

FAST EDDY AND THE BIG LIE

ONLY A FORMER CREW CAN TRULY UNDERSTAND THE GENIUS AND INTENSITY

BY CAROL
NEWMAN CRONIN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2017 **SW** 046

Ed Adams, champion, coach, and merciless mentor to many successful sailors.

PHOTO: JOE BERKELEY



BEHIND ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL AND INFLUENTIAL SAILORS.

THE

first time I ever spoke with Ed Adams, I lied. It was 1990, and I was eager to get back into competitive dinghy racing. I'd sailed in college with Adams' longtime Star crew, Tom Olsen, who suggested the Snipe. To make sure I got paired up with a good skipper, Olsen told me to call Adams.

I was pretty intimidated by the idea of cold-calling a recent Rolex Yachtsman of the Year, a name I recognized from the sailing magazines. I was also very, very hungry to go sailing — and this was my best lead by far. So the familiar predictability of Adams' first question was reassuring: "How much do you weigh?"

"One-hundred twenty-five pounds," I answered, honestly.

"How tall are you?"

Here was the pesky detail Olsen had warned me about: Adams would think 125 pounds was the perfect weight for a Snipe crew, but he wouldn't even consider me if I admitted to my true height of 5 feet 2 inches.

So I rounded up as much as I dared: "Five-four."

"That's a little short," he replied, adding, "might be OK if you hike hard."

Then he told me his wife Meredith had just given birth to their daughter, Michaela, so he was looking for a crew himself. But he wasn't sure when he'd be finished rigging his new Snipe. His words tumbled out so fast, I could barely understand him.

"I'll call you," he promised. Then he hung up.

Unlike me, Adams didn't grow up in a sailing family; he first turned to it as a way to prove himself to his peers. When he was 10, he moved to a new neighborhood in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. As the new kid on the block, naturally he got picked on. Sailing became a way of dealing with it — a way to prove himself in this little peer group of people who he met at the yacht club, in high school and then in college.

Looking back now, he recognizes the challenge of that childhood relocation as crucial to his development. "I meet parents all the time, and they always ask, 'How can I make my kid be the next Olympian, the next gold medalist?' And I have to explain that doing well in sailing is probably 25 percent athletic ability. And it's probably 25 percent preparation: taking the kid to regattas, getting him good equipment, hiring him good coaches. And it's 50 percent ambition and drive, which is not something you can purchase."

I might not be tall enough to be Adams' ideal Snipe crew, but fortunately I had enough ambition and drive to follow up that first phone call with an answering-machine message a few weeks later — and I was rewarded with a return call from Adams.

"Want to go to a regatta this weekend?" he asked. Two days later, I found myself shaking hands with him in his driveway — and trying to stand extra tall. As he pointed out the rigging details of his brand-new Snipe, I was still trying to figure out if the thing had a spinnaker (it didn't). Then we hopped into his van for our first race of the weekend, an eight-hour drive to Annapolis.

In Adams' world, driving both to and from regattas is its own test of speed and skill, because half-throttle—whether sailing, driving, talking or eating — is not an acceptable setting.

Adams has been sprinting to and from regattas since he first got his driver's license. As a teenager, he strapped his Laser on the roof and headed north for the 1974 Youth Champs at Association Island, a former

YMCA camp where the U.S. Sailing Team trained for the 1976 Olympics in Kingston, Ontario. It was a 45-boat regatta for qualifying. He won the regatta, which, he says, was a big deal at the time: "I wasn't just this hack from East Greenwich anymore."

A year later, he returned to "Ass" Island for the Laser Nationals — and won that too. That qualified him for the Laser Worlds in Kiel, Germany, which would lead to his first airplane ride — and a bronze medal, behind another American named Ed (Baird) and a New Zealander, Barry Thom. Back home on Narragansett Bay, Adams became such a dominant presence at the top of the local Laser fleet that a competitor is said to have named his own boat "Back Eddy."

At regattas, Adams slept in his car, or pitched a tent, as most sailors did in those days. "Nobody ever — it would've been totally foreign to spend money on a hotel," he says.

Fortunately, by the time I started sailing with him, he'd graduated from camping to staying with friends.

After receiving a journalism degree from the University of Rhode Island, he took a job at *Sail* magazine in Boston. That's where he received a memorable phone call of his own, from 470 World Champion Dave Ullman.

