



Dave Perry: winning in life

Author of the one book our editor unfailingly recommends to every novice and aspiring champion he meets, this is one sailor he has banged on about interviewing for years. Ex-Olympian Carol Cronin finally answered the call...

Whenever I'm challenged to explain our sport to non-sailors I borrow a metaphor from Dave Perry's first book that describes sailing's field of play as a football field – one that's constantly changing in both dimensions and texture, forcing players to adjust on the fly. Thirty-five years later *Winning in One Designs* is still a (the – ed) must-read textbook on what its author calls 'possibly the most complex sport in the world'.

I've always admired Dave's ability to communicate clearly (and usually humorously) with any audience, so it was an honour to share a November lunch with

him at his alma mater, Yale Corinthian Yacht Club (YCYC, pronounced 'Yik-Yik'). Surrounded by walls full of trophies and photos, we spent a few hours wandering along the timeline of his life to understand how he became such a respected sailor, sportsman, teacher and rules guru.

'I was born in 1954, into a family that loves sailing,' Dave begins, sliding his feet out of his customary flip-flops to cross one bare foot over the other knee. He still lives in Southport, Connecticut, a former seaport at the western end of Long Island Sound. 'We lived a five-minute walk from the Pequot Yacht Club. Even before I was in the junior programme I used to go and help sweep out in the morning. I was a little wharf rat.'

Dave has five younger sisters, and 'every one of us was into sailing'. His dad raced Atlantics, and their mom also sailed now and then. 'I just couldn't wait to get on a boat. It was as natural as having breakfast.'

When Dave was eight his father showed up at little league practice with a Sunfish on the car roof. Once dad was confident that Dave could right the boat himself, 'he

just let me go'. His best day's sailing ever was at nine years old, on a day with small craft warnings; his dad helped him rig and pushed him out onto the choppy harbour. 'I was bouncing off the rocks, but that's a Sunfish! And my grandmother sees me out there and calls my dad: "Do you know that David's out there?" My dad says, "He is??"' Dave laughs. 'Oh God, I loved it.'

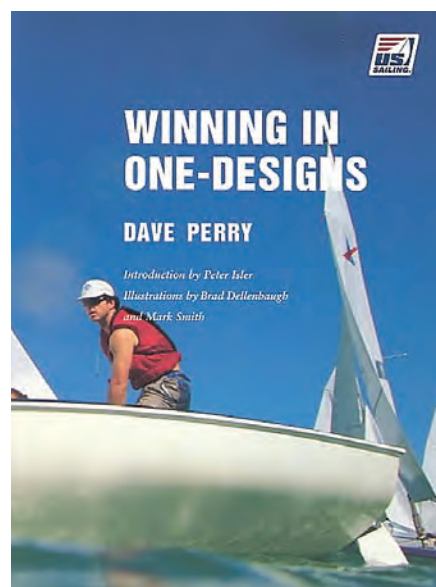
He also remembers seaweed fights, and popping rudders off other kids' Sunfish. 'We didn't even start junior sailing until 10 years old. You did your first race at 12, and that'd be on a Blue Jay.'

The combination of Blue Jays (for the kids) and Lightnings (for the adults) was perfect, he continues. 'Three kids on a boat, right? You could go under the deck; I'd have little forts, and comic books, and Bazooka gum. Pulling the cover over like a tent... I don't even know what we did, we just had so much fun.'

In his early teens he began crewing in the Lightning. Looking back, results were less important than learning seamanship skills and what he calls the 'adult-youth synergy' that was so formative for him.

This leads to an observation that age-limited learning – so popular today – doesn't help create lifelong sailors. 'I wouldn't have made [a sailing career] if it weren't for my pretty relaxed upbringing.'

