



## Hard chines and unasked questions

It would be almost impossible to find anyone in the sport with an ill word to say about double Olympic gold medallist and Star World Champion Mark Reynolds. Carol Cronin talks to the San Diego sailmaker with the breathtaking sporting CV that still pales by comparison with the successes of the countless rivals who he has helped to achieve success

There are a lot of sailmakers in the United States. There are even a lot of sailmakers who've started their own lofts and then kept them afloat for a decade or three. But Mark Reynolds is pretty sure there are only two sailmakers in the entire country who can claim an impressive pair of longevity statistics: the loft they started is still operating out of its original location, and they're still married to their first wife. 'Buddy [Melges] and I are, I think, maybe the only ones,' he says, with a dry but thoughtful SoCal chuckle.

When Mark was elected to the Snipe Hall of Fame Class of 2021 it seemed like the perfect opportunity to present this

incredible sailor's career to the *Seahorse* audience. It wasn't until I started putting our discussion down on paper that I realised there were at least two questions I'd forgotten to ask. What can I say; I was distracted by Mark's deep love of sailing and competition, which is well-supported by a frenetic memory for obscure details.

It's impossible to cover every single success, but here are a few highlights to get us started: Mark is the only US sailor who competed in the same discipline at four Olympics in a row. He's won two golds and a silver, as well as two Star Worlds, a Snipe gold medal at the Pan Am Games, a Farr40 Worlds and a string of other less obvious victories.

Now stay with me, because there are so many questions that did get answered...

### When did you start sailing?

Mark was born in San Diego in 1955, and he's never really lived anywhere else. When he was four his father (a World Champion Star crew) introduced him to sailing. 'I think it was Robbie Doyle, when he was inducted into the Hall of Fame, who said that we stand on the shoulders of the people who came before us,' Mark says... from the Zoom comfort of his loft desk.

'My dad gave me a Sabot [the local pram] for Christmas when I was eight. It was actually not on my list, and I wasn't

thrilled about it. But I figured out right away that I was pretty good. And I was very competitive, so it was better than baseball – where I was not very talented. My first Sabot sail I actually paid for half of it!' He pauses for a wry grin. 'After that my parents wouldn't buy boats for me, but they did loan me the money; I'd then have to pay it back, to learn responsibility.'

Growing up, Mark says Star sailing went hand in hand with Snipe sailing, because all the good local sailors competed in one of those two classes. San Diego Yacht Club was the Star stronghold, while 'Snipes pretty much sailed on Mission Bay; and I was also hanging out at the North Sails loft [for whom the Star sails were also big business].' A bunch of the salesmen there were Snipe sailors, and he crewed for a few until he outgrew that position. Meanwhile, his father provided inspiration; Mark was at the 1971 Star Worlds in Seattle when Jim Reynolds and Dennis Conner won their Star gold... the first of two for Conner – a fellow San Diego resident.

Mark started his first business while still in his teens, building lightweight Sabot and Snipe rudders for his competitors. That experience taught him an important lesson: it's OK to make better equipment than what's already on the market, but it's not OK to build something better for yourself than what you sell to your customers.



**Opposite:** Mark Reynolds and Magnus Liljedahl warming up on their way out to the start of the deciding final race of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Regatta. Reynolds specialised in last race showdowns during his long Olympic career... In Sydney he scraped home second in this race to take gold by 1pt from the GBR crew helped by fellow gold medal rival Torben Grael being OCS. In Seoul in 1988 he had gone into the last race odds-on for his first Olympic gold but dismantled in the rough conditions and had to make do with only silver. **Above:** quite the dashing SoCal boy... Mark Reynolds and Snipe crew Pat Muglia add to their trophy haul after a Snipe regatta at the Coconut Grove Yacht Club. Muglia would later also compete at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, crewing for Pete Melvin in the USA Tornado

He bought his first Snipe at 13 with another teenager, but they were too light to sail together and the partnership didn't last. His next Snipe investment would be with his girlfriend (now wife) DeAnn, soon after they started dating; they were a much better weight together, and that partnership persists to this day.

