

PRIME TIME

Mike Ramirez marks his 10-year anniversary at Southern California's high-performance shop Prime Marine. by Brett Bayne



Above: Mike Heitman's custom one-off 21' Schiada. Every part has been hand- or CNC-machined, from the exhaust to the electronically shiftable transmission. No expense was spared. Above right: Ramirez did a full resto on this 18' Rayson Craft built by Art Braeger. It features a 550-hp Ford engine.





Top: Don Christy's 18' Barron Sprint wood deck with 392 Hemi. All rigging and installation was by Prime Marine. The boat was built "era correct," from the rubber hose and chromed brass fittings to the safety wire that hold everything together from the spark plug wires to the hoses.
Above: Gene Oglesby's 1956 Barracuda. Prime Marine installed the 413 Chrysler engine and restored the boat, including the custom molding and chrome work.

Left: Ramirez tests Jon Cole's 21' Schiada V-drive at Southern California's Lake Elsinore. The ski racer features a new Pfaff motor.

Mike Ramirez's story has a familiar prelude: a hot-rod fanatic since he was able to drive a car, he was transfixed with all things high-performance. His dad's 1984 20SS custom-rigged Hallett jetboat, powered by a big block Chevy, was another huge source of his ever-growing passion, and growing up around the rivers of Southern California sealed his fate. Enraptured by high-performance aftermarket stuff on both the automotive and marine fronts, Ramirez was destined to launch a career built around speed. "I chose my employment opportunities based on that," he says.

In short order, he found himself working for Brad Anderson Enterprises as a porter of cylinder heads. After getting his feet wet in that arena, he studied automotive engineering under the tutelage of Kent Fisk. Eventually, gearheads Brad Anderson, "Billy B" Berkenheger and his brother Bobby pointed Mike toward a two-year gig at Gary Teague (GT) Performance. As mentored by Joe Vanderham, Ramirez learned how to build and rig boats, and how to use machine equipment. "I always had an eye for something that looked nice, and for being real meticulous, and Joe taught me the ropes," he says.

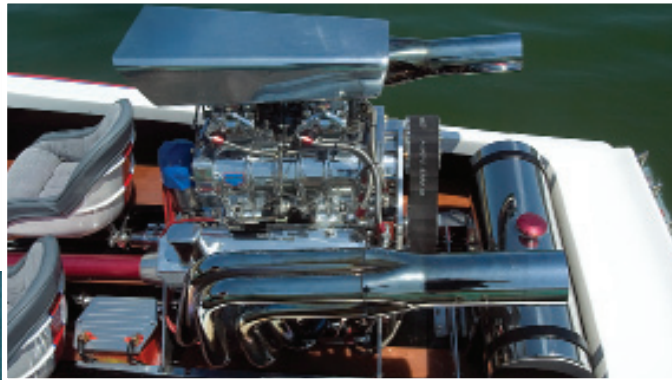
After returning to college a second time, in 2001 Ramirez landed job working for Randy Davis, who had launched an engine and service facility called Prime Marine to maintain some of his own equipment, as well as to do custom rigging and general service work on his customer's boats. "I decided to give it a shot, and I was hired by the manager at the time while I was continuing my schooling," he says. Ramirez expanded on the craft he began at GT, rigging boats, helping in fabrication, installing aftermarket components, performing restorations and working on all of the race equipment.

A few years later, after a shift in management at Prime Marine, Ramirez was offered an opportunity to run Prime Marine. "I was really young at the time, so obviously he had his doubts about me, and so did I," he laughs. "I didn't know if I could actually pull off the whole business thing, but I knew I could work on his stuff and keep the program going." Ramirez has run Prime Marine since 2002. We sat down with him to learn more about the company and what the future may hold.

Performance Boats: *What do you specialize in here at Prime Marine?*

Mike Ramirez: We do custom fabrications, engine and performance upgrades, custom engine hardware, jet blueprints and rebuilds, complete steering systems, V-drives, custom wiring and billet hardware...you name it. We also do a wide range of services—engines, drives, trailers, props, as well as any kind of customization you might need.

