



No introduction required

Carol Cronin looks deeper into the backstory of an Olympic gold and silver medallist, America's Cup veteran and match race champion who in something of a back-to-front career is now a scourge of the OK dinghy class. He also continues to scale ever greater heights as one of the world's 'winningest' sailing coaches... and of course writing a hugely popular column for *Seahorse*

Please don't tell the editor... but I have a confession. I often share Rod Davis's *Seahorse* columns with sailors who aren't subscribers because of his unique combination of big-picture perspective and drama-free detail. So I was thrilled when the opportunity arose to meet by Skype from our opposite sides of the world (my strange 2020 summer just ending, his just beginning), to chat about the sport where he has

made his living for almost half a century.

He didn't earn that living by writing *Seahorse* columns; Rod's been a pro sailor since before that was really a thing, and more recently has added coaching victories to an impressive CV. Highlights include every single America's Cup from 1977 to 2017, two Olympic medals and four Congressional Cup wins, and at 65 he's still coaching and competing at a high level. Perhaps the oddest thing of all is that everyone *likes* him, thanks to his warm smile and calm demeanour.

And maybe that 'mid-Pacific' accent helps too. Self-deprecating kernels of wisdom shoot across the airwaves in a mix of native California drawl and Kiwi twang, further muddled by a worldly mix of word choices and slang. Here's some of what I managed to pick up from a wide-ranging discussion that took place just before he escaped quarantine to finish third at the 2020 'Not the Worlds' OK dinghy regatta.

Young and hungry

Rod was born in Key West, where he learned to sail in a Sunfish and then beat up on his father's fellow Naval officers. 'I was about a third of their weight, and that

was real good when it was light and real bad when it was windy.'

When his family moved to San Diego he was 'never really any good in the Sabot' so he began crewing on 35 to 40-footers. 'I did the bow for all kinds of regattas, then came back into the smaller boats... a little bit backwards from the normal Olympic background.' But he thinks foredeck duty made him a better skipper, because it made him aware of 'all the complication in front of you. When you finally do start steering a boat you can help those guys out with moves that will make their life easy, versus just turning the boat and saying they'll have to deal with it.'

After high school and two years of misery in accounting school Rod decided to become a sailmaker. He wanted to work for Lowell North, one of his mentors; instead he took 'great advice' to get out of San Diego. 'Tom McLaughlin said, "You're just a kid running around the docks. You're never going to sell sails and further your career if you stay here. You need to start fresh somewhere else."'

So Rod took a job at the North Sails loft in Huntington Beach, a few hours up the coast, which was run by another mentor:



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ROBERT DEAVES



match racing legend Dick Deaver. It was there that Rod also started skippering on the match racing circuit. 'They were all borrowed boats, the rag tag of match racing. But the Congressional Cup in Cal 40s was far and away the most established – and best organised – and in my backyard. So we could do a lot of preparation.'

In 1977 he joined Lowell North's team on *Enterprise* for his first America's Cup experience – and also the first introduction to Lizzie, his future wife, who was Lowell's secretary at the time. 'Her job on *Enterprise* was to record the data while we were sailing,' Rod remembers. 'She was in the back with the heavies and I was all the way at the pointy end, so it was actually 1980 before we got together.'

Meanwhile, 'in the background' Rod had teamed up in the Soling with Robbie Haines and Ed Trevelyan to earn the US entry to the 1980 Olympics. 'But we know what happened there. You know why the US boycotted the '80 Games? Those nasty Russians invaded Afghanistan! Kind of funny how the world turns around...'

Back at work Rod went sailing with North Sails customers around the world. 'It was a good opportunity to further my

sailing career,' he says. 'There was no professional sailing at that point; you did it through the sailmaking.'

He logged his first Congressional Cup win in 1981. (He won again in 1985, 1989 and 1993 – each for a different yacht club, and for two different countries.)

He also trained in the Soling, but in those days everyone worked during the week and went sailing at the weekend: 'You drove your boat across country, took shifts for 54 hours or so.' Fundraising meant tapping friends and family to cover expenses. 'It was just the culture. For sure, the sailors now are better than we were, but everybody did it that way. And it was a lot of fun.'

