



99 years young

So good that they named a course after him – Carol Cronin looks at the life extraordinaire of Henry Hill ‘Harry’ Anderson

I first met Harry Anderson in 1984 when he gave a rules talk to my college sailing team. Though he was a household name in our sport (if only because of that racecourse), I’m ashamed to say that I’ve retained none of the wisdom he undoubtedly shared that evening. I do, however, remember his New York Yacht Club tie, because it hung outside a ragged crew-neck sweater. What a missed learning opportunity.

So when the editor of this magazine requested a profile of Harry, who was born in 1921 into a sailing family and today provides a living link back to an America’s Cup of J Boats and Vanderbilts, I immediately set up an appointment and hopped in my car. An hour later I let myself into a sunlit ground-floor apart-

ment near Mystic, Connecticut. As soon as I close the door I forget all about the retirement facility I’ve just walked through.

Taking a seat at an antique wooden table, I’m overwhelmed by both the cosy atmosphere and historic significance of Harry’s collected favourites. Every picture crowding the walls and every book on each carefully catalogued shelf cries out for my attention. Instead I focus on Harry and his bright red suspenders, getting up to inspect a particular half-model or photo only when it comes up in conversation.

As soon as I tell him I’m writing a story for this magazine Harry nods. ‘*Seahorse*, for the Royal Ocean Racing Club. Tail is backwards, you know...’

Promising to pass that information along, I mention greetings from my father, who in the 1970s helped develop what became the International Measurement System (IMS). That sparked a story about a New York Yacht Club (NYYC) cruise to Maine, when several race committee members went for a sobering late-night

swim after the gangway down to the floating dock gave way underneath them (‘a collapse of Commodores, heh heh heh’, as Harry put it). For the next hour any name or event I mention leads to another tale – while I just try to hang on for the ride.

What follows is an amalgamation of that chat, fleshed out with details gleaned from *The Strenuous Life of Harry Anderson* by another *Seahorse* writer, Roger Vaughan. Published in 2013 by Mystic Seaport, this weighty tome provides a personal view of the last century’s sailing highlights, as well as pointing out Harry’s inherent contradictions. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, most of his colossal energy has focused on expanding access to sailing and education.

A sailing philanthropist who got his hands dirty while staying out of the lime-light? Hard guy to summarise. And a very entertaining interview.

Flag officer, media and trout

Harry grew up sailing out of Seawanhaka



JONATHAN EASTLAND/ALAMY

Opposite: Harry Anderson presents the 1979 One Ton to John McLaurin whose Laurie Davidson design *Pendragon* won the mostly light-air series in Newport. Fabulous facts: the same *Pendragon* won the previous year's 3/4 Ton Cup in Canada – a double never achieved by any design before or since. Changes to the IOR that winter hit Davidson's centreboarder hard so instead of having an overweight 3/4 Tonner he persuaded his client that with a bowsprit, a bit more sail and some lead his crazy new plan might just work. **Above:** when Harry Anderson and some of his New York Yacht Club aficionados started to sense the club's 132-year hold on the America's Cup was beginning to slip away. The 1980 America's Cup challenger *Australia* – seen here to leeward of Dennis Conner's *Freedom* – had borrowed the technology for a pre-bent glassfibre topmast from the failed British Challenger *Lionheart*, allowing for a much bigger mainsail roach to be carried. The Aussies didn't win that year but they did win a light second race and *Australia* herself was much faster than on her previous appearance in Newport in 1977. Design genius Ben Lexcen was just getting into his stride...

Corinthian Yacht Club (SCYC) in Oyster Bay, New York. His first crewing experience was at about age six with his father on the family S-boat: 'My job was to light his cigarettes,' he remembers, chuckling. His mother had inherited a summer camp on St Regis Lake in the Adirondacks so he spent many childhood summers there.

'We did a lot of sailing on the lake, on E-Scows and other classes.' Later he mentions a local class called the Idem. 'Idem in Latin means "the same",' he tells me. 'It's the second-oldest one-design in North America, with a huge gaff-rigged main and a special cockpit behind the house for the mainsheet trimmer. There are still about six original ones up at St Regis Lake.

'Clinton Crane designed them. He was a good designer; he designed the *Aloha* [issue 478] for Arthur Curtiss James.' (See what I mean about trying to keep up?)