#### How'd you first meet?

DeAnn grew up sailing in San Diego too, so Mark says they knew each other a bit before they both got to San Diego State. But she was two years younger so it wasn't until they'd spent time together as members of the college sailing team that it clicked. 'We both went to the co-ed nationals in 1976, and DeAnn also sailed the women's nationals. I loaned her my stopwatch.' Again that sly grin. 'Which made a good excuse to call her when we got home, and ask her out.'

In 1978 they won the US Snipe Nationals. A year later they finished second at the Worlds. They married in 1980 and had three kids; now they are grandparents. But I'm getting ahead of the story...

After college Mark moved to Miami to crew for Augie Diaz in the Flying Dutchman. The pair were favourites to win the 1980 US Trials after a 1979 victory at Kiel Week, so US Sailing, as it is now, suggested Mark stay focused on that campaign; he also doesn't think they considered him 'skipper material' in those days – which now

*Probably the most bizarre thing I ever did was diving off my Snipe in the middle of a National Championships race. We were drifting in no wind and the heat combined with the flies all over, I just couldn't take it any more and just stood up and dived into the water. The race was abandoned soon after but my wife wasn't too happy about me jumping off the boat*

seems ironic. But Mark went and steered the 1979 Pan Am Games in the Snipe anyway, just one week after Kiel, and he and Craig Martin won every single race. A few months after that the US Olympic boycott was announced... so he headed back to San Diego and took a job at North Sails.

He did consider an alternative career, he admits now: boatbuilding. 'I grew up around Carl Eichenlaub's boatyard; he was the first person to take my dad sailing on a Star, in the late 1950s. But I pretty quickly realised that if you wanted to go sailing it was easier to do it as a sailmaker.'

'I saw a lot of boatbuilders who'd still be building boats during the regatta... sails are a little easier to get finished and deliver to somebody in time!'

#### Why did you start your own sail loft?

Mark was hired to market North's Snipe designs, but he was also sailing Stars – and the loft already had an employee in that class. 'It became evident that there just wasn't room for both me and Vince [Brun]; really the only way to make that work would be to have my own loft.'



**Sydney 2000 and the British Star crew of Ian Walker and Mark Covell approach the finish of the final race in third behind runners-up Reynolds and Liljedahl, ceding gold to the US sailors by a single point. After the prizegiving a gracious Walker told his supporters that if they were to miss gold he and Covell preferred to be beaten by the Americans, who Walker gave credit to for helping Britain's newcomers to the Star class to quickly get up to medal-winning speed, after they had been thrown together following the loss of their respective Olympic partners – Jonny Merricks (in a car accident in Punta Ala) and Glyn Charles (lost during the 1998 Sydney Hobart)**

Dennis Conner, an important mentor, suggested Mark talk to the 'Sobstad guys', because 'they were doing some pretty cool stuff. So I went to the 1981 Star Worlds in Marblehead with Eddie Trevelyan' – who'd win Soling gold three years later in LA, with Robbie Haines and Rod Davis.

'Ed in turn knew Dave Curtis, so we stopped by Curtis's loft and got to learn a bit about what he was doing. And then we stopped by the Sobstad loft and met Peter Conrad and Tom Whidden.'

Mark and Ed Trevelyan finished 34th at those worlds, while Brun and Hugo Schreiner finished 12th. 'By the time I got back it was pretty clear I had to do my own thing. So I got a loan from my grandmother to buy a Star boat, and I got a loan from Conrad and Whidden for sewing machines and fabric, and I started building sails.' He set up shop right around the corner from San Diego Yacht Club, and 'by January of 1982 Snipes were our main business'.

From a desk drawer Mark pulls out a sheet of yellow legal paper; when he holds it up I can see it's covered in a handwritten scrawl. 'I still have this list that I started, where I'd write in the customer's name and how much I sold the sail for.' He reads off some names I recognise from Snipe history. 'I only sold 13 suits of Star sails the first year, and 14 suits the next year. So at the time it was really the Snipe!'

DeAnn's success selling commercial real estate played a big part too, he admits. 'She did support the family throughout the 1980s, and that really helped keep the whole thing flowing. If it had been just the

sail loft it might have been a little tougher to do everything that I did. That's probably the only reason we have a house today...'