For the summer of 1983 Olympic sailing again took a back seat to the America's Cup; Rod sailed on *Defender* with Tom Blackaller, while Ed Trevelyan sailed on *Liberty* with Dennis Conner. Rod also married Liz Schnackenberg that year; they'd met (again) three years earlier, when Rod flew to Auckland to crew for Dick Deaver in a match racing event.

Liz was working at her brother Tom's North Sails loft, and when Dick asked Tom to pick up Rod at the airport Tom passed off the request to his sister. Almost



PPL

Opposite: Davis's Olympic career started with a bump when he campaigned with Robbie Haines and Ed Trevelyan for the Moscow Games of 1980. The trio were favourites for the gold medal before the USA boycotted the Games in protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Unlike some of the 1980 medal favourites Haines kept his team together and four years later got their reward in Los Angeles (above). **Left:** Rod Davis finished 9th overall at the most recent OK Worlds in 2019 in a fleet of 111 boats. Davis is presently head down finessing a new OK rigging set-up – and he expects to offer a new way to sail this thought-to-be-settled 65-year-old design.

Top left: Gotta love some of those 1970s haircuts... Rod Davis (far left) is dowsed in bubbly by John MacLaurin after winning his first offshore world title in 1979 as skipper of MacLaurin's Laurie Davidson One Tonner *Pendragon*... which with less lead and less sail area had uniquely also topped the previous year's 3/4 Ton Cup

40 years later I can hear Rod smiling at the memory: 'Funny things happen by chance, don't they?' The couple settled in California, where Rod and his Soling team again qualified for the 1984 Olympics. 'We won a gold medal at that one. It was good!'

After that success Rod was chosen to steer Newport Harbor Yacht Club's 12 Metre *Eagle* for the 1987 America's Cup in Perth. The boat wasn't very fast, he says, admitting that 'we got beat up a bit'.

Once their team was eliminated Rod did some work with Michael Fay's New Zealand Challenge. Fay then hired him to work toward the next America's Cup, so Rod and Lizzie moved to Auckland. It was easier for him to live in New Zealand, Rod explains, 'because I was always going to do a whole lot of travelling. To move Liz away from family, friends and where she grew up – and then me leave town all the time – that didn't make much sense.'

More AC and another medal

1987 was the first professional Cup cycle, but Rod says it wasn't until 1992 that sailors could actually make a living from it. 'My first three America's Cups, we didn't make any money. But when you're 20





GILLES MARTIN-RAGET



JONATHAN EASTLAND/AJAX

Davis began 1987 in Fremantle skippering the unsuccessful Newport Harbor YC America's Cup entry *Eagle*. It is fair to say that *Eagle* was not a success for its designer Johan Valentijn, who in 1983 designed Dennis Conner's ponderous 'Cup-losing' 12 Metre *Liberty*. A man rarely accused of modesty, Valentijn confidently declared that *Eagle* 'will work just fine'. But then four years earlier he had similarly declared that 'there was never one moment I doubted we [*Liberty*] would win. I felt we were at least equal to or better than *Australia II*.' But things soon got better for Davis and later in 1987 in Cowes he set a new bar for how to manage a professional sailing squad, directing the New Zealand Admiral's Cup team to a confident win led by their top-scoring Farr One Tonner *Propaganda* (right)

years old you don't need any money! They housed you, they fed you, and you got to go sailing as much as you could ever want. Life doesn't get better than that. Gosh, how do I sign up full-time for this programme, for ever??'

In 1992 Rod sailed on *New Zealand Challenge*, their Farr-designed mega-skiff complete with giant tandem keel, which he calls 'a funny old boat' – in a singsong, consciously lighthearted tone that makes it clear: the memories are still quite bad. 'It didn't really have a rudder. It had a keel that turned.' It also had a controversial bowsprit that the team was forced to remove; they never won a race after that.

On the side Rod and Cup teammate Don Cowie jumped into the Star, the start of a partnership that's still alive and well today. Sailing for New Zealand, the pair won a silver medal in Barcelona the same year. 'We had a really good Olympics, obviously. But we kind of needed it, after the America's Cup.'

At the next two Games Rod and Don would finish fifth – first in the Star, and then in the Soling, with Alan Smith. The Olympics always came together for him and Don, Rod says. 'He's sailed with me for 30 years, and we're still sailing together today!'

