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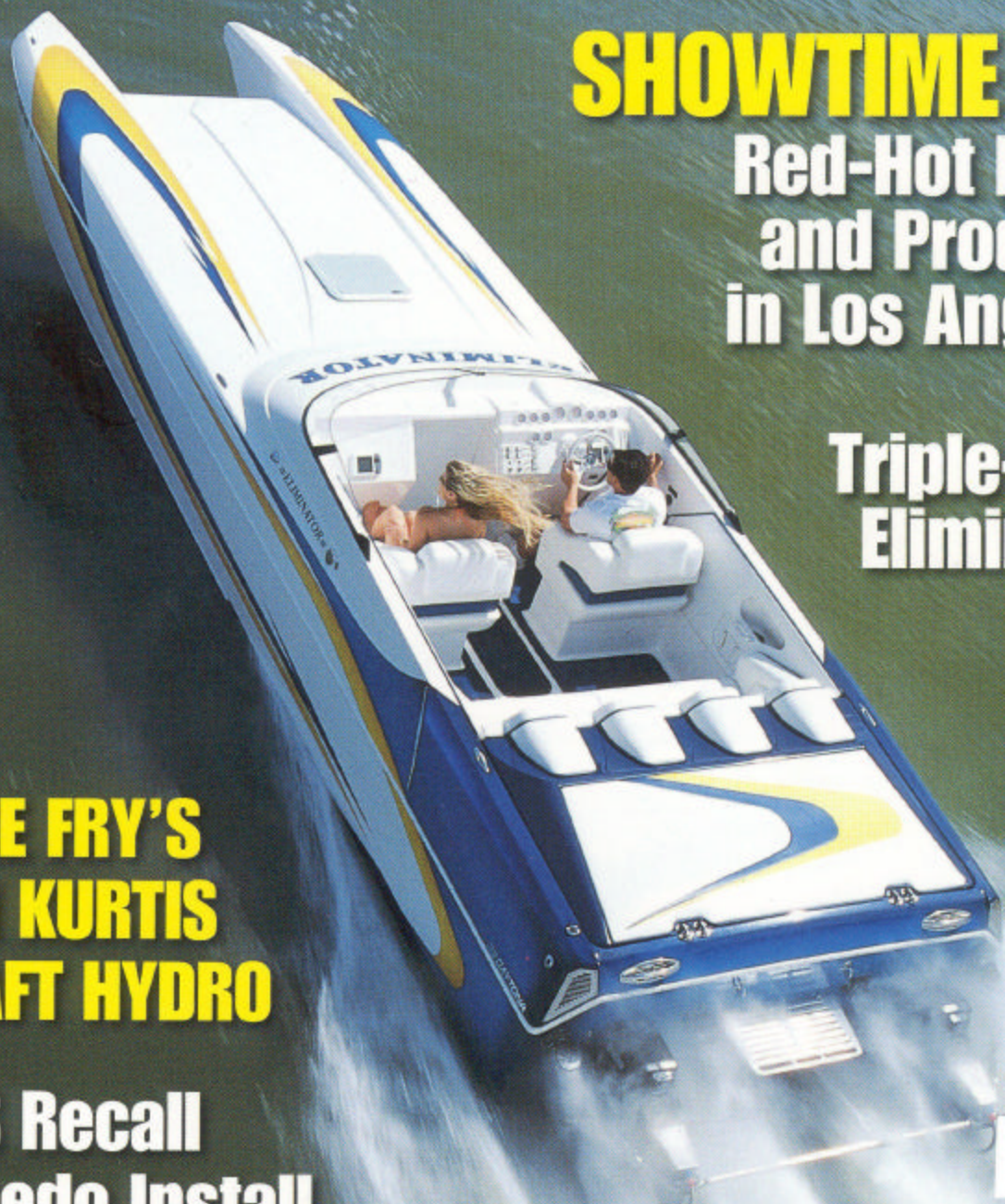
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## OBSERVER'S SEAT

BY KEVIN SPAISE



Editor-at-Large Kevin Spaise has occupied a number of editorial positions with *HOT BOAT*, including Editor, since the early 1970s. His byline has appeared in more than 20 magazines. Between assignments in such varied locales as Havasu and Florida, his home base is now Maui. You can reach him at (808) 875-8710 or via e-mail at h2oedits@aol.com.

