



While it all kicks off around him Vince Brun keeps his eye on the job trimming main-sheet for helmsman Ken Read on Dennis Conner's *Stars & Stripes* during the 2003 Louis Vuitton Cup in Auckland in a pre-start against Mascalzone Latino. Tom Whidden and Terry Hutchinson are helping manage the situation as part of an impressive concentration of sailing talent

DANIEL FORSTER/DPPI

# Friendship plus talent

Carol Cronin joined fellow Olympian Vince Brun for an overdue coffee and Danish...

When I first met Vince Brun at the 1991 J/24 Midwinters he was already a legend and the top dog at North Sails One Design; I was a newbie, eyes wide to the fresh joys of Biscayne Bay sailing in January. We did have one thing in common, though – we were both early risers. Morning coffee, pastries and newspapers on the Coral Reef Yacht Club patio became a daily ritual.

Sailing out to the racecourse one day, I happened to drop his name to my teammates. The response, I soon figured out, was typical: 'Have you heard this Vince story?'

Since then I've heard many, many Vince stories, but only one that's polite enough to share here. Vince, sitting at a yacht club bar after a great day of racing, sees a mainsail creep back up a mast. WTF – someone going back out on the water, during cocktail hour? When he spots Greg Fisher, owner of the upstart Fisher Sails, sharing tips with a potential customer about sail shape and trim, Vince pounds a fist on the bar. 'That %^&\* Greg Fisher! He's ruining it for the rest of us!' (North Sails later bought Fisher

Sails, the ultimate compliment.)

Thirty-odd years later I relate this tale to the man himself while catching up on a perfect summer afternoon over a coffee in Newport, RI. Vince just shrugs, but admits it's probably true – unlike most of what he hears about his own past words and deeds. 'I was on the dock the other day and this guy said, "Let me tell you a Vince Brun story." I never did any of this stuff, you know; it's like, what are you talking about?'

To date, Vince has won nine world titles in five different one-design classes (Soling, Star, J/24, Melges 24, Etchells). Dennis Conner calls him one of the best sailors in the world, complimenting his great eye for fast sail shapes. Four decades of impressive results, combined with a singleminded thirst for more boat speed and more victories, has earned him the respect of sailors around the world. If that respect comes packaged inside a not so respectful story about something he supposedly said... well, perhaps that's the price of strong opinions expressed in Portuguese-accented SoCal slang.

## Where it started

When I ask what first brought Vince to the States from his native Brazil, the answer is sailing – though he starts off with a

surprising admission. 'My father was a farmer,' he says, before amending that to 'son of a farmer'. After the Brazilian coffee crop failed his father worked for a steel company that sent the family to the US for several years; Vince was born in New York, in 1947. In 1950 the Brun family moved back to Rio (by ship, he reminds me; 'No planes. Yeah, that's kind of old') and settled in Niterói, 'where Torben [Grael] lives,' a block from the beach. 'My dad, I don't think he ever raced in his life, but he got involved in the yacht club and we cruised around Guanabara Bay.

'You saw the Olympics, a disaster, right? The water is polluted so bad.' Growing up, he says, 'It was crystal clean. I remember going to those islands at the end of the bay, and it was pristine. Everybody anchored out, then tied to a tree. We had a ball, we'd swim all day, go sailing with some guys. It was pretty cool.'

One Christmas Vince's father built a rowing dinghy for him and his brother Gastão. The two boys were very excited... at first. 'We row around, row around, row around, to the point that we're like, "What are we gonna do now?"'

'So we got a, I'm not kidding you, this is almost like a bit of a story... but my brother



says, let's get our mama's sun umbrella. We put it in the front of the boat, and he steers with the oar, and we go all the way downwind, close the umbrella, and paddle the thing back upwind!' The memory stretches his smile even wider than usual.

Once their father saw this jury rig he built the boys a mast; their mother found a sail. 'Full-battened main, big roach. And we just started sailing.'

In time their dad would join a consortium to buy one of 60 Snipes built at the local sailing club; a lottery determined who got each boat. Nine-year-old Vince and 12-year-old Gastão were both quite impatient; 'Every day or two we ask my dad, hey, did we get it? So finally we got our boat. We go to all the regattas inside the bay, and overnight. It was a fantastic time.'

In those early days, Vince says, 'The racing was not that big a deal for us. It was just more to go sailing.' He remembers getting stuck down tide, trying to get home before dark. 'We took tows from tug boats; grab the lines, come back at night. My dad had to be eating nails!' Now he claims those adventures taught them important seamanship skills. 'I'm a parent. In fact, I'm a grandparent now. But you have to be away from your dad to learn the lessons, right? You hit your head against the wall and learn for yourself.'

Vince and Gastão also did quite a bit of racing in Snipes and Penguins before moving up to the Star. 'It's a harder boat to sail, and you have to have more money. But these guys, they needed crew. So even though we weighed about 150lb we started to crew. And if they were not sailing they'd say, "You go take the boat." All of a sudden, we start to move up.'