At 12 Harry started his flag officer career as vice-commodore of the Upper St Regis Lake Yacht Club. (He'd eventually accrue 139 years as a flag officer of one

yacht club or another.) That same year he also made his first media appearance, in the *New York Herald Tribune*; 'I was about 12 years old and I'm standing at the end of St Regis Lake, fishing for trout.'

Twenty-five years later trout fishing would give Harry something to talk about with President Eisenhower, while they waited for wind during the 1958 America's Cup.

In 1933 Harry followed family tradition to the Adirondack-Florida School. He isn't sure why his father and uncle went there; he guesses that his grandfather had probably known the founder... Sailing was an important part of the curriculum, and he was soon elected vice-commodore of the school's yacht club. Today the school is called Ransom Everglades, and the gymnasium is named after Harry Anderson '38.

For his final year of college prep Harry's father sent him to Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Three days after graduation, in June 1939, Harry stepped onto a schooner that was heading for

Labrador to research Norse landings. His father had signed him on as a crew, since the (uninspected and uninsured) schooner was not allowed to carry passengers for hire. His log from that summer details hard physical labour and eating salt cod three times a day; it also mentions that the well-connected captain was alerted to World War II's start a few days earlier than either the US State Department or Whitehall.

YCYC, ROTC and 12 Metres

Anderson started at Yale in September 1939, shortly after Germany invaded Poland. Yale Corinthian Yacht Club (YCYC) was already going strong, and during his freshman year he sailed Class X dinghies. When he returned as a sophomore, though, the boats had been taken home by the graduating seniors who owned them – perhaps the origin of his later support for college-owned fleets?

During college summers Anderson raced on several of the era's most modern boats: ▷

the 12 Metres. And onboard Harold Vanderbilt's *Vim* he absorbed lessons from a meticulous deck boss named Rod Stephens.

Back at Yale, Anderson served as rear-commodore of YCYC in his junior and senior years. Along with a stimulating balance of academics, sailing and adult beverages, he also joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). He learned of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor directly from Eleanor Roosevelt, who mentioned it to her Yale audience after giving a speech there on 7 December 1941.

Bazookas, law school and fibreglass

One year later, thanks to a compressed academic schedule that replaced summer vacation with schooling, Anderson graduated and headed out to Oklahoma for artillery training. He helped train Army recruits to use a new handheld rocket launcher, the bazooka, before heading to France to fight under General Patton.

Discharged intact in 1946, he was commended for bravery under enemy fire. In *The Strenuous Life* he advocates a mandatory national service for all American 18-year-olds, because today's 'youngsters aren't tough enough'.

The war was followed by a few years at Columbia Law School, alma mater of his father and grandfather before him. He also joined the Adirondack-Florida School board and helped them to reopen in 1947.

In his spare time he built a Thistle from a class kit. And he became friends with Eric Olsen; a few years later the two men would start Gull Reinforced Plastics, to manufacture industrial parts using a revolutionary new material: fibreglass.

Rules broken and made

In 1949 Harry went to Cowes for the British-American Cup, a team racing event that started at Seawanhaka Corinthian a year before he was born (and still runs today). Racing 6 Metres down the last two legs of that year's final race kicked off decades of work developing the racing rules.

'We had a four-crew team against four British boats,' Harry explains, 'and here we are, tied, going into the last race.'

'It's a broad reach down the Solent; then around a buoy, and a dead run to the finish at the Royal Yacht Squadron. We had a winning combination, but one of the British boats luffed up two American boats to let another British boat through.'

'Bus Mosbacher had already gone around the mark and he saw this; he comes back on the previous course, luffs the British boats up, lets the Americans through, and then goes straight to the finish!' His twinkling eyes widen at the memory.

'Over cocktails there was a great discussion on how the rules applied. If you go back to a previous course and you lose your luffing rights, what is your proper course, to the buoy or the finish? It went on and on. So we came back and formed a committee here in this country and drafted



DAN NERNEY

Well into his tenth decade Harry Anderson holds court at the Newport Reading Room – one of the young (1854) upstarts that keep an old club like the NYYC (1844) on its toes

the match racing-team racing rules, to cover situations that don't come up in fleet racing.' Now we all take those appendices (and their call books) for granted.