"DISCIPLINE. A NO-COMPROMISE QUEST FOR PERFECTION. ED'S COMBINED THESE TWO TRAITS INTO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN SAILING."

"He said, 'Ed, this is Dave Ullman,' and I was like: 'Really? Wow. Cool.'"

Adams continued: "'I want you to come sail with me,' he said. 'We're doing an Admiral's Cup campaign.'" Adams agreed on the spot before Ullman asked him how much he wanted to get paid. "I was like: 'Paid? You're gonna pay me to sail with you? Really?' I think it was \$200 a day, which was a lot of money back then."

After two years at *Sail*, Adams worked at Shore Sails for a year before taking another editor's job at *Practical Sailor*. He also teamed up with Olsen, and together they won the 1987 Star Worlds. Thirty years later, Adams can still list his other significant class victories without hesitation (though some were sailed with a different crew): "Bacardi Cup twice, North Americans twice, Kiel Week, pre-Olympics twice." In 1987 (and again in 1991), Ed was named Rolex Yachtsman of the Year.

Olsen and Adams also won the World Ranking, an empirical predecessor to World Sailing's Sailor of the Year. "We were ranked No. 1

Ed Adams' success in the Snipe and Star classes (at top with the author, collecting hardware with crew Tom Olsen at the Bacardi Cup and the 1987 Star Worlds) earned him Rolex Yachtsman of the Year titles in 1987 and 1991. Transitioning to the grand-prix world, he had success in many one-design classes as tactician and self-taught weather forecaster, and today is a highly regarded coach and performance analyst.

PHOTOS: ONNE VAN DER WAL, SAILING WORLD ARCHIVES (2)



in the world in all the Olympic events, which is pretty good," he says matter-of-factly.

That's why, by 1990, the name "Ed Adams" was so intimidating to an aspiring Snipe crew. He was both a well-respected sailing writer, *and* a world champion. As his weekend teammate, I was accepted into the upper echelons of the Snipe class — though I would soon learn that most competitors found Adams' blistering delivery and single-minded search for perfection a bit over the top. For me, only his fast pace required any adjustment.

Since my father is a perfectionist too, Adams' focus and attention to detail felt natural. On and off the water at that first Snipe regatta, he took every piece of feedback I dished out, absorbed it, and then demanded more: more of me, more of his equipment and, most of all, more of himself. Of all the skipper phrases I learned, "Lean out — can't see" is the one I still hear in my head; clearly his hiking muscles were way better trained than mine. Not to mention his custom hiking pants probably fit better than my borrowed ones. He pushes limits, both his own and other people's; it's actually surprising he's had only two back surgeries.

In spite of a brand-new boat and a shorter-than-ideal crew, we won that regatta. Then we got back in the van to race home, and Adams started dictating a list of what we could've done better. This quest for perfection was both inspiring and exhausting — I'd learned so much in three days of racing, but there's only so much a brain can absorb in one weekend.

The lessons continued. When we blew a tire in Connecticut and couldn't budge the rusty jack, I learned how to drive a full-size van *up onto* its jack (a piece of knowledge I've gladly never used again). Once the spare was installed and he handed over the keys for the last driving shift, I picked up a new road-trip mantra: "In this van, we drive fast and take chances."

When I finally fell into bed at 4 a.m., I was too alert to sleep — still trying to absorb it all.

The next phone call was a great compliment: an invitation to team up with Adams for the summer Snipe circuit. (Maybe he hadn't noticed I was shorter than promised?) Over the next few months of training and racing, I earned a graduate degree in one-design competition; in exchange, Adams got an eager, dependable, trainable crew. And along the way, we gradually became friends — though it took me a long time to realize how rare that was. As he puts it, "I'm not a real sociable person, and I don't make friends that easily."

Our friendship even survived the humble pie of winning the consolation series at the 1990 Snipe Nationals, immediately after we both learned a lesson about the dangers of his full-throttle approach: In a qualifying series without a drop race, don't push the line so hard that you're over early.

Shortly after that disappointment, Adams and Olsen resumed work toward their ultimate goal: winning the next Star Olympic Trials. They'd gone into the 1988 Trials as the top-ranked Star team worldwide but went home empty-handed. In 1992, that history repeated itself.