Another important aspect of that childhood was excellent competition. Though he first met his lifelong friend David Dellenbaugh at little league practice, their competition on the water started quite young and hasn't stopped. 'He's only a year older, but



Above left: classic Dave Perry 'teaching at the board'. In 1978 (*opposite*) within a year of graduating from Yale Perry was starting what would be a 40+ year coaching career – and, as with his UK counterpart and old friend Jim Saltonstall, the lifelong respect shown by Perry's fanbase of one-time young champions-to-be became the stuff of sailing legend. Friends in high places (*left*)... Perry is middleman in a glittering Soling crew with Paul Elvstrøm and with Jud Smith – he of 10 world titles – on bow. **Top:** the only racing book you'll ever need

still to this day he's a little better... He's won the America's Cup. I've got five match racing championships, he's only got three! But we're best friends. Any time you see a good sailor you'll find they grew up with another good sailor very nearby. It's really hard to get good in a vacuum.'

For college Dave chose Yale for its music programme: 'Sailing wasn't even on my radar,' he says. But the summer before his first year he bought a Laser (one of only two boats he's actually owned). '695 bucks, brand new out of the box! Number 931.' He chuckles. 'It was amazing.'

When he arrived on campus and spotted a 420 with its sail up (part of a sailing club exhibit to tempt incoming Yalies) he stopped for a chat. 'Dead music just blasting, a keg of beer. I'm like, ah, cool sailboat. I know about sailing. Totally casual. Next thing you know I'm sailing with the team! Today the Yale team's recruited...'

The following spring USYRU (now US Sailing) invited 150 American kids to a regatta in Lasers, the first ever US Youth Champs (thought up by 'some guy' named Bob Johnstone). They brought in coaches, including 'Buddy Melges and Dave Ullman

and Dick Tillman and Peter Barrett, and on and on. There was a clinic each day; it was just mind blowing! And the Laser was so cool.'

Dave pauses for emphasis. 'The combination of the Laser and the Youth Champs turned me around,' he insists. 'I wouldn't be in this sport if it weren't for those two things, I'm sure of it. I've thanked Bob J so many times...' (Again, his memories focus on learning and camaraderie, not results.)

Back at college, sailing involved much more than just showing up for practice; YCYC was a totally student-run club. 'We did our own budgeting. We had a very supportive alumni group and they raised money to buy the fleet, but it was up to us to sort the docks, fix the engines, fix the boats.'

That 'we' included classmates Peter Isler, Steve Benjamin and Stan Honey. 'I always say about Stan: we went to the same school but we were never in the same classes!' Dave laughs. 'It was a kid operation, and I think that's one reason so many of our generation are still involved. Having that responsibility made you more passionate about it... and maybe more capable.'

When I suggest the reverse, that the less

passionate folks got weeded out by all that responsibility, Dave pushes back with what he sees as one of today's biggest challenges. 'If a coach takes care of all the organising then kids never learn to take that responsibility. The downside of a coach is when the coach starts thinking for the kid, and the kid stops thinking.'

Shouldering so much responsibility had its own downside, though: burnout. Most New England collegiate regattas are in Boston, a two-hour drive from YCYC. 'Now they tell me that the kids do homework on Saturday night in their hotel. Yeah.' Dave snorts. 'First of all, we never stayed in a hotel. I can't even tell you where I stayed most of the time. And second of all, we were definitely not doing homework on Saturday night!' Trying to keep up with both sailing and schoolwork, he fell behind.

'So by the end of my junior year I was exhausted. We won the 1975 Nationals, and I was euphoric... but I just didn't have anything left in the tank. I couldn't even think about going back to school in three months.' Instead, he took a year off; 'Nobody really made it in four years back then.' But in those pre-database days, he kept all of his Yale IDs. 'I ate at the dining hall, went to the gym.' He also practised with the sailing team, lived at YCYC and attended many campus events and seminars. 'It was the best year of college, the year I didn't go to school!'

