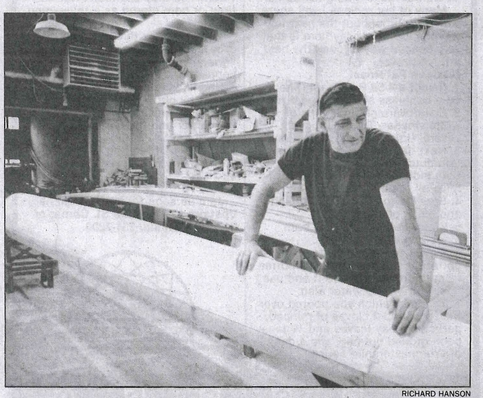

RICHARD HANSON

Mattison checks the shell of his 'rocket ship.'

SPORTS

BY DAVID MEDARIS

The Icing on the Lake

Iceboat racer Bill Mattison has designed a sweet new Skeeter.

After more than 50 years of catching cold winter wind in his face, it's not surprising that Bill Mattison looks so young—as if, from the neck up, age has been cryogenically slowed. Under loose-fitting, sawdusted and epoxy-stained dungarees, the body is lean and hard. And if he walks a little stiffly, if his lower back is a little sore, it's because he's spent most of the last four months in his garage on Williamson Street, laboring over his first new iceboat in four years.

Honeybucket 8 he calls her, and she's news for two reasons: Mattison is arguably the best iceboat builder in the world, and his new design represents a quantum leap in Skeeter construction. Already, in two weekends of low-key racing, the new boat has won four of its seven races.

Skeeters are the ultimate iceboat design, the Ferraris of hard-water

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sailing. A lot of people start out on little DNs or apprentice on Nites and Renegades, but all winter sailors aspire to pilot a Skeeter. Part of the allure of a Skeeter is that it is a development class boat; you can fiddle with it and change any dimension except sail area, which must be 75 square feet. And Skeeters certainly look sexy—which, for $12,000, they should.

But let's not kid ourselves. Skeeters go fast, and speed thrills more on ice than on any other surface. If a Skeeter goes at all it'll go 60, and on hard black ice just after a mist, with the temperature just below freezing and the wind at 20 miles per hour, racers spend most of their time between the marks at well over 100 miles per hour. That's one speed in a car and quite another on a frozen lake, where the pilot's ass is as close to the ice as a skateboarder's feet are to pavement.

It ought to be speed enough for anyone, and yet Mattison, 59, wants to go faster. He has wanted to go faster since he was 4 or 5 and hanging on to his first iceboat ride. He wanted to go faster when, as a reckless youth, he would steal iron fenceposts and "put them to better use" as runners. He was trying to go faster back in the winter of 1947-48 when he hit a slush hole that threw him from his boat and nearly killed him, rupturing his spleen, kidney and liver and leaving him, as he puts it, "full of sponges yet." He was looking to go faster when he built his first Skeeter, Honeybucket 1, in 1954. Even after winning his first International Skeeter Association championship in 1962 he wanted to go faster, and still—after collecting his 11th ISA title in 1986—he seeks the edge.

CATCHING THE WIND

The sailmakers have given Mattison his biggest boost in years with their new Kevlar-Dacron-Mylar combinations, which allow the sails to go taller to catch more wind. (To keep the sail area at 75 square feet, the foot or bottom edge is shortened.) "They tried 26-footers way back 15, 20 years ago, and the tops would blow right off because the fabric wasn't as stable," Mattison says. "But now, basically, the material is as hard as a piece of aluminum. It's like an airplane wing up there."

The spar, or mast, on Mattison's last Skeeter, Honeybucket 7, was 24 feet, seven inches. His new spar will be only nine inches higher, but that means radical changes in the dimensions of the hull and runner plank. "We're trying to make a package to go under the sails, that's all," Mattison shrugs.

That package bears only minimal resemblance to last year's Skeeters. The hull is a foot longer at 31 feet, including the springboard that holds the front runner. The plank that attaches under the cockpit and holds the two aft runners spans 20 feet, six inches, a full foot and a half longer than the plank on Mattison's last boat. The additional hull and plank length should provide enough stability to keep the boat from tipping under the forces acting on the taller sail.

But it's not just the dimensions of the boat that are different. The most striking aspect of the new design is the fundamental change in the hull's shape. Mattison has streamlined it, replacing the old boats' vertical sides with a rounded, tubelike shell. "This one I made kind of backward compared to the other ones," he explains. "I made a truss down the middle. Basically, there's no sides on this boat. To make an airfoil, to make it light enough, you have to eliminate something."

The truss and the 15 bulkheads, or ribs, that give the boat its shape are made of Sitka spruce, a particularly strong, long-grained wood that is a lot more confidence-inspiring than the boat's skin. Mattison has one ply of birch plywood on top and two plies on the bottom, and even though it's all coated with epoxy it looks like a rocket that would disintegrate on reentry. Perfect ice is as rare as it is black and smooth. Iceboaters must have at least four inches of ice to set their runners on, and by the time it's that thick chances are good there will have been a snow, or pressure will have made the ice pop and crackle until it's about as smooth as a Madison street. But downtown officeworkers gotta drive, and iceboaters gotta sail. And one or two plies of epoxied birch plywood, fragile as it may look, should be able to take the bumps as well as the pilot. "If it's a thoroughbred racer," Mattison says, "it's built right on the brink of disaster."