It was the Star that first took the Brun brothers out of Brazil. 'Wow, travelling was pretty cool,' Vince remembers. 'Going to all those nice places.' When the Soling was chosen for the Olympics Gastão got a boat and Vince crewed; 'We went all over the place. It was a lot of fun.' (They would eventually represent Brazil at the 1976 and 1980 Games.) Back home, between regattas, Vince managed to fit in engineering school.

In 1975 he travelled to his first two North American regattas: the pre-Olympics in Kingston and the Star Worlds in Chicago. 'Buddy [Melges] got me really drunk,' Vince remembers. 'I could barely sail the next day... it was so bad.'

Whether it was the sailing or the partying (or both), Vince decided to move to the US and become a sailmaker; he took a job with Murphy & Nye in Clearwater, Florida. After work he sailed Lasers, both on his own and with a group that included future world champion Ed Baird.

'We sailed a lot, going to Miami for the Midwinters. In those days they had 200-some boats, it was just crazy. The first regatta I sailed I won. And everybody was like, who the hell is this guy?' His smile widens. 'I felt really good about that. I put Rain-X on the bottom of my Laser and I thought, this is the thing!'



**Lowell North's original 12 Metre *Enterprise* – seen at the 12 Metre Worlds in Newport with Brun in the role of tactician – never looked this smart in her America's Cup heyday back in 1977. *Enterprise* was drawn as an improvement on Olin Stephens' spectacular 1974 Cup winner *Courageous*... but was beaten to the 1977 Defender slot by Ted Turner, Gary Jobson and a very fired-up crew onboard the modified S&S design... *Courageous***

Clearwater is also where he met his future wife, Marcia. 'She was doing a boat delivery to Sydney, Australia. She had a boyfriend, a guy who used to crew for Robbie Haines,' who later became an arch-rival, and then a teammate. 'Small world, right? I was there as a sailmaker, and I see this good-looking girl.' After Marcia broke up with that boyfriend she started dating Vince. 'We married 1 October 1981,' Vince remembers. 'And we've been together ever since. Thirty-eight years. Yeah.'

Clearwater was beautiful but Vince says that in the late 1970s 'everything was about San Diego; Dennis was the king of the mountain. I was like, God, I want to go to San Diego.' So when Lowell North came to Florida for the 1977 SORC Vince asked if they could meet. 'Me and Marcia, we went and had dinner with Lowell. With the Pope!' He laughs. 'Everyone said, "You had dinner with the Pope? Wow!"'

Lowell offered Vince a job at North Sails in Italy. 'And I'm like, no, no, I want to go to San Diego.' It wasn't about the money, he insists. 'I was in love with sailing, and I wanted to hang with the best guys so I could learn more and get better.'

A few weeks later Lowell called. 'He said, "We have a spot. When can you be here?" I said, "How about three days?"' (San Diego is 2,500 miles away.) 'So I put all this stuff in the car – stereo system, a big bag – and drove to San Diego... I lived with him for about three months.' Later, after packing up the rest of their Clearwater life, Marcia followed him out west.

'It was a good move,' Vince says. 'I arrive, and Dennis Conner is asking, "Can you help me sail testing today?"' He shakes his head. 'Really? This is a dream, right?'

At the loft Vince began as a sail cutter but also worked on new designs for his Soling programme. He credits Pete Barrett (one of Lowell's 'Tigers') with teaching him how to make a fast sail out of very stretchy Dacron. 'Without taking credit Pete was

designing the sails, and I would just learn along with him. Those guys in the old days, they knew how to control stretch to make a sail that was pretty good looking. Today it's a completely different game.'

Vince also learned a few life lessons from Lowell, first as his Star crew and later as his competitor. 'Things that I was doing wrong, like hitting a mark at a worlds and trying to say I didn't see it. He called me on that. That had a big impact. The environment is what really dictates behaviour, so being in San Diego was really good for me.'

Vince still keeps in touch with many of the people he used to work with. 'North Sails means a lot to me. They've been my family for a long time.'

### Crew and helm

Unlike for most sailing legends, both of Vince's Olympic appearances and three of his nine worlds victories came as a crew.

All successful sailors have the will to win but Vince combined that with versatility; after winning the 1978 Soling Worlds crewing for his brother they won again in 1981, with Vince as helm and Gastão on the bow. (His third Soling world title came in 1983, crewing for Robbie Haines.) Vince says his brother, who decided to focus on business rather than sailing after the 1980 (boycott) Olympics, 'was actually the best sailor in the family; super talented, a natural. I was more the guy who works harder at it.'

In 1986 Vince added a gold Star to his list of accomplishments. A decade later, at 49, he won the J/24 Worlds crewing for Chris Larson. The next year he steered his own J/24 – and won again. Add to this list winning two back-to-back Melges 24 Worlds (1998 and 1999) and the 2000 Etchells Worlds, and that's five world championships in five years. 'I love crewing,' he said in a 2004 interview celebrating his election to the Sailing World Hall of Fame. 'And it's made me a better skipper.'