Dave graduated in 1977 with a major in organisational behaviour. 'I have this sort of organisational brain that tries to make sense of stuff, so it was perfect for me. My



Opposite: Dave Perry with crew Peter Worcester and Tom Kinney collect the Prince of Wales Bowl in 1982 after winning the first of five US Match Racing championships. And in the coach boat (above) doing the knife and fork thing with US Finn representative Zach Railey before the medal race at the 2008 Beijing Olympic regatta where Railey took the silver medal behind Ben Ainslie... obviously

focus was group dynamics. I probably use it every day.' But his very first job, at a marine retail store, was 'the worst nine months in my life – and the last time I've ever done business.' He soon discovered a much better fit; teaching weekend racing clinics in one-design fleets around the country. 'It was great. They all got better together: the back of the pack and the front.'

In 1978 Peter Isler asked Perry and Dellenbaugh to join his Soling campaign. It was at the 1980 Soling Worlds in Ponce, Puerto Rico, that they learned about the US boycott of the Moscow Olympics. 'A guy says "Perry, you guys are boycotting the Olympics." I thought it was just a goof! He hands me the newspaper – all in Spanish. So I go to somebody who speaks Spanish: What does that say? "Oh, this says the US is boycotting the Games."'

Dave rearranges himself in the armchair, still visibly annoyed four decades later. 'I have no problem with the US government giving no money to sport. But then don't use us as your political statements. In the old days they used to stop wars for the Olympic Games.'

He takes another bite of sandwich, chews and moves on to his next adventure. In the early 1980s the only real sailing jobs were as a sailmaker's hired gun. 'You'd go sailing with a customer and listen to them rant about how bad the jib was, as they were crashing into every wave and sailing in bad air, and you couldn't turn around

and tell them, "Well, actually it's not the jib, it's you." No fun.'

So instead he organised more racing clinics. 'I'm a compulsive teacher. And I could say to the drivers, "Look, you've got to get better." That dark-eyed stare becomes even more intense. 'Our sport completely undervalues education. Completely.'

After so many years' teaching sailors, I tease, hasn't he found a fix for that yet? 'Fix is a pretty strong word,' he replies. But 'anyone who's spent time with a good coach always says, "Wow, that was really good."'

In 1981 Dave bought a Snipe (the second of those two boats he's owned). The racing was fun, but it made him realise that 'I still have the itch, to see if I can get to the Olympics.' He borrowed back the 1980 Soling and signed on Brad Dellenbaugh as a teammate. Ed Trevelyan joined them for the 1982 Soling Worlds where they finished third; 'that just launched us.'

Back in the US, Dave continued to combine racing and teaching. Before driving to a Soling North Americans in Texas, 'I'd get on the phone (or maybe telegram, I forget how we communicated then) and line up clinics that would basically pay for the trip.' He also met Betsy, his wife, at a Thanksgiving soccer game in 1982. Back at the house, 'I was on the piano, and suddenly she sat down next to me and started singing away.'

After a first kiss (they still debate who initiated it) and a couple of dates Dave

invited Betsy to join him for a trip around the world, financed by coaching gigs with the Japanese and Swedish Olympic teams. It was toward the end of that trip that Dave realised, 'I'd be crazy not to marry this girl.' So, while watching sunset near the Arc de Triomphe, 'I said, "Hey, what do you think about getting married?" She went, "Yes!" He grins. 'We celebrated 35 last week. My job there is: just don't screw it up.'

Dave offered to give up his Olympic campaign, but instead they scheduled the wedding for after the LA Games and he continued training. 'We had a great team, but it was a deep US Trials,' Dave says, quickly rattling off impressive names: Robbie Haines, Buddy Melges, Dave Curtis, Dave Chapin, Ed Baird, Larry Klein. He shakes his head, as if to dislodge the remorse: 'We were leading going into the last race. And we were the only team with no letters on our score.'

But the 10-race trials included two throw-outs, so Robbie Haines' team was able to discard a DSQ and an OCS. 'Great sailors – and they won the gold medal,' Dave reminds me. 'I love 'em dearly. And those guys sailed a good last race...'

