



Slikkers' second company, S2 Yachts, built high-performance sailboats.



Slikkers received a Lifetime Achievement Award in November 2021, which was accepted by son, Tom.



A Legacy of Innovation



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Tiara Yachts founder Leon Slikkers retired in September 2021 following a remarkable 75-year career as one of the world's most innovative boat builders.

by Craig Ritchie

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SLIKKERS FAMILY AND TIARA

Boaters around the globe bid farewell to a boat building icon last fall, as Tiara Yachts founder Leon Slikkers officially retired from a 75-year career as one of America's most respected yacht builders. Slikkers, 93, entered the boat building industry way back in 1946 when, as a fresh-faced 18-year-old, he left the family farm in Diamond Springs, Michigan, for the promise of a more exciting career building boats. Following in the footsteps of his two older brothers, Slikkers found a job at the Chris-Craft boat factory in Holland, where he took up a position in the joinery department making components for cabin tops. Eager to learn, Slikkers soon found himself under the tutelage of senior craftsmen at the plant, who shared their vast knowledge of materials, engineering, and the art and science

of building boats. That rich expertise kept food on the family's table in 1952, after a labor disruption saw the Chris-Craft employees walk out on strike and Slikkers left without a paycheck. With the confidence of youth, he continued to make ends meet by building his own boats in the family garage, completing and selling 10 outboard-powered runabouts by the time the strike was settled. While a subsequent return to full-time work at the Chris-Craft factory brought the security of regular wages once again, by that point the seed of enterprise had been sown. In January 1955, Slikkers left the steady job to start up his own company building boats of his own design, selling them under the name SlickCraft. To finance his dream, he sold the family home.



fiberglass, nor did they want to invest the time or energy that would be required to figure it out. But Leon saw that as a way to differentiate and to grow his business. It was something that would give him a distinct advantage.”

Boat buyers — eager to embrace the flood of new technologies coming to market in the roaring economy of post-war America — were more than receptive. Beyond being more modern looking and durable, SlickCraft fiberglass boats featured colored gelcoats that didn’t require annual repainting or revarnishing, a key feature that eliminated hours of tedious maintenance for buyers. It didn’t take long before sales of Slikkers’ new fiberglass boats exceeded even the company’s most optimistic forecasts. So successful were the new models that only two years later SlickCraft ceased production of wooden boats altogether in order to focus on fiberglass product alone.

Getting creative

The company grew steadily through the 1960s, as North American families made the most of their greater purchasing power and increased leisure time. Sales figures for Slickcraft grew year after year, while one competitor after another followed Leon’s lead and introduced new fiberglass models of their own.

Like any successful family business, it wasn’t long before SlickCraft attracted the attention of much larger conglomerates. One of them, bowling equipment manufacturer and Hatteras Yachts parent American Machine and Foundry (AMF), was particularly determined to acquire the SlickCraft business; in September 1969, AMF made Slikkers an offer that was just too good to refuse. Thinking of his family’s long-term financial interests, Leon Slikkers sold the company he founded to AMF, staying on as president.

The happiness was short-lived, however, and it didn’t take long before Slikkers found himself at odds with the new owner’s approach to boat building. His contract around the sale of SlickCraft included a non-competition agreement, which would prevent Slikkers from leaving AMF and starting up another powerboat company for at least five years. But the non-compete clause said nothing about building sailboats.

So, that’s exactly what he did. Slikkers left AMF and began building sailboats under the name S2 Yachts — the S representing Slikkers, and the 2 marking the fact it was his second boat company.

Although Slikkers’ career had been confined to building powerboats, he hired the best marine



engineers he could find, and S2’s sailboat designs soon earned praise for their sea keeping and easy handling. A focus on high-quality construction and innovation through the implementation of new technology saw the business flourish. When Slikkers’ non-competition agreement with AMF expired in 1975, S2 Yachts promptly re-entered the powerboat market with the launch of its all-new Tiara division the following year.

The Tiara era

Like the headpiece worn by royalty, Slikkers envisioned Tiara Yachts as representing the highest standards of luxury and refinement, and something to be treasured by their owners. Once again leveraging the latest innovations in technology and engineering, the new marque quickly caught on with yacht buyers at the top of the market, and became highly sought-after by buyers both on the Great Lakes and in coastal markets.

In a nod to the salmon fishing craze gripping the Great Lakes in the late 1970s, Slikkers even created a special fishing model called the Tiara Pursuit. That single model proved so popular that it eventually grew to become an entirely separate company — Pursuit Boats — with its own manufacturing plant in Florida. Tiara ultimately sold Pursuit to Malibu Boats in 2018, in order to focus on producing luxury yachts. Today, Tiara employs more than 600 people in Holland, who work in the comfort of a state-of-the-art, 800,000-square-foot manufacturing facility.

“You have to admire someone who has a passion for what they do that’s so deep-seated that they’re willing to sell their home, cash it all out and pursue the dream,” reflects Tom Slikkers, who succeeded his father as Tiara president and CEO in 2012. “When



my dad did that, he got \$5,000. That’s it, \$5,000. He didn’t have a place to live. He didn’t have a place to work. But he had a dream, and he had a vision, and he had a tremendous passion for building boats.”

That remarkable legacy was honored in November 2021 when, before an international audience of boat builders and media, Leon Slikkers was presented with the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual METSTRADE marine equipment trade show in Amsterdam, Netherlands — the first American boat builder ever selected for the honor.

“Without our father’s vision, passion and unwavering entrepreneurial drive over many decades, this company, its rich history, and all that’s been accomplished would not have been possible,” said Tom Slikkers, who traveled to Amsterdam to accept the award on his father’s behalf. “He has devoted his life to this business, and the Tiara brand will continue to carry on his legacy.” ★



Top: Leon and wife Delores test drive a classic SlickCraft model.

Center: Leon’s design influence is still evident in Tiara’s new 48 LS.

Bottom: Leon Slikkers changed the way boats are made.



Early pioneer

Slikkers’ first boats stood out in the market with their forward-thinking design and top-notch build quality. By the end of its first year, the fledgling company had built and sold a total of 35 boats — all 14-foot open models with formed plywood hulls.

Although it was the industry standard at the time, plywood was a challenging material for a boat builder to work with, being inflexible and highly vulnerable to rot. A revolutionary modern synthetic called fiberglass seemed to offer all sorts of advantages, being much easier to work into complex shapes and, unlike wood, almost completely impervious to water.

“Leon was an early pioneer who led that transition from wood to fiberglass,” notes son Tom Slikkers. “At that time, boats were all made from wood. No one was really interested in

Top: The Slikkers family — (from left) Kelly, Alex, Leon, Tom, David, Tim and Bob.

Center: Tom Slikkers succeeded his father as Tiara CEO in 2012.

Bottom: A young Leon Slikkers.