

Just say 'Yes'

Stan and Sally Honey are two champion sailors. But their influence on sailing – and on commercial sport – extends far beyond competitive success. Carol Cronin finds out more

Perhaps the most surprising thing about sailing legends Stan and Sally Honey is their humility. It's as if they don't understand why we'd ever be interested in how they tacked and gybed their way to the top of our sport – while also transforming several high-tech industries. How did they accomplish so much? After almost two hours of asking questions I conclude it was a unique combination of luck, skill and two glass-half-full personalities that are, after almost a half century together, deliciously intertwined. In hindsight at least, their life together plays out like a very tactical sailboat race, so let's fire off the first gun.

The start: opposite coasts

Stan grew up in Los Angeles sailing out to Catalina with his parents, and racing dinghies. He quickly developed an interest in big boats, and 'back then, at all levels, the sailors had the common sense to never leave an interested kid on the dock.' And once he got interested in navigation owners quickly let him have a go. 'Before long I found myself as the primary navigator of the Mexico races and even Hawaii races. And that was back when it was hard, because that was all dead reckoning and celestial...'

'And you were only 17 or 18,' Sally points out. She grew up in New Jersey, and at 20 did a Transatlantic with her father on a little New York 32. She didn't start racing dinghies until her second marriage – to small boat champion and cutting-edge boatbuilder Mark Lindsay – when she started sailing the 505s.

'I was on the wire and it was fabulous – until we did the Worlds in Santa Cruz where it blew 35 the whole time,' she chuckles. 'There were seven of us women sailing, wearing five cotton sweatshirts hosed down at the start.'

'Mark and I had been finishing in the



top three in New England and we finished 43rd! And it was like, uh, you know, you're 6ft 2in and 200lb. So the next season we swapped places. It took me a season to figure out [steering a dinghy] because I'd grown up on big boats.' The reorganised team won the North Americans, as well as several Bermuda Race Weeks and the big CORK Regatta in Ontario. But the marriage to Mark didn't last.

The first cross

When I ask Stan and Sally how they met Stan's boyish dimples – which grow deeper whenever he talks about Sally – appear: 'Which story do you want?'

Almost before I can respond ('all of them') he's taking us back to the mid-1970s, when he was a student at Yale and sailing 505s with Sally's boss. 'We would run across one another at regattas, and I would admire Sally's helmsmanship. I was quite in awe of her reputation as a sailor.'

But they didn't meet face to face until after Sally moved from Massachusetts to Connecticut to run the One Design department for the local North loft. Stan was living at the Yale Corinthian Yacht Club (YCYC), and one afternoon Sally showed

up with a Volvo 122S that wouldn't start. 'I was able to fix it very easily,' Stan says. 'And I upgraded 505 skippers!'

Sally jumps in with her own memories; 'a friend had mentioned a handy guy who lived at YCYC and also owned a 122S...'

'So I towed the car down there, and I thought he was pretty nice looking. And then he didn't charge me! Wow. What a guy.' She's smiling too, even as she remembers the challenge her new teammate issued before they drove to their first regatta together. 'Stan said, "We've got to look at the [trailer] bearings. Do you know how to do that?" And I said, "Uh, that's my trailer but, no, I've never done that." So my first really big test was to get my hands all greasy... I guess I passed.'

Sally and her young son Tam soon moved into the downstairs bedroom at YCYC; Steve Benjamin and Peter Isler lived upstairs. It was a fantastic learning environment, Stan remembers. 'A lot of Olympic training crews would come through and sail with us. Carl Buchan would show up for a week, stay in the living room and sail our team practices... There was a lot of talent in the air.'

Sally remembers the fabulous boat shop



Opposite: Stan and Sally Honey back at home port in San Francisco and (*above*) navigating *Comanche* during her Transatlantic record attempt in 2016. Among many dinghy racing successes at both ends of the boat Sally Honey won titles in 505s, Fireballs and Thistles, including winning the 1978 North Americans as helm. She was Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year in 1973 and again in 1974

– and the pranks. ‘One time I had my 505 mast laid out, rerigging it because I was getting ready for summer. And I came back from work and where my mast was, there was a mast that was all full of big round holes!’