Preparing well

I devour all of Rod's columns, but the ones I share usually include lessons I can apply to my own sailing. These tend also to be quite timeless, like an October 2013 column, Match Planning, that started: 'You're reading this knowing the answer, whereas I currently don't.' As a coach for Team New Zealand the burning question was: would their boat be faster or slower than Oracle's in San Francisco? By taking his own advice, 'Play for the now', Rod was able to write about their plan in words

that still ring true, years after Team New Zealand went home without the Cup.

Unlike most of what's written about the America's Cup, that piece also helped me improve the way I prepare for my own regattas. 'Don't try to step up a level for the big one,' Rod advised. 'Do just what got you to where you are.' That approach helps explain why Rod was able to peak at each of the four Olympics he sailed. Doing just what got him there won him 'a gold, a silver and two fifths. Even the fifths... we had a chance of winning a medal going into the last two days, which is about as good as you can ask.'

And then he reminds me that excellent preparation can never guarantee results. 'You set your whole programme up to peak at the critical regatta, but you never really know if you're going to or not. You don't know if the environment is such that you can perform.'

Coaching vs sailing

A winning environment is one of the biggest variables, Rod says – so much so that he's coined another term for coaching: environmentalist. 'Because we're trying to create that environment that the team can actually excel in, both individually and as a team. Trying to push expectations away, and taking pressure off. It's a complicated thing, and I've got books and books of notes and all kinds of stuff... but that's what coaching is all about.'

Asked to choose between coaching and sailing, there's a long pause before Rod finally admits (as I expected) that he'd rather sail. He started racing the OK dinghy several years ago, partly to remind himself that executing on the racecourse is far more complicated than it looks from the coach boat... 'I thought that sailing the OK would *humblise* me,' he says, another

wonderful new word. 'If you just coach you will become one of those grumpy old guys who think it's always much simpler than it really is. I didn't want to be that kind of coach.'

'You get frustrated because you're going, "What the hell are they doing?" What you have to keep telling yourself is a) you're so far out of the play you don't actually know what's going on, and b) they're having to read the water right in front of them and make a decision. You've just got to trust they made the best decision they could. Maybe not the decision they'd make again, but the best they could do at that point.'

'I reckon coaches should be drug tested,' he adds, a teasing chuckle bubbling to the surface. 'And if they're not on drugs they should be given drugs. Something to make them happy and relaxed.'

A few months ago Rod jumped into the Finn for the first time and finished an impressive fourth at the NZ Masters – but now he humblises about that too. 'But I did manage to turn it upside down in one race... that was silly!'

He says his competitors told him how to set the boat up, and then laughs when he speculates that 'I'll probably never do that well again, ever.' In tweaky boats like the Star and the Finn 'your first couple of regattas are usually your best regattas, because you know you don't know anything, so you just go and sail your boat.'

'And then you get into this spiral where you think the board being in the perfect position is everything, or the mast tune and shrouds have to be exactly right. It takes you a year to realise that actually all that doesn't really matter. You just have to race your boat. Should have had more rake... no, no, no! You should have hit that 10° shift.'





Above: Davis's steed for the 1992 Cup in San Diego was Bruce Farr's very personal interpretation of the IACC rule. New Zealand's tandem-keel 'skiff on steroids' was a big challenge to sail in a fleet of higher pointing heavier designs and once a protest from Italy's *Il Moro* prevented the use of a bowsprit they were toast. In reality the boat was simply not fast enough to get any further than it did. **Right:** for the 2003 Cup in Auckland Davis was starting helmsman for Prada's second Cup challenge. And then along came Alinghi...



JEAN-MARIE LIOT/DPP

Pride and prejudice

Asked which regattas he's most proud of, Rod of course mentions his Olympic finishes. But then he fast-forwards to the 2019 OK Dinghy Worlds in Auckland. 'To get ninth in 111 boats, and be more than 20 years older than all the other top 10 – another regatta that just fell together.'

Because he prepared as if it was a mini-Olympic campaign, he admits, 'I built a few boats and just tried to, again, have it all come together at that point.' (You can of course read about that preparation in *Seahorse*).