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Steve Hodget's 18' Kurtis Kraft received a full resto from Prime Marine, which built all the hardware and component pieces. They also cleaned up and refreshed the engine.



PB: *What have been some of the boats that you're most proud of having created?*

MR: We've done a lot. I'm pretty proud of all the boats that we do. I'm very proud of the first flatbottom we did. I guess I've always been a little on the extreme side. Some may classify it as "high end" work, but I like to think of what I do as putting a different twist on stuff. I've never cared for the run-of-the-mill. Some people have been building boats forever, and very often you tend to see the same thing every time. So I try and take just a different approach when I start a project. I'll get a vision in my head and then we'll try to put it on paper. Once we know what we're after, we'll start building the boat. We've done everything from classic wood decks that look like an absolutely cherry 1968 model, to a 40-foot Skater.

Lately, my favorite boat—the one I'm proudest of right now—is only about two years old. It was a 21 Schiada that we did

for a gentleman named Mike Heitman. He brought us a bare hull that he'd purchased. We started from nothing and decided to do a nice custom river boat. Since we worked on it, it's been at the boat show and it's been in a couple of magazines. It's just something that's a little different. Every time someone looks at that boat, there's something they find that they didn't see before.

PB: *So you're responsible for Nordic's more custom-oriented output.*

MR: Yes, we have built a couple of Nordics for some custom stuff they wanted. I still build a lot of parts for them throughout the year. Lot of those custom billet pieces you see, whether it's the race boats or some of the outboards. They come from me.

PB: *You've built some boats beginning with a bare hull.*

MR: Sure. Often, if a customer wants to do something a little custom—something

beyond the run-of-the-mill—we may need to change the dash or do some glass work. We also built some custom motor mounts, different parts than you could just get from a Mercury deal. We're used to doing little twists and turns and fabricating custom pieces that made a boat so much nicer-looking.

PB: *What's your personal boat?*

MR: A 1977 Sanger flatbottom. I'm kind of a V-drive guy. It's a little different than what I would normally do, but I found a boat through a customer of mine who had purchased it as a bare hull. He basically dropped the boat off with a bunch of parts in boxes and said, "I want to build this boat." But as time passed, he lost interest in the project, so I offered to buy it from him. Once I started getting into it, I realized that every single piece of the boat was original 1977. So I decided to completely revamp it, restoring it to exactly how it



Jeff Niegsch's 18' Bezer, another Prime Marine success story. They built the entire boat and installed the Pfaff engine.



Tom Buckles' 18' Barron Sprint. Prime Marine built this from the bare hull on up, including floors, hardware and Pfaff 540 engine installation.



Ramirez took apart Kevin Kritzberger's Cole 22' Superhawk and added custom hardware, new dash and upholstery. It sports a modified Merc 800+ hp engine (below) and Bravo drive.



would have looked in 1977—it's got 660 center-squirter carbs, old log manifolds, Hallcraft water pump and original gauges. I did everything "period correct." I don't get to use it much anymore, but I still have it. It's actually got the original paint job on it.

PB: How have you kept the company afloat through the recession?

MR: As the times got tough about a year and a half ago, I had to make some major cuts. I had about eight people working for me at the time. So to be able to get through this lovely economy we have, I had to cut back. We had to go back to the beginning... it was almost like starting over again. But since we made those changes, I think we've basically gotten back on track since last summer. We decided to hang tight through the winter and not make any drastic changes, and things are actually looking pretty good now. I owe a great deal to our faithful customers, good friends and family members, as well as my longest-term fabricator and employee, Mike King.

PB: And what is your vision for the future of Prime Marine?

MR: I hope things will continue to improve. I don't know if it will ever go back to the way it was five or six years ago, but hopefully people will be inspired to restore their existing craft. Money is tight for everybody, so hopefully that will help us as we take advantage of our expertise in restoring and repairing vintage boats. We've seen a lot more restoration work lately, as well as a spike in service work—more revamps and fewer new boat builds.

For more information about Prime Marine, visit the Web site at primemarineusa.com or call (909) 484-8338.