That mast belonged to a Yale professor, Stan explains. ‘He’d bought a 420 mast, drilled a million holes in it, and then tried to see if it was much faster. Of course he couldn’t tell. But nevertheless when Sally stepped out to get a cup of coffee we replaced her mast with his.’ It didn’t take her long to figure it out, he admits, but it was entertaining.

Winning their side

Stan graduated in 1978 and took a job at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), which he could combine with grad school. ‘And when I drove out to the west coast I managed to drag Sally and Tam with me.’

The next few years were financially stressful; Sally was working in a canvas shop for minimum wage while Stan had taken the ‘worst paying of all the job offers

that I got, but it was by far the most interesting. I would have worked there for free – it was just an amazing group.’

Fortunately, even though he was only a part-time student at Stanford, he managed to charm the pair into the university’s married student housing – which halved their rent but broke all the rules. ‘Of course you were supposed to be married,’ Stan says, chuckling. ‘You were supposed to not run any businesses.’ (Sally started The Spinnaker Shop there.) ‘You were supposed to not have any animals. I think we had a cat.’ They’re both laughing now.

That break helped them keep sailing 505s, at a very high level. ‘Going to world championships – we absolutely could not afford that.’ They even ordered a new Lindsay 505 from the top builder in the class (Sally’s ex-husband). ‘We were spending everything on the boat and travel.’

By now Stan was also navigating professionally, thanks to Stanford’s flexibility. ‘They wouldn’t pay me but they would give me the time off, as long as my projects were on schedule; so I was going to work

my tail off. But that worked out well for them too.’

‘And you worked every night until midnight!’ Sally adds.

One of those navigation clients was Nolan Bushnell, inventor of the video game Pong. ‘Total wingnut, but a genius – a wonderful guy,’ Stan remembers.

‘He had a new Maxi built to be first to finish in the Transpac, which we succeeded at in 1983. Nolan was really only interested in consumer markets, but he had a real insight into technology.’ When Bushnell asked Stan to dream up a future consumer product Stan proposed vehicle navigation – and then described how he would cross-correlate between the road network and a car’s sensors, to improve accuracy. Nolan offered to fund a start-up, which became ETAK. ‘And so we developed the first vehicle navigation system that used map-matching.’

‘And all dead reckoning, just like on a boat,’ Sally puts in.

ETAK sold licences to all the major car makers and automotive electronic manufacturers. That attracted Rupert Murdoch

YANN RIOU



They don't come much more multi-talented than this. Aside from his sailing achievements – including, remember winning the 2005 Volvo Race on *ABN Amro* – Stan Honey is a member of the US National Inventors Hall of Fame, holds 31 technology patents and is regarded by many in the industry as the father of vehicle navigation. Don't take our word for it... 'What Stan has done – from the glowing puck to the 1st and 10 NFL line to tracking Nascar (stock cars) in a three-dimensional space – has completely changed the viewer experience. Stan's inventive, curious mind has left an indelible legacy on sports production in the USA and around the world.' That summing-up from David Hill, the founding president of Fox Sports who would later move on to launch Sky TV in the UK

– another visionary, Stan says. 'Murdoch had already thought it all through to what would eventually be Google Maps. And that classified ads and yellow pages would all be replaced by people asking the electronic question: "Where's the nearest...?"'

Meanwhile, ETAK had the highest-quality digital roadmap database of North America. 'And we were working on Japan. So [Murdoch] acquired the company for that reason.' Though it wasn't a windfall, Stan says, 'we all made good money.'

Meanwhile, Sally had started The Spinaker Shop to serve Palo Alto sailors, but once the harbour silted up the raceboats left. Luckily, however, her shop was 'right around the corner' from Silicon Valley...

Customers coming in for sail repairs asked if she could also make covers for their technical projects (the cone of a jet engine, say) and, like any good entrepreneur, she always said yes. 'So now I was forced to learn how to read engineering drawings and meet full specs and do all the testing and so forth,' she says.

