

A Catcher's Mitt for Your Boat

With SeaPen, Craig Freeman helped bring a truly innovative docking solution to the U.S. market.

The boating business gets in your blood. It starts with multigenerational recreational boating and growing up on the water. Then you find a way to do what you love for a living, and that journey just might lead to a game-changing opportunity.

Enter Craig Freeman.

On a steamy August morning in the South Carolina Lowcountry, I met Freeman at his Beaufort home to talk about a unique in-water, dry-dock solution for boaters. I'd heard of SeaPen and understood the gist of how it worked, but I didn't quite grasp the game-changing part.

That changed when Freeman walked me down the steeply pitched ramp to his floating dock on Battery Creek, now several feet below the bluff at low tide. A large Scout sat in its SeaPen, hull afloat yet 100% dry in the slip.

My host grinned.

Origin story

Freeman grew up in Massachusetts, and he spent countless happy hours sailing with his grandfather in Perkins Cove, Maine. But boating was a recreational activity, not a vocation; after he earned his business degree, he joined the family construction business.

Yet the water called. He purchased his first

boat, a 16-foot 1974 Dreamliner, at the age of 21 and fixed it up over the winter.

"It was my first experience with powerboats, and the boat had problems with its decking," Freeman recalls. "So I sold it, and then I bought and sold probably five or six more. At that point, my wife said, 'You love boating, so why not sell boats for a living?'"

"We could've stayed in Massachusetts, but when I woke up one morning to snow and cold, I thought, I just can't do it," he adds with a laugh.

The Freemans moved to Beaufort roughly 18 years ago, just as they were expecting the first of their two children. He purchased a local boat dealership and ran it from 2005 to 2016.

"We were a top five Chris-Craft dealer, but the Great Recession was rough on the business," Freeman notes. "I learned a lot, though, and I'm grateful that those lessons came early in my career."

One day, a client in Australia sent him a photo of what seemed to be a portable dry-docking solution. Intrigued, Freeman flew Down Under to meet Mark Barber of Dockpro; Barber's father, Allan, invented the SeaPen a couple of decades earlier and started the company in 2004.

When Freeman flew home, he had a distribution agreement for North America in hand.

"Mark wanted to do it originally, but every U.S. market is so unique," he says. "How do you manage that from the other side of the world? This was a good solution."

Freeman co-founded Solstice Docking Solutions to handle SeaPen sales, distribution and installation. In the early days, he and his team definitely faced some challenges. For example, in Australia, the average size of a recreational boat was 25 to 28 feet. In the U.S., that swelled to 38 to 41 feet.

"All of the marketing materials from Australia focused on small boats," Freeman explains. "I didn't have the boats I needed in the pens to show people what was possible. Luckily, I got a few clients who



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEAPEN

saw the potential, and then I could get the right pictures and content.”

The American boating industry took notice. In 2019, SeaPen won the Miami International Boat Show Award for Innovation. Before long, Freeman was working closely with premium brands — such as Scout Boats, Chris-Craft and Pursuit — and with dealers.

How it works

As I walked around the Scout, I could see the boat sitting on a net made of breathable, UV-stabilized, marine-grade rope held within a high-density polyethylene frame. This unsinkable enclosure ties to any fixed or floating dock, and it allows the boat to float at water level.

Underneath the netting is a growth-resistant liner that acts as a protective barrier between the boat and the water. When you want to take your boat out for a cruise, you use your remote control to instruct the system to drop the SeaPen’s rear gate. Water floods into the pen, and in less than 10 minutes, you can reverse out of your slip and get on your way.

Once you’re back in your slip, close the rear gate, and the SeaPen system will pump all the water away from your boat within about 45 minutes. Thanks to an integrated-weight system designed to maximize air flow and channel the water, the hull will dry completely.

There are significant benefits to this system. For starters, there’s no danger of the boat falling due to a boat-lift mechanical failure, or getting stuck in the air if the power goes out (the SeaPen can be operated manually if necessary). The boat can’t sink at the dock, and if there is heavy rain, the SeaPen’s smart pump detects the water and automatically pumps it out.

“The SeaPen also will contain any spills, and you won’t have the expense or environmental worries that come along with bottom paint,” Freeman adds. “Anywhere you need bottom paint, there’s a reason to do this. You won’t have to drive pilings. You won’t have to hire an electrician to install heavy 220 power, because this runs on 110. And it’s easy to maintain since you’re not dealing with mechanical components. You’re just letting air out.”

I also liked the SeaPen’s accessibility factor. It’s easy to get in and out of a boat when it’s floating at water level, there’s no danger of falling between the boat and the dock, and you can reach the entire hull for cleaning; just step into the SeaPen and walk around.

Freeman took me for a short spin so I could experience all of this for myself. Another benefit became crystal clear as we motored back into the



slip: You don’t have to nail your angle perfectly, the way you do with a boat lift or trailer. You can be slightly off, and the boat will still slide into place. No scrambling for lines and fenders, and no need for yelling.

“It’s like a catcher’s mitt for your boat,” Freeman says.

Leveling up

In the beginning, Solstice Docking Solutions could provide SeaPens within a 10-hour drive from Beaufort. Today, it has products from Maine to Key West, it works closely with the One Water dealer group and MarineMax, and it has its first Great Lakes-based dealer, M.E. Yacht Restoration in Holland, Michigan. The company also has broadened its reach in North America, completing installations in Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala.

At press time, Freeman and his team were preparing for the fall shows, including the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, and for an exciting new product development.

“We have a cellular-based box and app coming in October,” Freeman reveals. “You’ll be able to operate your SeaPen with your smartphone and receive push notifications for all activities. The app will have a FAQ section, customer support through an auto-contact form, and even a technician portal so we can handle diagnostics and programming remotely.”

That is the way of the future, after all. Freeman and his team clearly understand that, and they are investing time and money in research and development. It’s worth it, he notes, because they have something special.

“We’re offering a real solution for people, not presenting a new problem for them to solve on their own,” he says. “Running a boat dealership was fun, but with SeaPen, I saw the opportunity to help more people. And how often do you have a chance to bring something 100% new — a real innovation — to the market?” ★

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