Off the water Rod's proudest of his two daughters and son. 'All three are quick off the mark, independent and have excelled in their chosen field. Not that it was my doing; Liz was the leader there. I was only there for one of the births because of regattas.' (None of the kids took to competitive sailing; 'It's probably hard to go into a sport where your dad's already established.') Son Grant eloquently summed up his reasoning for choosing a different sport: 'He said, "Dad, the thing about swimming is the harder you work the faster you go. Sailing is so confusing!" How do you argue with that?'

'Honestly, that's what makes it fun, though,' Rod continues. 'It is complicated, because you're trying to get your equipment right to be as fast as you can. Everybody knows that you have to be fast. But once you are fast, then you actually have to go execute well. You have to have both those aspects nailed.'

Why more important than what

When I ask what keeps him hungry to compete and learn after so many successful decades Rod says he's always just trying to get better. 'To be as good as I can be and to make my players as good as they could be – that's what keeps me pushing. I'm passionate about that – which, I guess, is kind of obvious.'

Then he posits a theory that makes perfect sense: that when learning anything the why is more important than the what.

(Sounds like an excellent topic for a *Seahorse* column.) To explain, he mimics a conversation between competitor and coach: 'Why do you pull your outhaul on?' 'Because it's blowing 12kt, and we pull the outhaul to here.'

'But why?' 'We want to reduce helm and drag.' 'Ah, we're trying to reduce helm, OK!' I could almost hear him shaking his head.

'I wish I'd tripped onto that earlier in my career, because if you only know the what you can't get better and go to the next level. If you know the why, then you can always step up.'

Next challenge

Like many quarantined sailors, Rod's currently hyper-focused on his local scene – where there's plenty going on besides that 2021 event that gets all the press. 'This whole virus thing has been good for grassroots yachting,' he points out. 'Just before our latest lockdown we had a 60-mile double-handed race with 170 boats!'

'People are going back to their basic yachting and saying, "Well, we used to have a lot of fun doing that. Let's go do that.' We've got fleets growing here in the middle of the pandemic. Grassroots local sailing!" he repeats. 'I'm going to get stuck into that, with an eye towards doing a little less coaching and a little more sailing.'

Even though the Auld Mug will be contested next in his adopted hometown Rod expects to watch from the sidelines – for the first time since 1977. 'I'm not ruling out doing a bit of dabbling here and there, but I don't really see my involvement in this next America's Cup. My expertise is moves and counter-moves on the match racing side. Now obviously we're foiling, and it's not moves and counter-moves that make the difference; it will be the ultimate speed.'

Rod's a glass-half-full guy so he's using his current outsider perspective to watch teams make difficult decisions. 'In this Covid world this heavy fog prevents you from looking towards the future. They all have to commit to plans, and they don't

know what's beyond that fog and how it's going to play out. Terry's [Hutchinson] probably pretty happy that he's come down here early. Luna Rossa did not come down here until really, really late. Both of them are probably pretty confident that they've done it right. Interesting, eh?'

He's also completely stumped by the rule that prevents teams from sailing against each other beforehand. 'That just seems so weird to me. What's the point?'

'It'll be interesting when the boats finally do line up; who's got it right, who's got it wrong. But imagine going to the Olympic Games and never being able to sail against another boat!'

The world has changed, Rod adds. 'Values have changed. I'm not saying they're better or worse. They're just different, right? The way you were brought up, and the way you thought about it for all of your life, isn't necessarily the way it is now.'

There's one thing that hasn't changed since Rod's very first race in Key West, though: 'I just love racing sailboats. It keeps you getting up and charging into each day, trying to be as good as you can be.' Then another sarcastic chuckle bubbles up as he looks even farther ahead. 'I've got to gear up, because in five years I become an amateur under the World Sailing rules. [He'll be 70.] So I gotta be ready to be a really good amateur. They can't take it away from you – you can go to all those amateur regattas and steer!'

Regrettably, our hour is up. But just as I'm trying to stitch all of his pithy quotes together Rod sends a follow-up email. 'One thing I can't believe is I have written my column for *Seahorse* for more than 20 years now. I do laugh because I failed English and creative writing in school; several times I got put in remedial classes, and then they just gave up and turned a blind eye. Come to think of it, if you tried to read my drafts you would realise the teachers were right!'

More humblising, of course – and yet another fact that's probably best to keep secret from the editor... [You're in good company, Rod, I failed them too – ed]. □