



International Star Class Yacht Racing Association Blast From the Past

“We Found A Wooden Star Mast”

November 1, 2013

This past November, District 21 and Carter Lake Star Fleet members Paul Kresge, Phillip and Kristi Huff were cleaning out their former District Secretary Bill Kieser’s warehouse when they happened across a wooden Star mast hanging from the rafters. Unsure what to do with the apparently new mast, Kresge and the Huffs decided to give it to whoever would be interested in collecting it from the warehouse. Kresge reached out to Barbara in the Central Office seeking ideas for who to contact that may be interested in owning the mast and followed up a few days later to share the information and story they received about sailing with wooden Star masts.

Kresge and the Huffs were able to connect with Life Member John McGann, 84, of the Continental Divide Fleet who happily picked up the mast and provided some details about the old spar. McGann wrote to Kresge:

“OK I picked up the mast this AM and it is suspended under my patio roof. I forgot how heavy a wooden mast is! I think it is a mast produced in Tiburon, CA by Erickson. We sailed on the bay from there in the North Americans in 1968. The mast was probably brought back on Bills boat from there. The two projections are not the spreaders but twin jumpers. They were used to straighten the mast going to wind. The Erickson mast is a noodle Sitka spruce laminated to a cedar core. Ask [Ernie] Hildner to tell you about breaking his mast during that series. He was on his honeymoon and pitched Sandy into the bay when they returned under tow she wouldn't let Ernie touch her!

The mast is new never measured and cut below point B for the step, with all of the rigging including slides for the shroud tracks. I am sure Bill brought it back as a spare from SF. The transition to extruded aluminum masts and the new vang ring was happening. Gates was parked alongside me and he had the first vang ring I ever saw, I bought one right there and then! Boy it was worth your life to jibe in any wind before the ring came along. The mast is safe and sound and out of the way. Surely someone is desperate for a vintage wood mast. This must be one of the last in the world.”

Intrigued by McGann’s suggestion, Kresge contacted Ernie Hildner, 71, from the Carter Lake Fleet for the tale about his honeymoon at the 1968 Star North American Championship in San Francisco, CA. Hildner recalled:

“A wooden mast, probably when unwrapped, to be seen to be from the workshop of Nils Ericksson . . . A blast from the past! And it makes me remember . . .

Back when the Star Class was half as old as it is today, there was no rule on the tip weight of masts, so the sailors and makers kept making them lighter and lighter. As John McGann has pointed out, Nils Ericksson in the San Francisco Bay area was building the "hottest" masts around, about 3/8 inch of Sitka spruce over a cedar core. To keep the needle-like tip of the mast from bending aft and to leeward as the leech pulled on it, two jumper struts stuck out in a "V" fashion from the front of the mast, about 8 feet down from the tip. The wire over the port strut would tension and keep the upper part of the mast from bending off on port tack, and vice versa on starboard. When a bunch of us sailed in the North Americans on the Berkeley Circle in San Francisco Bay in 1968, we started only one race in less than 30 knots of wind, and - pre circular vang tracks - every jibe was a risky proposition. Lots of boats did tacks through 270 deg rather than jibe through 90 deg. In one race, something like 10 boats lost their masts at one jibe mark. Wood





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masts can get compression cracks when they are bent, and mine had such a crack on the forward side, discovered by the measurer at the Championships. As we rounded a jibe mark and hardened up, the mast went over the side, and so did Sandy, who was crewing for me. In those days, along with wooden boats, wooden masts, and no vang tracks, we had no hiking straps. To keep the boat flat, we lay along the gunwale; when it blew hard, you tried to put as much of your body as possible out on the topside, with just the inner thigh of one leg - ankle hooked on the backstay - and your arm on the deck. Then, there was no rule about the weight of clothing you could wear, so over our foul weather gear we wore two sweatsuits, one on top of the other; when they got wet with spray they added quite a lot of weight to help hike the boat (and gave a little padding against the gunwale). Because her skipper had no experience steering up and over the steep 5-foot waves in the shallow water, fairly often the boat would drop out from under the crew faster than gravity, and Sandy would free fall, then slam back into the gunwale as the boat rose up on the next wave. Still, after she went into the drink, she wanted back on board; cold water, big waves, and wet sweatsuits beginning to weigh one down make a floating platform look pretty desirable.

We took the broken mast pieces to Nils Ericksson's shop, where he kindly let us have the run of the place, while he went off to the mid-week banquet. John McGann, bless him, repaired my mast, working until the wee hours of the morning. I was a graduate student then, and my stipend surely did not cover buying a new replacement. To most everyone's astonishment, this Colorado sailor and his crew were back on the water next day, thanks to Nils and John, and we finished in our usual place, about one boat from last.

Sandy was only one of two female crews, and folks marveled at it. Sherida Gerrard crewed for Bill Gerrard in two races, then was too beaten up to continue, so the Race Committee let Bill swap in a male crew, leaving Sandy as the only female in the regatta. Made for an obvious conversation starter at the social events, where we knew almost no one other than our Colorado/Wyoming contingent. Sailors were in awe, and wives and girlfriends were in disbelief. When I saw Sandy undress at night, I was very glad that in the cool temperatures of the Bay, we all covered up in long sleeves and pants. That way, no one could see just how badly bruised up my ex-downhill racer crew was. I might have gone to jail for spousal abuse if anyone had seen her in a bikini and taken a picture.

Still, it was a memorable time, competing against Dennis Conner, Tom Blackaller, and other soon-to-be America's Cup sailors. We are very glad we went, and glad to have had Bill Kieser, John McGann, and Norm Fowler (from Lake Alcova) with us on the water, each of us with a small state flag sewn into the leech of our mainsail. (So that the other sailors could recognize us and would be intimidated, I think was the reasoning.)

As I remember (though I could very well be wrong), the tip weight rule went into effect just about the time that metal masts came in, and the conversion from wooden to metal masts was very rapid as the old, light, wooden masts broke. Some sailors broke several of the wooden masts per year, and the metal masts were about as durable as they are today, so it made sense to swap over immediately.

Ahh, those were the days . . . Oh, and we launched with a construction crane on caterpillar tracks, not down a ramp."

