



A Maritime Renaissance

by
Chip Barber

Marilee racing after her restoration in 2001 (Photo by Dan Nerney)

When the average non-sailor thinks of sailboat racing, he or she immediately pictures idyllic islands with warm waters, clear skies, and gentle breezes. One envisions beautiful yachts with vast expanses of varnished mahogany and acres of brilliant billowing white sails, along with beautiful people, rich in both wealth and the time to pursue this grand sport of the “leisure class” (sarcasm intended).

The reality of modern sailboat racing, however, is quite different. The racing boats of today are more often stripped-out hulls with nary a piece of varnished wood in sight, and the sails and masts are the black color of weight-saving carbon fiber. The crews are made up of muscled professionals who jet from one racing venue to the next at the great expense of the owners. Most nautical dreamers wouldn't recognize today's rac-

ing machines in their own nightmares.

There is, however, one aspect of sailboat racing today that beckons to the grand old days when the leisure class did in fact turn out dressed to the nines to race beautifully sculpted wooden racers. Racing in vintage and classic yachts has again caught the fancy of many. Inspired by the season-long series along the Italian and French Riviera that gained momentum a decade ago, we now enjoy seeing vintage wooden yachts racing in the waters south of New England. In Newport, Rhode Island, vintage racing has proven so popular in the past three years that Rolex now sponsors vintage yacht regattas where the turnout regularly exceeds 70 boats—many over a hundred years old.

The breathtaking beauty of these yachts under sail is not lost on the sponsors. Nor is the significance of saving historically important boats from the scrap

heap lost on the many owners who pay to restore and maintain boats of inestimable value. The fact that, after spending over a million dollars in one of the few boatyards with the traditional wooden boat-building expertise to restore a century-old boat, one would then turn around and race that priceless work of art around a racecourse, sometimes mixing it up within inches of other priceless boats, speaks to the siren song these old beauties still possess.

My first boat was a small cutter that I had built to a 1932 plan by S.S. Crocker by a traditional wooden boat builder in Maine. *Sasanoa* was named for the little river that ran from my home near Bath to the builder's yard in Wiscasset. This little boat was a beauty. Rigged with a bowsprit and boomkin, she was faster than any of the similarly sized fiberglass boats in Annapolis where I kept her for many years. *Sasanoa* was just the start of my 30-year love of vintage wooden sailboats.

I have been extremely lucky over the past several years to be involved in the restoration of several large and historically significant vintage racers. The first was the topsail gaff cutter *Marilee*. *Marilee* was one of the famous New York Yacht Club Forty Footers drawn by Nathaniel Herreshoff in 1916. At almost 60 feet on deck, and over 70 feet from the tip of the bowsprit to the end of the main boom, the NYYC 40s were a sight to behold. The partnership that purchased a decrepit *Marilee* gave me one charge as project manager: They wanted a spectacularly beautiful restoration that was historically correct in every respect and a yacht that could be raced competitively against Europe's fastest vintage boats. When purchased, *Marilee* was in such bad condition that she couldn't be safely sailed from Long Island to the American Shipyard in Maine where the work would take place. She had to be trucked up I-95. Research at the Heart Museum at MIT provided me with Herreshoff's original drawings, not



Marilee in Camden, Maine at the start of her restoration

(Photo by Chip Barber)



Bolero racing in Rhode Island. Author at helm. (Photo by Dan Nerney)

only for the NYYC 40 class of boats, but for this specific boat. Because of this, I was able to rebuild the interior as original, even to the pattern on the raised paneling on the bulkheads. Fine tufted leather covered each bunk and settee. On deck, she was re-planked in rare Eastern White Pine. The spruce spars were turned on an 80-foot-long lathe at Philadelphia's Independence Seaport Museum.

Restored to her original specifications and beauty, *Marilee* proved to be extremely fast. After work-ups in Newport in 2001, she was shipped to Cowes in the south of England where she competed in the Sesquicentennial Jubilee of the America's Cup. Not only did this vintage gaffer win her division in the weeklong event, but she won outright the Overall Performance Trophy for the re-enactment

of the original America's Cup—a 60-mile-long circumnavigation of the Isle of Wight—beating out 201 of the most extreme modern racers on corrected time. Not bad for an 85-year-old design by one of America's most renowned naval architects.