In 1984 'everything kind of changed' at the loft. 'When I went to the Bacardi Cup Bill Buchan bought a suit of sails from me. And he won the Olympics!' By the end of that year the loft had sold 150 Star suits.

#### **How'd you manage to do so much sailing...**

Through the 1980s Mark sailed Snipes with DeAnn in the summer and with heavier crews for the windier winter regattas. He was also a regular on the Star circuit. 'For close to 10 years I'd put the Snipe on top of the van and tow the Star across the country... Miami was always very good to me.'

He wasn't the only sailor pushing hard in both classes. 'Torben [Grael] and a bunch of other guys crossed over as well – though I never competed against Torben in the Snipe. Hard chines and whisker poles... I never really sailed spinnaker boats much at all.'

Mark also enjoyed tweaking boats in his garage, and he says both the Snipe and the Star were great for that. 'Earl Elms [a San Diego Snipe legend] always kept his boats really simple. Whereas Dennis, who I worked for on the Star, would keep everything really complicated – so you could adjust everything. I learned from both

*I'm not superstitious myself but I do enjoy hearing of my competitors' superstitions...*

those guys and found my happy medium.'

From 1987 to 2002 Mark finished in the top 10 at every single Star Worlds, sailing all but one with either Hal Haenel or Magnus Liljedahl. He won a gold Star with each of those legendary crews (1995 and 2000), and finished second three times and third twice in those 15 years. (He also finished third in 2013, with Haenel.)

'I grew up in a place with the best Star and Snipe sailors in the world,' he explains, with a tiny shrug. 'So you can't help but learn and get good. Dennis used to say that it was difficult for a guy like Buddy to come out of a lake and be able to perform everywhere else. Whereas San Diego is a perfect place for developing boat speed, because you can sail out in the ocean.'

All those miles and hours of sail testing off Point Loma helped Mark develop speedy sails; he says they also helped perfect his helming technique. 'When you really got good at helming you could spend a little more time looking around and not keep so completely focused on the telltales. So it was a pretty good thing to be able to do all that sail testing, for two reasons.'

#### **... while running a successful business?**

How did he keep track of the loft while away at regattas, I ask – especially over two decades of Olympic campaigning?

'I didn't do a whole lot of training,' he claims. 'Back then it was pretty much just doing the regatta circuit. But that was more than the generations before me...'

'I once talked to the guy who won a ▷



**Mark Reynolds and Magnus Liljedahl receive their gold medals at Sydney 2000 to add to Reynolds' previous Olympic tally in the class of a gold medal in Barcelona in 1992 plus silver in Korea in 1988. To add to this remarkable Olympic haul are two Star world titles, won in Laredo, Spain, in 1995 sailing with Hal Haenel and in 2000 in Annapolis racing once again with Liljedahl**

bronze medal in 1948. And he'd just happened to be going to school in the UK... he said, "Hey, the Olympics are in London, do you want to sail the Swallow?"

'And my Dad did the Olympic Trials twice, during his two weeks of vacation.' (With Malin Burnham, Jim Reynolds just missed out on the 1964 selection.) 'So things have changed a little over the years.'

Even Mark's own approach wouldn't work any more, he points out. 'Olympic sailing now, if you're not out on the water every day you'd better be at the gym.'

'But back when I started there were basically three ways you could do an Olympic campaign. You could have a wealthy family who supported you. You could be a good fundraiser; there weren't too many guys like that, but Robbie Haines would be a good example... he was really good at raising funds to go do all the sailing he wanted to do. Although he ended up being a sailmaker too!

'And otherwise everybody basically worked for a sailmaker at some point. That's just what you did, because there wasn't any other way.'

Today's sailors can earn a decent living as pros, he continues. 'And that's my theory of why the United States is not as competitive on the world level any more. Things started changing in the 1990s, when people had the opportunity to sail [for a living]; that's what Cayard and Kostecky started doing.'

'Today guys can crew on a J/70 for somebody and get paid real money; as Cayard has pointed out, you can either get paid to go sailing or you can pay to go sailing. Pretty easy to make that choice when you need to eat and have a place to live.'

