

Tech Valley Company Making Strides in Marine Safety Gear

By Ken Daves

As a boater, what comes to mind when you think about a Personal Floation Device? Usually it's the multi-strapped and buckled ski vest, right? What about the blaze orange overstuffed U-shaped type? Certainly not the most comfortable or user-friendly piece of equipment, PFD's often make sitting, bending or

just about any other type of function aboard down right awkward. Even some of the newer types on the market seem to always be in the way. PFD's are, none-the-less, mandatory equipment. They will save your life, if you wear them. And let's face it, how many of us above the age of 12 actually wear one while underway, never mind dock-side?

Now, what if you could own a PFD that performs equal or better than the traditional types but also actually looks, feels and functions like a normal garment you would often wear while on the water anyway? Interested? Read on.

Troy based Float Tech Inc. has quickly earned itself a reputation for seeing things differently when it comes to PFD's. A revolutionary product, this one of a kind system looks and feels very much like a normal lightweight jacket on the outside, but contains a inner vest, which self inflates upon immersion and meets Coast Guard Type III performance standards at 27 lbs. of buoyancy when activated.

The system is as good-looking as it is functional. Inside, the zip out inner vest can be worn separate from the jacket. The inflation system, powered by a small CO2 cylinder has an external ripcord as a backup to the automatic activation and then can also be self-inflated quickly via a breath tube. Under normal wear, the inner chambers are flat and unnoticeable.



With features such as breathable rip stop nylon, removable sleeves, high quality zippers, multiple pockets and a hood, the waterproof outer jacket is almost unrecognizable as a piece of safety gear. But take a closer look and you will find it's all about life saving technology. There's a reflective panel around the entire jacket, expandable pleats for comfort when activated and a zipper access point for a separate tether harness system. The breath tube is located on the left upper breast and a Velcro access flap on the lower right breast allows access to the ripcord and a window that allows the wearer to confirm that the inflator is armed and ready should the need arise.

Equally impressive as the product is the story behind the Float Tech organization itself. Originally known as Orca Gear, the improved lifejacket concept started as an award winning MBA business school project for four Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) students in 2001. All avid boaters, the young entrepreneurs came up with several boating related products. The lifejacket, being the most promising of their ideas was taken to a local sporting goods manufacturer and a prototype developed. Seven months later, they incorporated the business and had trademarks and patents in hand. There's been no looking back since.

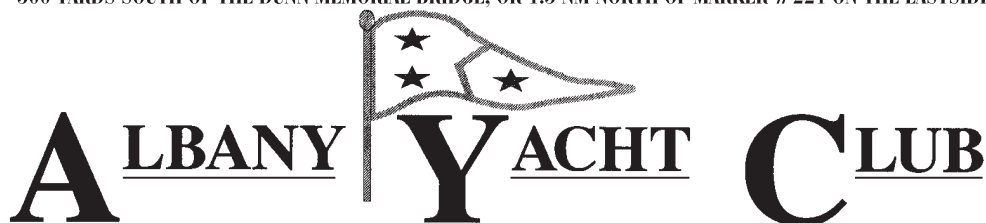
By spring 2003, the group had secured seed money through private investors. One, a "Tech Valley Angel", a philanthropist who chose to remain anonymous, was key in fueling the startup. By that summer, the product was on the shelf of one major national retailer, and they had sold through their first order of inventory. More retailers and professional marine suppliers were soon to follow.

In November 2004 Float Tech was named "Most Promising Enterprise" by The Business Review and Co-Founder and CEO Cecelia Domingos was recognized as one of "Tech Valley's Top Ten", an award given to "up and coming movers and shakers" by the Albany - Colonie Regional Chamber. Recreational boaters have given a solid nod to the product in terms of purchases, and industry leaders have echoed that sentiment. In February 2005 Float Tech earned the "Freeman K. Pittman Editor's Choice" award as Top Gear for 2004 by Sail Magazine.

What's next for our friends on the northern tidal Hudson? According to Domingos, who in addition to being at the helm of Float Tech, is a Naval Reservist and Merchant Mariner, "Our goal is to educate boaters that there is finally a lifejacket on the market that they will WANT to wear. As a competitive sailor and professional mariner, I have a strong appreciation for comfort in safety gear. With Float Tech as your PFD, you don't even know you're wearing safety at all." An expanded product line, including children's models are in the works. As it stands, the Float Tech jacket is available in two highly visible color configurations - Red and Navy and Yellow and Navy. Sizes range from Adult XS to 3XL. Accessories such as re-arming kits, harnesses and water-activated strobe lights are now available, with other unique and innovative products to follow.

For information and a list of independent retailers, visit www.floattech.com or call 518-266-0318

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