'One of our more interesting jobs was doing the Kevlar straps for the space shuttle, following the Challenger disaster.' Industrial sewing for the aerospace, electronics and medical industries turned out to be 'a little more lucrative, and much more thought-provoking than another sail repair'.

Eventually Sally was able to name her price when it came to dealing with the top companies, Stan explains. 'They'd know it would be perfect. It would be on time. And, compared to the cost of a satellite, a cover costs like, nothing.'

Stan's career was evolving as well. After a

few unhappy years flying around the world explaining technology's future to the top guns at Murdoch's News Corp ('What is the internet, and how is this going to affect our business?'), he formed the News Corp Technology Group and went back to what he loved: innovating and building cool stuff. Their first creation was an electronic blue dot that made it easier to follow hockey pucks on TV – a significant improvement for casual viewers, though diehard hockey fans hated it. 'I try to avoid talking about the puck, with Canadians especially,' Stan jokes now. But the Honey's hand-to-mouth phase was over.

Rounding the mark

Of course, they weren't yet 'the Honey's' – because they didn't marry until 1996. When I ask why, they both laugh and again Stan asks which story I want. Again I say 'all of them,' and again he jumps in first. 'You may remember there was an era where you couldn't use a partner's frequent flyer miles unless you were married? That's why she finally said yes...'

Finally – how many times did he ask? 'Well, it was just kind of a continuous question...'

By the mid-1990s Sally had 'gone around enough buoys' so they gave up 505 sailing and bought a Cal 40, thinking they would go off cruising. Instead, as racing 'creatures of habit', they did a major refit (and Sally built all new sails) and then sailed their first double-handed offshore race, the 1990 Pacific Cup from San Francisco to Hawaii.

Sally had never used an autopilot before – and even though Stan had programmed

theirs, 'I didn't trust this little thing that was supposed to be steering! I was used to having somebody on the tiller the whole time.' They finished second in the double-handed division, but both remember it more for the white-knuckle 'face of God' squall they lived through. In the middle of the night Sally says, 'the whole sky turned black and I said, "Ah, Stan, come up, please. I may need your help."' By then, they both agree, it was far too windy to take the kite down.

'You know what they say about spinners,' Stan quips; 'we set them, and God takes them down! That was actually the sensible approach in a Cal 40. Planing at 25kt, and the boat was perfectly balanced. I couldn't believe nothing broke.'

Six years later they won PacCup overall – besting even the fully crewed boats. Afterwards they sailed back to San Francisco via Alaska and Vancouver – and discovered that indeed they both loved cruising. Sally: 'It was just hilarious because we had no dodger, no heater, a German shepherd – and, for the first part, no anchor windlass. Even so we had a wonderful summer standing in the rain.'

'We decided we were going to spend three years sailing around the world,' she adds. And at last getting around to *her* reason for finally saying yes, she adds: 'We thought it might be better in foreign countries, or if one of us got sick, to have the same name.' They got hitched on the beach at Half Moon Bay. 'That was a good party,' she remembers. 'And the nice thing about waiting 20 years is that you both have a similar group of friends.'



FRANCOIS VAN MALLEGHEM/DPPI

Another day another record... Honey (centre) celebrates with the rest of the crew of *Groupama 3* after setting a new round-the-world record in 2010 to win the Trophée Jules Verne. Honey concedes his command of French was much better at the end than at the start

Persistent shift

But instead of cruising around the world with his new wife Stan co-founded Sportvision and brought out his most famous gamechanger: the yellow first-down line for American Football. Over the next six years similar Sportvision innovations would also help TV viewers follow baseball and then Nascar.

By 2005, when Mike Sanderson needed a navigator for the Volvo Ocean Race, a 50-year-old Stan was finally able to say yes to racing around the world. 'I'd been asked a number of times before, and I'd always had to say no... we'd just raised venture capital, or just founded a company, and I couldn't responsibly take off a year and a half.