(After the interview I realise that I failed to ask the logical follow-up question: how did he balance work/sailing and family? Because somehow that never came up...)

#### **Why would you make your competition faster?**

The regatta circuit was a great place to interact with customers and explain what

he was doing with the sails, Mark says. 'Being able to talk to those guys during the week was certainly better than working at a job somewhere else! And I got to fiddle around with trying to make the sails better, and do some sailing.'

Even at the height of his Olympic career, when Mark was supplying almost all of his competitors' sails, he never strayed from the lesson he'd learnt as a teenage rudder salesman. 'I never had anything special,' he insists. 'I always had a good reputation for using the same sails as my customers, and letting them know straightaway when we were developing something new.'

But making his competitors faster wasn't always an easy choice. 'I won the Olympic Trials in 1988 because we were really fast, particularly in the lighter air. Dennis actually told me, "Well, just don't sell any sails until after the Olympics!"

'I go, "Well, Dennis, that's how I put food on the table." And Dennis responds, "But then when you win the Olympics there'll be an even bigger demand!"

Mark shakes his head. 'It wouldn't be the best way to work with customers... like "No, I'm not going to sell you the sail that I'm using myself."

Sydney 2000 was what Mark calls 'the ultimate situation'. He'd just changed over his loft affiliation from Sobstad to Quantum, and almost every boat in Sydney was using his designs. 'At the Olympic measurement our jibs were oversized on the reinforcing patch. Which is kind of a stupid measurement to have in the first place; you should almost have it the opposite... Specify a minimum rather than a maximum.'

'But it was over by 2mm along maybe 4cm, just a little slice on one of the corners. And everybody had two sets of sails, so I had to take 45 jibs up to a sail loft not too far away and recut all of them... open up a little bit of stitching, cut it, and then sew it back down again. I had a lot of things I had to deal with... but obviously it worked out.'

After a rocky start he and Magnus Liljedahl won the gold medal – as well as

the 2000 World Sailor of the Year award.

2014 was the last Star Worlds Mark sailed; he finished 11th, sailing with Beppe Oggioni. Shortly after that he sold the loft to Quantum International; now they also do the same R&D for several other classes.

'We've got a C Scow main and jib on the floor right now. For some of the classes it's just easier to build a few sails here, while others are built in Sri Lanka.' But he says his own job is still 'pretty much focused on Snipe and Star sails'.

Mark has also become an important custodian of Star Class history. When I need clarification about the switch away from Olympic scoring for an upcoming book, *A Century of Star World Championships*, I email him; he replies promptly with the exact year, 1994 – and adds that in 1988 the older scoring method (along with a broken rig) had cost him and Hal Haenel the gold medal. I have no doubt that his memory for such details is correct.

As for Mark's retirement date? That's another question I forgot to ask.

#### **Any hobbies?**

This is a leading question, because I already know Mark and DeAnn are into biking. But instead of talking about their most recent off-road adventure there's a long pause until Mark finally comes up with photography – a passion that dates back to his FD days.

A photo that he took in Kiel won him a magazine contest, he remembers; the prize was a 10-day charter in the Caribbean, which he and DeAnn turned into their honeymoon. 'Otherwise, yeah, not really too many hobbies. I pretty much just focused on sailing and the business. No big surprise, really...'

So I ask if he has any bucket list items. 'A sailing bucket list? No, not really... I'm not saying I'm retired, but I don't really have much in the way of plans.' Then his eyes light up again. 'But DeAnn and I are having a tandem [bicycle] built! Titanium, with couplers so it fits in two suitcases. We plan to do some travelling with that in Europe and other places. New Zealand, maybe Japan...'

Yet another question I forgot to ask (which only occurs to me now, as I finish up this story) brings with it a tiny giggle: who will get to steer that tandem? When he and DeAnn bought their first Snipe together she claims they agreed to switch helming duties – which never happened. 'She's probably right,' Mark admits, with another SoCal chuckle, 'but it never even occurred to me!'

Maybe I'll drop him another email – or maybe, once he reads this, he'll send along his answers to my unasked questions. □