Olin Stephens, another renowned American naval architect, designed the 74-foot yawl *Bolero* for then-Vice Commodore of the New York Yacht Club John Nicholas Brown in 1949. Built at the Nevins Yard in City Island, New York, she

Restoration work on *Bolero* in progress at Pilots Point, Connecticut

(Photo by Chip Barber)





Mast partner on *Marilee* (Photo by Chip Barber)

was the largest ocean racer to be completed after World War II. *Bolero* was first to finish the Newport to Bermuda race three times and held the elapsed time record for an amazing 18 years. I became involved with *Bolero* when Ed Kane and his wife Marty, longtime clients of mine (and part-owners of *Marilee*), purchased her in 2001. At that time, *Bolero* had been partially restored but still needed significant hull and structural work before she would be considered safe to sail offshore. After 18 months at the Brewer's Pilots Point Yard in Connecticut, during which time the stem, forefoot, and over half of the cedar and mahogany double planking was replaced using traditional methods and materials, *Bolero* was again ready to show her heels to the competition. Just out of the yard, *Bolero* easily sailed to First-in-Fleet in the Antigua Classic Boat Regatta, beating other famous boats like *Ticonderoga* and *Velsheda*. That summer of 2004 *Bolero* sailed to numerous firsts in the Classic Yacht Series in Newport. The Kanes are currently cruising the Mediterranean on *Bolero*.

On the basis of my experience overseeing the restoration of *Bolero*, I was pleased to be asked recently to help save

another large Olin Stephens yawl. *Black Watch* (ex-Edlu II) is a 68-foot yawl also built by Nevins, but prior to the War in 1938. *Black Watch* earned an enviable reputation on the racecourse for her first owners, the Schaffer family. During the War, *Black Watch* served on anti-submarine patrol off the East Coast and actually saw action against a German sub. After a short stint as a school ship, she was bought by a young physician who owned her for over 52 years until giving her up in 2005. Again, I was given one charge by the new owners: Make *Black Watch* an accurate representation of her original glory but also make her competitive again on the racecourse.

As with *Bolero*, the restoration work is being completed at Pilots Point in eastern Connecticut. And as with *Bolero*, extensive re-planking has been required. The engine and all of the original electrical and plumbing systems have also had to be replaced. Modern radios, RADAR, and GPS complete the outfit—but with a twist: All modern conveniences are built so that at the end of the racing day, they can be unplugged, removed, and hidden from sight. The bottom now has a smooth racing finish, and the sail inventory, cut to look

like period cotton sails, contains a full list of racing spinnakers and staysails. To everyone, *Black Watch* appears just as she did when she left the Nevins yard in 1938. We expect she will be a speedster.

In June, *Black Watch* will be raced by her new owners in the Centennial Edition of the Newport to Bermuda Race, a race she first competed in 68 years ago. I fully expect that, like *Marilee* and *Bolero* before her, she will relish in her newly restored splendor and show everyone her spectacular beauty and speed.

To have played a small part in helping to ensure that these three famous vintage racers will remain a part of America's sailing heritage—and not just as part of a static display in a dusty museum but actively sailing and racing where anyone can see them in the environment for which they were designed—has brought me great personal satisfaction. But it should always be remembered that we owe a great thanks to the many men and women who have dedicated significant personal resources to ensuring that the beauty of these vessels will endure for generations to come.

Charles Barber is a veteran sailor of over 40 years. He was the Director of Sailing and Commodore of the Naval Academy Sailing Squadron. Chip was the coach on board the Naval Academy's 48-foot sloop *Constellation* in 1992 when she won the coveted St. David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet in the Newport to Bermuda Race. Upon leaving the Navy, Chip founded an international yacht management service and provides administrative management and special project management for high-level racers as well as for long-distance sail and powerboat cruisers. Chip participated in the Centennial Newport to Bermuda Race in June 2006.