"You have a project, and you just work at it as hard as you can," Adams shrugs when he recounts this footnote in an otherwise illustrious career. "Usually I've been lucky, and they've turned out well. They haven't always turned out well."

After the 1992 Trials, Adams sold his Star and went to work at *Sailing World*, before transitioning to full-time professional sailing. "The magazine editing ... it's more of an intellectual challenge. But at that point we had Michaela, and [my son] Luke was on the way ... and I made quite a bit more money sailing than I did working in the office."

Once he reached his mid-40s, he also began accepting coaching jobs. "I see guys my age trying to hang on [as pro sailors], and they're simply not as good as the young guys are. There are certain things they can do better with their experience, but a lot of things they can't do as well. I decided I was going to transition out of it early."

As a coach, Adams drives his sailors as hard as he's always driven himself. On a practice day just before the 2004 Yngling Worlds, he bullied my teammates and me into putting up the spinnaker in more wind than

we really could handle. After a big wipeout that led to cutting away the spinnaker halyard, we made it safely back to shore — where he talked us through the valuable lessons we'd learned. A week later, we won a bronze medal. And it was as a coach that Adams finally earned his ticket to the Olympics, helping the guy who beat him at the 1992 Trials, Mark Reynolds, win gold at the 2000 Games. "Mark's very disciplined," he says.

One of his favorite stories features Reynolds as a defending gold medalist. At the 2001 Star Worlds in Mdeblik, Holland, Adams (the U.S. Sailing Team coach at the time) was responsible for getting four U.S. teams out on the water to train together. "I'm walking around checking on everybody, and Mark's saying, 'I'm on schedule, I'm ready, I'm ready.' And I started to realize that the other guys aren't making enough progress to be in the water on time, so I start bugging 'em."

Reynolds pulled his Star up to the hoist right on schedule, but the other three American teams were still doing boat work.

"And finally I got mad," Adams recalls. "I walked over to Freddy Loof [of Sweden], who was just starting his campaign. Freddy had all his tools on his deck. I said: 'Hey Freddy, you want to go training with Mark? Mark's going in the water right now.' He literally took everything and pushed it off the boat onto the ground, jumped into his clothes, tied a few knots, and launched his boat right after Mark. And he won the worlds." Seven years later, Loof also won a gold medal.

The moral? "You gotta have some discipline in your program," says Adams, "or you can't go anywhere."

Discipline. A no-compromise quest for perfection. Adams has combined these two traits into a successful career in sailing — supported all along by that one priceless and essential ingredient.

"Doing well in the sport requires ambition," he repeats. "You have to have it. You can acquire it through life experience, but if you don't have it, it doesn't matter. It's gotta come from the heart."

Since that first summer, I've racked up a lot of miles racing with Adams

"IN ED'S WORLD, HALF-THROTTLE — WHETHER

SAILING, DRIVING, TALKING OR EATING — IS NOT AN

ACCEPTABLE SETTING."

in a variety of one-designs (and vehicles). And even though I promised never to tell his kids the least-flattering road-trip stories, here's a quick summary of my all-time favorite: Stuck in a Friday-afternoon New York City traffic jam, Adams jumped out of our van and into the car in front of us to drive it through a particularly tight spot on the highway — just to hurry the poor woman out of our way so we could race to the next regatta.

"All I really think about passionately is sailing," he says. "I have been that way since I was 15 years old. I don't know if it's normal or not; that's just the way it is."

About 10 years after our first phone call, Adams and I were sitting side by side at a Newport bar when I finally made a beer-induced confession.

"The first time we talked, I lied to you," I confessed. "Tom told me to tell you I was taller than I was."

"I knew it!" he said, thumping his beer bottle on the bar. "When I first saw you, I knew you couldn't really be five-four."

All was forgiven, of course. He might have a hard time making friends, but he does a good job of hanging onto them. Which is why, 27 years later, I'm still glad I told the big lie. ■

Ed Adams won his first Laser U.S. Nationals in 1975, and then finished third at the Laser Worlds in Germany in 1976. Four decades later, he's a force to be reckoned with in Newport, Rhode Island's Frostbite Fleet 413.

PHOTO: JOE BERKELEY



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2017 **SW 051**