Looking back, Dave blames one crucial personnel decision for that painful second-place finish. 'My biggest sailing regret was not committing to sail with Moose [McClin-tock] in the summer of 1983,' he says. Instead, they went for a third with more Soling experience. When Ed Trevelyan left

to re-form Robbie Haines's 1980 team, along with bowman Rod Davis, Moose eventually signed on six months later. But they'd already lost valuable time. 'I wish I had just said, yeah, Moose, Brad and me, let's go. It was right there.' He shakes his shaggy mane once again. 'You get sick.'

He hadn't prepared for the crushing disappointment of losing: 'Your image is always you're going to be successful.' Instead, 'our world ended.'

So for a while Dave Perry went 'sailing cold turkey' – except for an annual trip to the Congressional Cup. 'It was competing at the highest level that I've always loved doing,' Dave explains. 'And if you just go out and do it now and then you won't compete at that level.'

Instead, he stepped away from the water and dived into a fresh challenge: athletic director at a private high school. 'I figured my whole life had been four years of high school, four years of college, four years of Olympic effort; I'll do four years at Green Farms Academy... I was there 21 years! Best job I could've had.'

As his family grew (he and Betsy have a son and daughter) he did stay involved in sailing as a volunteer. He organised the Youth Champs and joined US Sailing's Appeals Committee (he's now the longest-serving member, ever). And whenever he talked to kids disappointed by their own performance he told the tale of his own US trials defeat in 1984. 'How we tried really hard, didn't win, and here's all the good stuff that happened afterwards. I'm the sailor I am now because of that.'

Along the way Dave developed his own sports philosophy: 'focus on performance, not outcome. Don't talk about winning and losing, talk about how you're going to do something better.' He asks if I've read *The Inner Game of Tennis*, and I say yes. 'That book changed the way I lived.' He says it taught him that 'what you do doesn't define who you are.'

Which reminds me that we skipped right over his own publications, so I ask how those came to be. He explains that *Winning in One Designs* is basically a compilation of 40 magazine columns written during two Olympic campaigns, plus countless clinics. 'I'd take something from my seminars and make it an article. People would say, "Dave, your articles are almost like you're sitting there talking to me..." That's because I was.'

Four of the columns were about specific rules, so during that disappointingly quiet summer of 1984 ('turned out I had some time on my hands!') Dave broke those out into *Understanding the Racing Rules of Sailing*. Ten years later he published Dave Perry's *100 Best Racing Rules Quizzes* – also a compilation. 'So I've got three books out there, but I've really only written one!'

I'd brought along my own copy of *Winning in One Designs* for Dave to sign, and as I extract it from my bag he shares one of his proudest moments. 'In 2011 I was walking through the [Weymouth Sailing

Academy] parking lot at the pre-Olympic event and there were Iain [Percy] and Bart [Simpson] working on their Star boat. Iain goes, "Hey, you're Dave Perry! Aren't you the guy who wrote the book about banging the corners – I loved the bird on the sign, "Welcome to Cornersville... pop 1."'

Dave beams. 'Then Ben [Ainslie] came over and they're telling me how they were given the book by youth coach Jim Saltonstall when they were "ferrets" and they loved it. "Your book was so influential for us," adds Ben. I loved hearing that!' He eventually figured out that both Jim Saltonstall and Harold Bennett in New Zealand had given *Winning in One Designs* to all their sailors, extending Dave's legacy around the world. (Dave would later go on to work with Percy at Artemis Racing in 2013 and 2017.)

In 2006 Dave left his job at Green Farms Academy and returned to sailing and coaching. Since then he's worked with America's Cup ('a think-tank for the brightest people in the world') and Olympic teams as rules adviser and coach. He's also done a lot of team racing and match racing.

Now 65, Dave claims he's 'just trying to stay relevant'. He's hoping to go to Tokyo 2020, with Team USA; otherwise, he doesn't plan ahead much. 'I've always sort of lived in the moment... right now, here's what I want to do. As long as you're doing something good and productive... it's worked out.'

