, providing lateral stability, as well as providing protection for the legs. However, a 5’ 10” “robust” man can also be comfortable in the seat, given 3” of lateral movement for each side of the torso. “When we can provide that for the small gals—we’re looking to make a side-to-side adjustment in a narrow seat—then we’ll have done it all!” McLeod states.

Another ergonomic feature of McLeod’s seating is a vertical grab handle that uses less resistance strength. Located on the back of the front seat, the passenger can hold on without strain. The design passed the test for the Swedish Navy, which uses the seats because of their comfort and quality. Each piece of the construction is bolted into a stainless steel frame for strength and durability. The seats are rated to 10G of force with 300 pounds—the military specs that provide for the durability and quality that McLeod delivers. “I’ve never broken one!” says Vic Spellburg who has run a Formula boat or two in rough water.

McLeod’s patented designs, proprietary parts and quality command a premium. “After-market reaction ranges from ‘Holy Cow! That’s expensive!’ to realizing this is sophisticated and no one has anything like it—not even close!” he states.

“There is a difference,” says Wayne Schaldenbrand president and CEO of Sunstation Boats, with McLeod interiors, “People get partial to it—[the seats] really fit you.” Sunstation made the hook up with McLeod during the early 90’s when the company first developed the 32’ Dominator. “The sizes of our companies are ideal for each other—we’re lucky he is so close to us—it’s a good relationship,” he says of Sunstation’s Algonac, Michigan, location, about 65 miles from McLeod’s Taylor, Michigan firm.

“McLeod does one of the nicest interiors we’ve ever seen,” Schaldenbrand adds, “And we have him do everything in our upholstery from the cockpit to the engine hatch. The quality is the upside—he sees things from a different perspective. His opinion is very valued—he knows boats and has improved our boat building—in and out.”

As Sunstation built its new F-4, McLeod developed a new generation bolster. They even sent him a sample half boat to use for exact fit. In addition, the electric footrest is incorporated, as is a bench back seat with sculpted grab handles, integrated into the gunnels, cup holders and steps to facilitate entry and exit. A new sunpad is surrounded by a protective fiberglass frame, with inset, removable cushions, thus avoiding literal wear and tear by the raising and lowering of the engine hatch. The Sunstation logo stitching on the sunpad is so detailed and labor intensive that it takes a full day of hand-sewing to create, but that is part of the overall attention to detail. The F-4 also features a new cabin, totally designed by McLeod to his exacting ergonomic standards.

“We can’t build ‘the same’—people want new, different. It has to be high-profile. The customer is the leader,” Schaldenbrand states, “This is all new to the industry—an exclusive,” bemoaning only that prototypes always take longer.

If there is a weak link in the chain, manufacturers agree that it is delivery time and that’s where daughter Stephanie has come to the rescue, making McLeod truly a family business that works well with other family businesses. A former flight attendant, Stephanie recently came back to Michigan from Phoenix with her husband, to work with her Dad on the business side of the business. “I want him to be able to retire at some point, or be able to work from home,” she states, but McLeod will have nothing to do with retirement. “This is what I think about—how do you retire from thinking?!” he asks. Right now, he is thinking heavily about his new Matrix prototype with wrap-around electric arms, an automatic headrest and even on a whole new product for Formula.

“The marine demographic is changing,” says Blythe, “It’s different than it was 15 years ago. Formula still does the performance side of the market, but the market also points towards day boating; comfort is important there too. Mike [McLeod] won’t show his new product until he’s ready, but we’re looking forward to it—he is so wrapped up in everything he does—but that’s complimentary in every sense of the word.” -marilyn



**SPARE TIME**  
 When Mike is not at work, he’s probably out in his 1970 Chevelle convertible...

interiors