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

Iceboating in Madison, 1894.

Mattison has put in a little over 300 hours so far, building Honeybucket 8 to brink-of-disaster specifications. It's not the boat he made drawings of back in August. "I've modified it already," he says. "It's never been on the line. We've redrawn it, made a whole new set of bulkheads to a new number."

Alone, in the garage, resined and sanded but unpainted, Honeybucket 8 looks like a rocket. But it will look even more radical next to the standard Skeeters it races this season. "It's surprising how close all the Skeeters are to numbers," Mattison says. "I mean, the current Skeeters are as close together as a one-design. Changes are very subtle. It creeps ahead, a little at a time. It's like auto racing—there's no really major big-time thing. Now, this boat in here that I'm putting together, it's unbelievable the number of things I've changed. Everything about it."

Perhaps because everything about it is so different, the builder is unable to say whether it's "going to be a rocket or it's going to be a turkey." But so far Honeybucket 8 looks nothing like Thanksgiving dinner. Over the Christmas weekend, the new boat won two Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club races on Lake Kegonsa. Then, Mattison celebrated the New Year by nearly taking a regatta up in Green Bay: He won two races, came second in two more and would have sailed away with the trophy if he hadn't broken down in the fifth race. Even so, he placed second. This week he's back in the shop, making repairs and adjustments in preparation for more club races this weekend on Lake Mendota, conditions permitting.

Certainly Mattison hasn't raced iceboats for five decades so he could use his savvy to build an albatross. Ken Kreider, a Four Lakes veteran about half Mattison's age, has watched the boat's development closely, and proclaims it "a 1990s boat. It's a rocket ship. It's going to be absolutely the fastest boat out there."

Other testimonials concur. Bill McCormick, patriarch of the biggest iceboating family in town, says it with understatement: "I know it's a good basic design because Bill built it....He sails them, so he knows what makes them go. He's gifted. If Bill's working on it, it'll go."

The esteem in which he is held is revealed when Jim Payton, who retired from Skeeter racing a few years back but still serves as a judge at regattas, is asked if Mattison is the best boatbuilder in town. "He's not the best in town," he replies. "He's the best in the country. Used Mattison boats are the hottest things on the market."

MADISON'S ICEMAN

If Mattison is cautious about the new boat's prospects, it could be simply that he is the classic laconic Midwesterner. He was born and raised here, and started Star Photo while he was still a student at East High School. He can remember when the coal-burning furnaces in Madison homes would lay a dusting of soot on Lake Monona; the carbon would dull his runners. They were always sharpening or changing runners in those days.

But his caution could also stem from the fact that iceboats must be built to average. Most regattas are held Friday through Sunday, and conditions can change drastically from day to day—even between each day's races. "To win a regatta," Mattison says, "your boat has got to be down the middle of the pack. It's got to go in light winds, it's got to go in heavy winds, it's got to go in mush, it's got to go on hard ice, and every combination thereof. Even when the sun's in your eyes it's got to go fast."

And it doesn't hurt if the pilot is unflappable. "The second you think

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you've got it all figured out, somebody's going to knock the socks right off you," Mattison says.

That coolness is well-suited to ice. Iceboating can be a brutal sport. Asked what the rewards are, Mattison looks a little rueful when he replies, "Experience and abuse. Mostly abuse." Soft-water sailing is demanding enough, but hard-water boating involves a substantial beating. "You look like a little glider going out there," Mattison says, "but I'll tell you, you come out of there hammered, black and blue, just pulverized."

Iceboating has eaten far younger men. Every few years, Mattison admits, something drastic happens. Yet he'll tell you the sport has his respect—and that's as close as he'll come to saying it's dangerous. He's reluctant to talk about the aforementioned accident that almost killed him, perhaps because he doesn't remember even walking away from it, as witnesses said he did. But he almost appears to relish telling another story to Kreider, about a time he was watching a race and caught a forestay across his face at ramming speed. "I was one of these smart guys," he recalls, "and I was going to stand still and let him steer around me. I stuck to my convictions. Just as he came and I saw he wasn't going to miss, I jumped up in the air, and the forestay caught me right across here." He draws a line with his finger from his left temple across the bridge of his nose, where there's still a little scar, to his right jaw. "I hit so hard it broke the mast off, broke the back of the cockpit off, and I wound up on the runner plank like this, and I thought I was dead." For the next few months, he says, he looked like Long John Silver.

Certainly the sport should have long since pulverized the innovation out of him. Instead, his mistakes and rough rides have accumulated to shake up convention. Mattison will be fiddling with the new boat all season, changing runners and adjusting the rake of his spar like everyone else, but also shaving and planing to get an incremental advantage in a sport where finishes, after five circuits of the course, are measured in seconds. After all, he cautions, "It isn't going to come out of the box and just blow everybody off."

But few veteran hard-water sailors would be surprised if Mattison added a 12th ISA championship trophy to his collection come February, and it is toward that mark that he will sail, close to the wind, hauling hard on his mainsheet, trimming his sail like a jet wing. "The harder you pull," he says, "the faster you go." And Mattison pulls harder than anyone. ■