

GAME-CHANGING POD DRIVES

They bring joystick control to docking, boost fuel efficiency and reduce noise levels

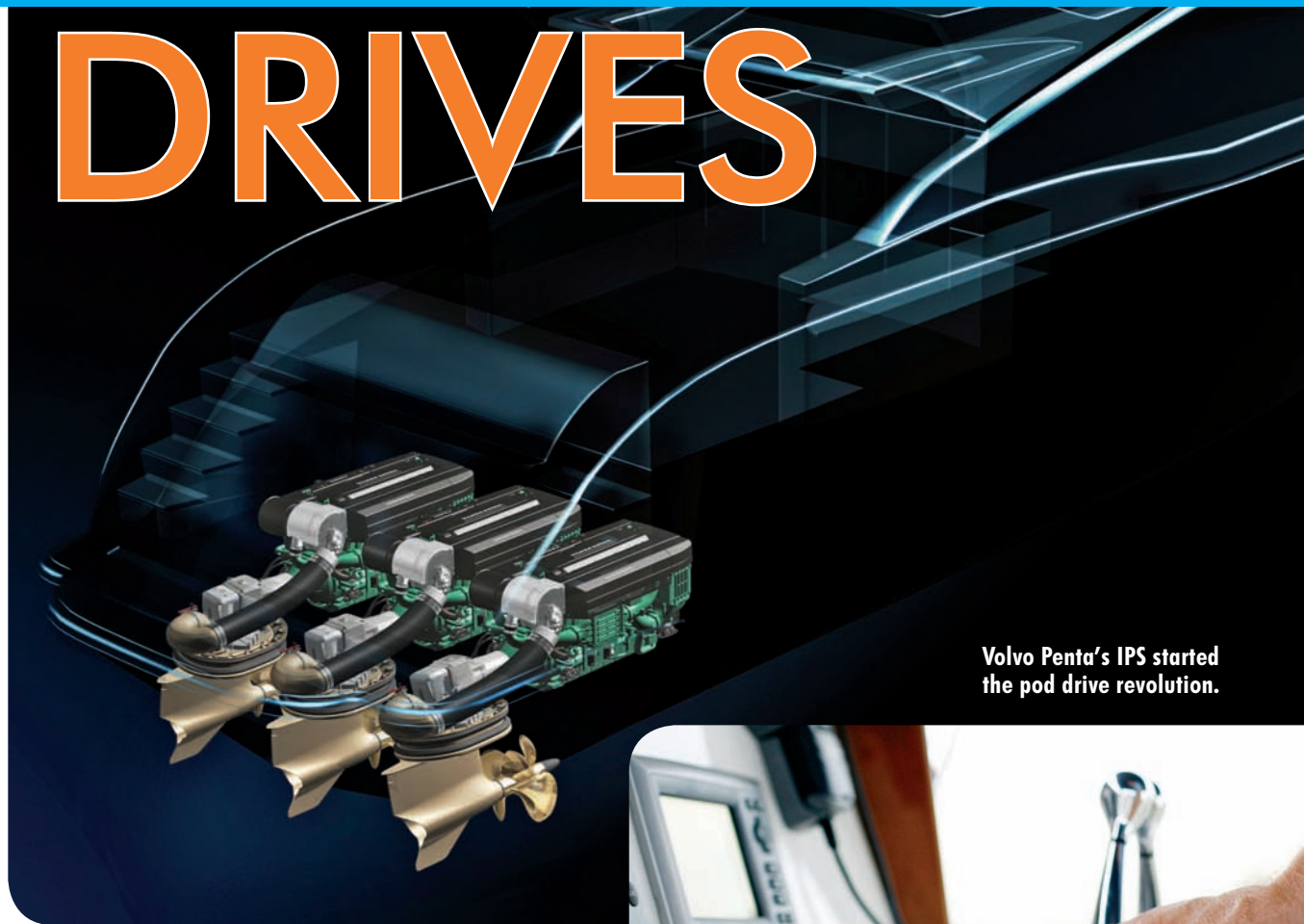
By Chris Landry

Walking the docks at the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show not long ago, you'd see a few yachts powered with pod drives, and a prominent sign at the slip would let showgoers know it.

