

## The Genius of Bob van Niekerk

Greg Mills

Jacob van Reenen 'Bob' van Niekerk, the man who produced the Darts, Flamingoes and more than 170 boat designs, passed away peacefully in his Hout Bay home on 23 August 2012, aged 84. Bob, according to his long-time friend Johann van Blerck, 'felt cold, had a glass of red wine, went to lie down to warm up, and had already moved on when his wife Laurette checked on him just a few minutes later.'

At the time of receiving this sad notice, I was en route to Lake Kariba. In the back of my mind was to keep an eye out for the famous Meteor III racing catamaran powered by two 450bhp Nascar Holman-Moody V8 engines, which Bob designed and built and which in his and Kenny Stephens' capable hands had won the SA offshore powerboat championship in 1969 and finished fourth in that year's Isle of Wight race, the World Championship of the time. The Meteor had reputedly ended up on the Lake in the early 1970s, though its ply-construction is unlikely to have survived the ravages of time and Robert Mugabe. Stephens, my godfather, and something of a likeable rogue, had taken me for a spin in the cat in Simon's Town aged just six. I remember being terrified by the buffeting and banging of the waves even in the relative calm of the harbour when doing just 40mph.

They were brave men. And in the person of Bob van Niekerk, an undoubtedly great one.

### FOR SALE — METEOR III, offshore racing catamaran



1st in S.A. Offshore, 1969. 4th in Round Isle of Wight, 1969.

**Specification:** Built 1968. LOA 28ft. Beam 8ft 2ins. Marine ply, glassfibre covered. Aluminium bulkheads. Fuel capacity 350 gals. Complete set of instruments. Padded upholstery. Powered by two 450 h.p. Holman-Moody engines completely reconditioned. Transmission by "V" drives to new Michigan propellers. High speed road trailer. Guaranteed top speed 58-60 m.p.h.

THIS OUTFIT WILL BE SOLD COMPLETE AND READY TO RACE IN THE NEXT OFFSHORE AND IS AVAILABLE FOR DEMONSTRATION. PRICE R12,000 open to negotiation.

Contact: Ken Stephens, De Wet Road, Ottery, Cape. Telephone 77-9502



The Van Niekerk-designed Meteor III which he co-piloted with Kenny Stephens. (SA Yachting)

Bob's interest in cars was sparked by his father's gift of a 1927 Amilcar two-seater sportscar which the University of Stellenbosch student used to travel from his home in Stanford to university. In those days, Van Niekerk told the author in August 2005, 'Dougie van der Riet was someone to copy, and so I built myself an Austin Seven single-seater based on a 1933 Austin Seven while at university, using nuts and bolts and parts from an Avro Anson aircraft. I did not get anywhere with it, but it was lots of fun nonetheless.' At university, he met Willie Meissner, then a mechanical engineering student, and 'we started talking about building our own sportscars, though in 1952 we decided that this was impossible in South Africa given that we did not have the Italian or other craftsmen to make the bodies by hand from aluminium.'

Meissner had come to Stellenbosch from nearby Paarl where his father was a dentist. First year students were expected to carry out chores for their seniors, and Van Niekerk got Willie 'to clean the Austin 7 special, after which he became interested in cars and got himself a motorbike – the same bike he fell off later on Helshoogte Pass and badly broke his jaw. We did not do much