## To Catch a Thief

**T**odd Schwede has become the John Walsh of performance boating. In California alone, a staggering 900 boats a month are reported stolen, and a growing number of these are performance boats. While that figure gives cause for pause, it is in itself typical of the murky world of boat theft, where things rarely are as they seem on the surface.

Todd Schwede, a marine surveyor and spearhead behind the San Diego-based Todd & Associates ([www.boatman.com](http://www.boatman.com)), has actively navigated this shadowy terrain for nearly a decade. Through an expansive nationwide fax network, extensive contact with law enforcement agencies (mostly in California, Arizona and Nevada), a Web site that elicits some 4,400 hits a day, and good, old-fashioned police work, Schwede has become the John Walsh of the missing-boat world.

He is every bit as tenacious. And his tenure has done nothing to reinforce his faith in humanity.

It is Schwede's experience (which includes a hand in the recovery of more than 200 stolen powerboats) that the owners are involved in some way in eight of ten reported thefts. Admittedly, these numbers are skewed, since Todd deals only with insurance claims, and do not take into account uninsured boats. He intercedes and investigates on behalf of 20 insurance companies and various lending institutions.

"Whether it's insurance fraud, a way to get the bank to pay for the boat or a divorce situation, it's an unfortunate fact that the reporting owner is involved in most of these incidents," says Schwede. Todd & Associates has pioneered

a proactive and tech-based recovery approach that has been phenomenally effective, by national standards, with a reported 68% recovery rate.

After a boat is reported stolen to the insurance carrier, Todd (or someone like him) is contacted for follow-up. His role ranges from a simple telephone interview with the reporting policyholder, to a full-scale investigation. He often enlists the services of right-hand investigator

, a longtime performance boating enthusiast who is also with the and who moonlights for Todd & Associates.

"Having done several thousand of these interviews, you can usually tell if something isn't quite right after 20 minutes on the phone," says Todd. "On a full investigation, we'll get the initial information on the boat, and a photo, so that we can prepare a flyer. We put it on the Internet and fax it to a network of over 8,000 locations nationwide—everything from law enforcement, launch ramps, gas stations near lakes, yacht clubs, marine surveyors, public park employees, even delis near the water—anywhere people might come in contact with the stolen boat. We may then decide to meet the owner eyeball-to-eyeball, depending on how everyone involved feels

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about the case. You can usually tell if someone is a legitimate victim. There are a number of things that send up red flags—someone not having a photo of their boat, not knowing the specific colors or equipment, or generally not giving us all possible information."

Not surprisingly, Lake Havasu City is a hotbed of theft-related activity because of its strong performance boating culture, its proximity to Las Vegas and Southern California, and the sheer number of transient and local boats. Local law enforcement there deals with a heavy theft caseload, and they are extremely aggressive and highly effective. About six months ago, the proprietor of a Lake Havasu City marine and automotive performance shop was arrested for dealing in stolen outdrives and engines, ending what appeared to be an organized ring that recycled hot parts and motors into both new boats and repair jobs.

More often, the scenario is similar to the 24' Eliminator that was reported stolen out of the Laughlin Harrah's Casino parking lot on Super Bowl Sunday last year. Surveillance cameras recorded the incident, and Todd & Associates broadcast a detailed description of the offending tow vehicle, a distinctively striped truck. A tipster in Costa Mesa, California, recognized the truck by the description and linked it to an area marine performance shop.

An investigator contacted the shop, couching his inquiry in a general conversation about boat theft in which he enlisted information and help. Meanwhile, the shop was placed under surveillance. Within minutes of the telephone conversation, the truck and boat were observed leaving the shop. Law enforcement pulled over the driver, a shop employee, a few blocks later, unbeknownst to the shop owner. The investigator then visited the shop and had another conversation with the owner—and afterward promptly arrested him.

A classic case of a delighted owner reunited with his high-performance pride and joy...but not quite. The employee caught towing the boat away spilled the beans. The Eliminator owner, embroiled in the midst of a divorce, had been involved from the beginning, and had already used the settlement check for a down payment on a condo. The bottom line: three arrests, criminal charges and full restitution. There was a happy twist to the story, however, aside from the averted insurance fraud. One lucky hot-boater, in the hunt for a bargain, encountered the year-old Eliminator—in near-perfect condition and powered by a fresh 502 Magnum/Bravo train—for sale at the mandated salvage offering. He bought it for a hair over 20 grand. Stole it, you might say. ■