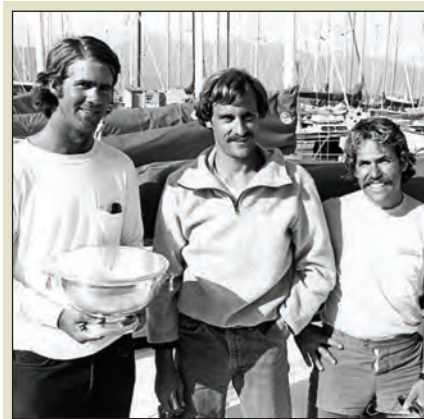
'I just love helping people,' he adds. 'That makes me happiest.' So it's no surprise to hear that rules talks remain on his to-do list, along with 'match racing, and more time with Bets...' His family is clearly what he's the most proud of, so that seems like a fitting place to wrap up our conversation.

As we stand to leave before 'Yik-Yik' gets too busy with afternoon practice I notice the perpetual trophy right behind my seat is named the 'Dave Perry Sportsmanship Award'. 'Huh!' he says, clearly pleased – and surprised. Turns out associating Dave Perry with sportsmanship isn't just a Yale thing. In 1992, when Dave retired as chairman of the Youth Champs, US Sailing named that regatta's sportsmanship award after him. In 2006 Green Farms Academy put his name on their own sportsmanship trophy. 'And then I got the Van Alan Clark sportsmanship award [from US Sailing],' he adds. 'I'm very proud of trying to help people be successful in a competitive sport, but in a way that's respectful. To feel like I've had an impact on a generation of young people.'

'Or five or six,' I kid.

He laughs. 'I coached JJ [Fetter] when she was 12 years old, and now I'm coaching her kid! It is a sport for life...'

Later, at my desk, I open *Winning in One Designs* and read: 'To Carol... Hike Hard, Sail Fast, Be Smart... and when all else fails... Bang a Corner!' So now, when trying to explain how to win sailboat races, I have a whole new quote to borrow. □



Filling in the blanks

Dave Perry grew up sailing at the Pequot Yacht Club in Southport, Connecticut, winning the Clinton M Bell Trophy for the best junior record on Long Island Sound in 1971. While at Yale (1973-1977) he was captain of the National Championship Team in 1975, and was voted All-American in 1975 and 1977.

Other racing accomplishments include: 1st, 1978 Tasar North Americans; 5th, 1979 Laser Worlds; 1st, 1979 Soling Olympic Pre-Trials (crew); 3rd, 1982 Soling Worlds; 1st, 1982, 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2015 US Match Racing Championship; 1st, 1983 Star South American Championship (crew); 1st, 1983 and 1984 Congressional Cup; 2nd, 1984 Soling Olympic Trials; 1st, 1988 and 1992 Knickerbocker Match Race Cup; 1st, 1994, 1999 and 2003 Ideal 18 North American Championship; 1st, 2007 South American Match Racing Championship and 1st, 2010 Detroit Match Racing Cup.

Dave has led hundreds of US Sailing instructional seminars in over 50 one design classes; directed US Olympic Talent Development Clinics; coached the 1981 Youth world champion team; and given seminars in Japan, Australia, Sweden, Argentina, Brazil and Canada. He has been the Youth Representative on the US Sailing Board of Directors and Chairman of the US Youth Championship Committee, and has served on countless other US Sailing committees. He is currently a member of the US Sailing Appeals Committee and a US Sailing National Judge.

In 1992 he was voted into the Sailing World Hall of Fame; in 1994 he received an honorary Doctorate of Education from Piedmont College; in 1995 he became the first recipient of US Sailing's Captain Joe Prosser Award for exceptional contribution to sailing education. He served as the rules adviser to the Swedish 2007 America's Cup challenge and Artemis Racing in 2013 and 2017 and to the US Olympic Sailing Team in 2008 and 2012.

He is the author of three successful books on sailing: *Understanding the Racing Rules of Sailing*, *Dave Perry's 100 Best Racing Rules Quizzes*, and *Winning in One Designs*