"At that time the pod builders were doing the most advertising," says Bentley Collins, vice president of sales and marketing for Sabre Yachts and Back Cove Yachts. "They were trying to convince the public that pods were good so that they would ask their boatbuilders to use them. We needed new technologies to keep people interested in buying new boats, and pods have been the best technology we've had."

Pod drives power a good number of boats on display here at the show. "The Sabre range consists of boats from 38 to 54 feet, and every model in the range is available with pods," Collins says. "The 38, 42, 48 and 54 Salon Express are only available with pod propulsion, and we offer with our biggest flybridge model, the 54, a straight-shaft option, but the reality is we have pods available on every design we have in the line."

Pod drives bring many pluses to the boating experience. They help make operation easier and less stressful, especially around the dock. Their low-speed maneuverability hinges on the ability of the pods to operate independently of one another. Linked to a joystick, the drives push the boat fore and aft, port and starboard, diagonally or rotationally. Pod boats also run more efficiently than



Volvo Penta's IPS started the pod drive revolution.



most straight shaft setups.

Pod manufacturers have added features to their systems, such as Volvo Penta's IPS Sportfish Mode. It directs the drive units outboard to their maximum for rapid response when maneuvering the stern to fight a fish. "It's just phenomenal the way you can operate the boat, fighting a fish in a tournament," says Robbie Buckley, who fishes his 2010 SeaVee 390 with twin IPS600s in Florida sailfish tournaments. "It's all about time and speed. In a matter of a second and a half I can have the bow back to where the stern just was. It's that quick. It's almost like a carnival ride."

As an offshore fisherman, Buckley also appreciates the fuel economy of the pod drives and diesels. Cruising at about 37 mph, his 390 gets 1.5 mpg. "It's great," says Buckley, who lives in Pompano Beach, Fla. "From my house to Bimini I burn about 48 gallons of fuel, and that's running almost 40 mph. It is about 62 miles."

Here are some more numbers to digest. Twin Volvo Penta IPS900s (about 700 horsepower each) burn a total of 40 gallons an hour powering the Sabre 52 Express at 25 knots for a mileage rating of 0.625 nmpg. The same boat with twin 865-hp inboards burns 54 gph at the same speed for a 0.45 nmpg rating.

In a Cabo 40, the efficiency gains are even greater. Cruising at 32.7 knots, Mercury's 600-hp Zeus pod drive system consumes 46 gph. With twin 800-hp MAN diesels — 400 fewer total horses — the 40 burns 63 gph cruising at 31.5 knots.

In addition to increased fuel efficiency, pod drives operate at lower noise levels than conventional inboards. "A pod boat's quieter operation is somewhat of an underrated benefit," Collins says. The difference in noise levels is so significant between a pod boat and a conventional inboard boat that he likens it to listening to a string quartet versus a rock concert.

Pods excel on boats from about 35 to 55 feet. Go larger, and the benefits diminish somewhat because bigger boats require more horsepower to hit the speeds where pods'

fuel efficiency shines. They also require larger pods that create greater drag and add weight to the boat.

Semidisplacement and displacement boats are generally better suited — at least for now — to conventional shaft drives, boatbuilders say. That doesn't mean engine companies have been avoiding the bigger-boat market. In fact, Mercury is looking to expand in the 50- to 70-foot segment, but with planing boats powered with triple pods.

Designing and installing a single pod in a smaller boat is no problem from an engineering standpoint. Just look at SeaVee's 39-footer with a single ZF pod. The setup, however, requires a bow thruster and additional engineering to make it all work, and that adds to the cost of the boat. The 39-foot SeaVee with twin IPS600s is about \$60,000 more than the same boat with three 350-hp Yamaha outboards, says SeaVee president Ariel Pared.

From a financial standpoint, repowering with pods makes little sense. Also, there's a need for more technicians capable of working on pod drives, some boatbuilders say. Boaters and boatbuilders also worry about the drives' susceptibility to strikes with submerged objects, so the pluses must be weighed against the minuses before you decide whether a pod boat is for you.

Consumers cite ease of use as the No. 1 benefit of a pod boat. "It all has to do with making boating easier. The ability to move a boat sideways, to spin it on its axis — these are things people have wanted for a long time," says Martin Meissner, ZF Marine's marketing manager. "So I don't think it is surprising to see how quickly people have gravitated to [pod technology]." ■



The entire Sabre fleet is available with pods.