PAUL TODD/OUTSIDE IMAGES





We all have our crosses to bear with pictures that refuse to go away and one of the best-known photographs of Vince Brun in action is this shot (*above*) of him racing with Marcelo Ferreira at the 1988 Star North Americans at Ithaca in upstate New York. The Brazilian crew in 7209 have just been hit by a 35kt freeing gust and are on their way to a full keel-in-the-air capsize while also taking out the intermediate shroud of 6474 to leeward... which somehow kept their damaged rig up and finished the race in second. Brun's rig, however, did not make it home. When Vince Brun's father added a rig to his sons' first rowing dinghy (*right*) he did not mess around

This ability to play a supportive role led him to be part of Dennis Conner's Stars and Stripes team, twice. Since retirement he has put it to work helping top teams on a variety of keelboats, from small to tall.

### Life skills

One reason there are so many Vince stories is that he's never shy about making bold, global statements. 'I believe very strongly that sailing prepares kids for not just competition, but for everything,' he tells me now, leaning in across the table.

'Sailors in business are successful as hell, right? Because they are competitors. I remember going to get a job when I was doing the engineering school, and the guy said to me, "You compete? So how do you do?" As soon as I said, "I have really good results" the guy said "You're hired." They want the people who are ambitious, who want to compete. Sailing gives you that.'

When he first started sailing Vince says he went out just to have a good time. As he became more competitive, though, he realised the benefits of planning and organisation. 'Sailing is a complex sport, right? It's not just put the boat together and go, not if you want to do well. 'Dennis wrote about no excuse to lose; if you prepare you succeed. If I'm coaching I always ask before we step on the boat, "What are we going to try today?" It accelerates the learning process when you get a little bit more serious.'

But you still have to enjoy it. 'If you don't like to sail you're not going to put in the extra hours, go to bed thinking about it.' He recalls spreading pictures of different sail shapes across the coffee table at home. 'I tell Marcia, just leave them there, so I can go and look at the sail again. I look at it when I have a coffee; the day after, I look at it again. And then I go, "This is what we have to change." You just keep working at it... if you like what you do.'

And working on weaknesses is the fastest way to improve, he says. 'I don't

like push-ups. I like sit-ups. So push-ups, maybe I do it tomorrow. The same thing in sailing, you tend to do the things you like, going downwind and surfing the waves. It's really important, and something that takes a little bit of discipline, to pick the stuff you're weak on and work on that.'

When Vince retired San Diego A-Class cat sailors convinced him to try one of their boats. 'I needed something to do in the week, something to sail all by myself.

'First, I thought Laser. But it's too hard, hiking.' So he went A-Cat sailing. 'I loved it because it was during the week and I could go fast as hell compared to any other boat I sail. I should've just stuck with that.'

Instead, he bought a brand new boat – this time with foils. 'That was a mistake. That was a definite mistake. Every time the bow goes down, my feet come out of the footstraps and I go forward.

'So I'm making this strap as tight as possible, and that's when I hurt my knee, because of the crashes. I got beat up pretty bad. I had days when I came home and Marcia tells me what's for dinner; I'm like, "Don't worry about it, because I'm just going straight to bed." It's not a boat for old people, not with the foiling.

'I never felt comfortable,' he continues. 'I think the class is missing the point, because I always believe that you want to make the boats easier to sail. So the difference between the top guys and the guys at the back is less.

'The guys who are good on foils, they are so much better. It's not even a race.' (I can't help thinking he wouldn't have minded this at all, if he was one of the top guys.)

Vince says he has been contemplating getting back into the Star, where many old friends are still active. 'It's pretty amazing how the class is doing so well, being out of the Olympics. I think it's a pretty good class to be sailing, particularly if it's light air. Heavy air would be a bear; they might have to change a couple of things, just to make it a little easier for older people...'

Then he laughs. 'Any boat, right? Just seeing your old buddies and having fun.'

### Regrets?

When asked if he has any regrets Vince first shares a personal thought. 'When I left Brazil I probably hurt my parents a little bit. When I told them I'm going to the US they were shocked. I missed seeing them getting older. And I was really attached to my mom; my dad was a good dad, but he was kind of quiet.'

Then we're right back to sailing, and all the boats he should've tried. He mentions the Moth before remembering it wasn't around when he was young enough to sail it. 'Now it's just not possible; I don't have the body to do that any more.' He also recently had back surgery, brought on by hiking and trimming the Star mainsail. 'Once your arms lose their strength you do a lot of work with your back... sometimes too much work.'

In 2018 Vince was inducted into the US Sailing Hall of Fame. When we chatted he was enjoying a day off coaching a team on a new Melges IC37 and looking forward to the 12 Metre Worlds. 'To be honest, some of those boats look better than when they were new for the Cup,' he marvels, perhaps wishing we could all age so well.

'I consider myself a lucky guy,' Vince continues. 'Lowell bringing me to San Diego, the opportunity to work for a company like North, the people I met. And making a living out of that. What else can I ask? I have a comfortable life. Two kids who are doing well – my wife gets most of the credit for that.' He pauses to pull out his phone, showing off a photo of his granddaughter.

'Sailing is a sport that offers a lot of benefits,' he says. 'A lot of people don't even realise or appreciate it.' As for the stories: 'They just get better and better as you get older,' Vince laughs. 'Hopefully I can keep on doing this stuff... and with all the friends that I've made.' □