This leads to another British-American Cup story. 'One year, very hot summer at Cowes, we were neck and neck with a boat coming to the finish under spinnaker. We'd stripped to the waist, but the British won't finish a boat if you don't have a shirt on. And everyone was putting on their T-shirts.' He pauses to chuckle. 'Just before the finish I said, 'Let go of the spinnaker sheet!' And of course the sail went flying out ahead of the boat and we finished first. That introduced the phrase "finish with your equipment in its normal position".'

'So first you broke all the rules and then you wrote them,' I tease. 'Well, there weren't that many rules back then!'

Back to college

Harry never married but he's got several adopted sons. When I ask what he is most proud of, he doesn't hesitate: 'All the work in the collegiate setting. Bringing thousands of young people into competitive sailing.' In the 1960s he helped YCYC establish a permanent home by persuading an old friend to donate a small but pricey piece of Long Island Sound shoreline.

A complete list of Anderson's official roles would take up space better used by other witty replies to my bumbling questions, but here are a few key highlights: IYRU (now ISAF) President; NYYC Commodore, and longtime member of the America's Cup Selection Committee; US Sailing Executive Director and Chair of the Appeals Committee (for 25 years); Seawanhaka Commodore; American Sail Training Association (now Tall Ships America) Chair. In 1979 US Sailing awarded him their highest honour: the Nathanael G Herreshoff Trophy. He was also a judge and Chairman of the Intercollegiate Yacht Racing Association (now ICSA).

Thirty years later he helped guide the transition from club to varsity sport; a decade after that he was involved in the replacement of the ageing boathouse.

And it's not just his own alma mater that's benefited from Harry's support and wisdom. In the 1950s he was instrumental in bringing the Intercollegiate Yacht Racing Union (now ICSA) into compliance with NAYRU (now US Sailing). In the 1960s he helped found a civilian advisory committee at the US Naval Academy and also came up with the idea (over cocktails, of course) for a foundation that would enable boat donations – now an important revenue source for Navy Sailing.

Then there's the University of Rhode Island... where the sailing team's national ranking is consistently higher than the school's academic one! Harry's interest in that programme was originally sparked by one of those adopted 'sons', Jamie Hilton '83. Around that same time Harry managed what in *The Strenuous Life* he calls a 'double whammy': he purchased Yale a new fleet of 420s and then bought their old fleet for URI, putting his dollars to work for both groups.

Even now Harry's influence extends well beyond writing cheques; he's the ultimate facilitator. When I mention a friend who'd graduated from URI in 2018 Harry nods at the name. 'Well if you're talking to her we're about to make a major move. I've just been on the phone today...' and he dives into a detailed description of the current URI sailing facility's limitations (too protected, and shoaling up more every year) before listing both the advantages and challenges of a promising new location.

'I think it would be a good move,' he declares. 'Right now we're at a disadvantage if we send a team to a regatta in open water.' Though this plan is not yet definite, Harry says that 'we are in a good position. I'm in touch with the president of URI, and we keep him posted. He's very high on sailing, so that's a big advantage. Half of this stuff is politics, you know!' (It was only later that I realised he'd also been



PAUL J MELLO/OUTSIDE IMAGES



At the 1980 America's Cup the trophy's guardians at the New York YC were not alone in sensing trouble ahead. By midway through the series Dennis Conner and his crew (*above*) were convinced that in light to medium airs Alan Bond's Australian team had the faster boat – *Australia's* new bendy mast was a psychological weapon every bit as much as a performance tool. What Conner's crew did not fully appreciate was that the novel Aussie spar was being rebuilt every night to keep it in one piece. Meanwhile, Conner could rely on the legendary technical skills of no less than a 71-year-old Rod Stephens (*right*) to care for *Freedom's* more conventional rig

instrumental in URI Sailing's 1981 relocation, to the place he now says is no longer their best option.)

America's Cup, and brandy in the library

Harry's involvement in the America's Cup stretches over six decades – and every story finishes over drinks. As a teen he watched family friend Harold 'Mike' Vanderbilt win the last J Class contest. After WWII he was instrumental in reinventing the Cup, even though no one had any money. 'Before the war Harold Vanderbilt personally financed a J boat,' Harry says. '[In 1958] It took a syndicate to finance a poor little 12 Metre!' His laughter is infectious.