'It's like joining the army, you're gone 14 months. But Sportvision had got to a point where I could leave. And this was a once in a lifetime opportunity; the last time I was ever going to get asked. That was great, to win it on the first go. A fabulous team.'

As navigator he had too much to do during the stopovers to travel home, so Sally flew out to join him – even though she didn't sell her own business until 2008. She also put together an all-female team for the 2005 Transpac and skippered/navigated their Cal 40 to second in class.

After winning the Volvo Stan kept on saying yes and helped set a slew of records: fastest Transatlantics on both multihull and monohull; fastest 24-hour run on the monohull *Comanche* (which broke the record previously set by Stan and team on *ABN Amro*). In 2010 he joined Franck Cammas on *Groupama 3* and set a new circumnavigation record (48 days and change). And he also joined the World Sailing Oceanic and Offshore Committee, putting his rare combination of technical savvy and communication skills to work improving the sport.

Down the final run

In 2014 Stan and Sally took off from San

Francisco Bay for several years of 'commuter cruising' down the west coast of the US and Mexico. In the spring of 2019 they transited the Panama Canal and hurried up the east coast all the way to Newport, arriving just in time to haul the boat and fly home for the winter. The plan was to sail the 2020 Newport Bermuda Race, but when that blue-water classic was cancelled they reinstalled several hundred pounds of cruising gear (including that anchor windlass) and headed down east to Maine for two and a half happy months of gunkholing.

They are full of cruising plans for 2021 too – despite pandemic uncertainties. 'We're hoping that the Canadians will have us,' Stan says. 'If so, we'll go to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland – we're really looking forward to that.'

Asked what they are most proud of, Stan first differentiates between the two halves of his life: 'On the technical side, the birth of vehicle navigation and the yellow first-down line... it's fun to have been involved in things that had a big impact on people.

'In sailing... the Volvo is certainly a highlight. And setting the Jules Verne record.' The dimples reappear when he adds: 'And sailing with Sally is a wonderful thing.'

Sally is justifiably proud of her work with the Safety at Sea committees at both US Sailing and World Sailing. 'But I don't consider myself completely over the top about safety; when we sail we do the reasonable thing, but we're not crazy. But I like communicating things that I think are important.' (Did I mention her master's degree in creative writing?)

Helping sailors learn from sailing fatalities requires tactful but firm editing, because the easiest out for coroners is to tell survivors that, as Stan puts it, 'Oh, he was dead when he hit the water,' because they don't want people to feel terrible for the rest of their lives. 'But in fact boats are a deadly weapon. Sally was the first one who wrote an incident report that had the

balls to say "they're being hit in the head with the bow". To say "you killed him". It's a whole new understanding of how these people are dying.'

Stan's also working on safety issues, including a long overdue update of industry specifications for keel attachments. 'We [World Sailing] have got to take this stuff on – because who else is going to do it?'

Post-race debrief

When I ask about regrets, they are both – for the first time – at a loss for words. Then Stan remembers asking his retiring father that same question; 'He said he should have said "yes" more often. I took that to heart. There've been times when I thought, this might be crazy... like setting out to do the Jules Verne with nine French guys that I'd never met, and I don't speak French! But invariably I would think back and say, yeah, I'm glad I said yes.'

Sally wishes she'd been able to accept more invitations too. But then she switches gears to something much more specific: that time 'at the start of the [505] Worlds, when I went between the mark and the extension of the line...'

Stan claims what he calls his 'senior tour' as a professional navigator is coming to an end, and then casually mentions that he plans to navigate *Wild Oats* to Hobart next time around – 'if they let Americans into Australia,' he qualifies.

'I've beaten them four out of six for first to finish, so they finally said... OK!'

There's another maxi project too. But what deepens those dimples again is more cruising with Sally – where he can continue to admire her helmsmanship. 'We both respect each other's skills,' Sally replies. 'I navigated to Hawaii, so I know Stan's way better than me and respect how hard it is.'

'Having sorted out how to compete together in a dinghy at a worlds and not kill each other...' Stan shrugs, 'it makes the rest of your marriage and life easy.' □