1958 was the year Harry (aged 37) was asked by the NYYC to keep President Eisenhower entertained. 'I spent a whole day out on the destroyer with him telling him what was going on. Well, of course I didn't talk military with him; he was way ahead of me on that.

'We talked trout fishing, he trout fished all over the place! The first day was very light winds, we were postponing and postponing... We didn't have a good Coast Guard patrol because we didn't have that experience then. And the yachts were all over the place. Eisenhower looks down and says, "This reminds me of a drunken cab driver in a Paris traffic jam!"' (Later I'll read the same quote in *The Strenuous Life*, so it's obviously a favourite memory.)

Harry was on the America's Cup Selection Committee from 1974 'until we lost it'. Another favourite memory shows how closely his life was tied to the Cup – and how clearly he saw what was happening, even while in the thick of it.

The closest racing of the Twelve Metre era was in 1980, he says, three years before the loss to Alan Bond's Australian team. 'In 1980 after the first day it was evident that they [Australia] had a much faster

boat. We kept the Cup three times with a slower boat, mostly on tactics and what-not. But we saw the Australians were catching up on us.'

Then he gets that twinkle in his eye that precedes another story; this one took place during a mid-year IYRU (now ISAF) meeting, at Beppe Croce's house in Italy. 'After dinner the butler came into the library to serve brandy. And Berta [Beppe's wife] asked me, "How serious are you about this Cup, Harry?" And I said, "Well, I'll make a wager with you: if we lose the Cup I'll get married. Can you line up some girls for me?'

'This went on for a couple of America's Cup matches but after 1980 I said to her, "We're not gonna win every time with the slower boat. It's too risky. I'm calling it off!" He laughs as if it's the first time he's ever told this story...

His own sailing

Though Harry is lauded as someone who (as Bob Bavier put it in the March 1980 issue of *Yachting*) 'seldom hit the front page but do[es] more for the sport than those who win the big races', he had plenty of his own boats and quite a few victories.

He won his class in the 1979 Marblehead to Halifax Race on his New York 40 *Taniwha*; a year later he won a very competitive 40ft class at Block Island Race Week, which earned him a callout in *The New York Times* as a 'seasoned skipper'. (Not so seasoned was the music blasting from Commodore Anderson's mothership that week, according to Jamie Hilton. Jamie also remembers *Taniwha's* motto: 'No trim is too small and no drink is too early.')

When I ask Harry how many boats he's owned he pauses for just a moment. 'That's a good question. Probably a dozen at least.' (Great guess; 14 are listed in Appendix 2 of *The Strenuous Life*.) Asked to name a favourite, he chooses *Witch of Atlas*, an S&S-designed Hughes 38 that he owned

for most of the 1970s. 'That was probably the best boat I ever had for racing. Terrific boat... she was so well balanced.'

Asked for a dream list of boats to own, and the first one he mentions is the Finn – a class Harry helped bring to the US. Next he names a Twelve Metre. And he'd also need an ocean-going boat, he adds quickly, which brings us to the last boat he owned: *Blue Shadow*. 'She was a 47ft sloop built of teak in Mauritius, and in the ocean she was a very fast boat. I took her a lot of places, we cruised in northern Scotland, and up to Labrador a couple of times...'

No detail too small

Everyone who's ever enjoyed a conversation with Harry will understand that an hour was not nearly enough. By the time I made it back to my desk I was worn out with keeping up – and I already had an email following up on the backwards-tailed seahorse.

'Dear Carol, Enjoyed the banter. May have gotten the tail on the RORC in reverse. Club emblem shows tail coiled behind its back so that each time it is articulated the seahorse would be going backwards. Do you know why the penguin waddles backwards? It would rather see where it has been than where it is going.

'We give credit to RORC for being more fore-sighted than this! We've stayed at the clubhouse too, which in its original state was like a farmhouse! Boodle's was normally my London abode!!'

From J Boats and Vanderbilts right up until today Harry has made our sport both better and more accessible. Working mostly out of the limelight, his fingerprints are on almost every major sailing improvement of the 20th century – as well as several in the 21st. And thanks to a simple but elegant sailing course, his name will live on for future generations of college and frost-bite sailors, a fitting legacy for this under-appreciated giant of our sport. □