



# One job one dream

Mike Toppa is one of the best-known faces in big boat and America's Cup sailing, whichever corner of the world you inhabit. Yet in an illustrious – but discrete – career which has now spanned more than 40 years he has only really worked for one employer. He talks to Carol Cronin...

I've admired Mike Toppa from afar for many years, but it wasn't until last winter – standing side by side on an ice-slickened dock, thumbs busily trying to propel our DF95 model boats around a tiny race-course in the most protected corner of Newport Harbor – that we actually had a conversation. Such a soft-spoken, glass-half-full kind of guy – even on one particularly arctic race day, when his mast just inexplicably... broke.

Toppa's default facial expression is a smile, and he exudes a comfortable calm; not the usual demeanour at the pointy end of our sport. I was quite curious; how does

the nicest guy in sailing win three America's Cups – over three decades, with three different job descriptions? How has he kept what he calls 'only one job' through 44 years and counting at North Sails, despite an entire industry revolution? And, perhaps most surprising of all: why is he still so completely jazzed about sailboat racing?

I don't usually write down questions before an interview, but I do Google my profile 'victims'. For Mike the only item from outside the North Sails umbrella was a nomination to the US National Sailing Hall of Fame.

'Mike is known for being intensely talented and competitive,' the nominator wrote, 'while at the same time exuding a calming influence, a rare and welcome combination in the world of yacht racing.'

He's not exactly a self-promoter. And sticking with the same company over the entire lifespan of the internet eliminates the usual cyberspace landmarks. But when we sit down for a chat on a sunny and crisp October morning amid the hustle and bustle of Newport Shipyard, he's eager to share his history.

All it takes is one question; 'how did you get here?' – which could be taken as quite specific (he's the only North Sails employee

with an office onsite) or completely open-ended; how did you achieve such success? Instantly that smile ratchets up several watts: 'Well, that's a story.'

I settle back in my seat, certain that – as long as I've actually remembered to hit record – learning what makes this guy tick will be almost as much fun as thumb-yachting alongside him.

## One tall mast

Mike grew up in Newport, but his parents and siblings didn't sail. A chance sighting from his bike as an 11-year-old determined his fate. Riding down Thames Street, 'I saw this big tall mast and decided to check it out.'

Down on the dock was 'this flush-deck, cool-looking sailboat: *Intrepid!* So I went back the next day and was hanging around and somebody said, "Hey, why don't you help us move this whatever..." probably a sail or something. So I ended up being their dock boy for the entire Cup summer.'

He didn't get to sail on *Intrepid* but when the skipper of their trial horse, *Constellation*, asked Mike if he wanted to go sailing, 'I said yes!'

Once onboard, a guy instructed him on



SHARON GREENULTIMATE SAILING

**Opposite:** Dennis Conner steers the 1977 S&S 12 Metre *Enterprise* during testing against his eventual 1980 Cup Defender *Freedom* with a young Mike Toppa trimming genoa. *Enterprise* was a disappointment for Olin Stephens, beaten in the 1977 Defender trials by Ted Turner's older *Courageous*. Originally skippered by Lowell North, the great man had a tiller extension clamped to the top of *Enterprise's* wheel so he could steer from the rail small-boat style. Soon after, Toppa moved south to Florida – an obvious choice for an ambitious sailmaker with south Florida now the world capital of winter big-boat racing. The Petersen-designed *Scarlett O'Hara* is seen racing the 'frantic' 1983 SORC in the hands of sailmakers Chris Corlett and Dee Smith of Horizon; previously in 1982 *Scarlett* had made a strong SORC debut in the hands of Mike Toppa's North Sails boss Tom Blackaller, but in 1983 she really lit up with a new rig, winning the SORC overall then quickly selected for the US Admiral's Cup team for Cowes... where she finished the 1983 series as top inshore yacht. But by 1983 Blackaller, Toppa et al had a new SORC mount (*overleaf*) plus big plans for a Cup summer in Newport

what he now knows were the running backstays. 'He said, "OK, when we tack" – and I didn't know what tack meant – 'when we tack, you let go of this line. And I'm going to pull the other one on, and you come and help me.'

That 'guy' was Olin Stephens, he marvels. 'So, yeah, 11 years old and Stephens is telling me how to do it. And sailing that big boat! To me it was just incredible.'

It became even more incredible when *Intrepid* won the America's Cup that September. It was the beginning, he says, of his childhood dream: to win the America's Cup one day, as a sailor.

### Pathway to the Cup

The next summer Mike joined Ida Lewis Yacht Club as a junior member and learned how to sail, in a type of boat called a Bath-tub. More auspiciously, he also met Jerry Kirby. Jerry was only one year older, but he already 'had the same goal: to win the America's Cup. Today we still joke about it.'

Over the next few summers the two friends transitioned to 420s. 'There's a trophy for the Ida Lewis junior sailing season championship called the Vanderbilt Cup,' Mike explains. 'It was given to the

club by Harold Vanderbilt, to inspire kids to learn to sail... and to help defend the America's Cup. So Jerry won it one year, then I won it the next summer.' Looking back, he says that was the real start of his path. 'I was so hooked, I couldn't get enough of it.'

In the winter, when Jerry went off to play hockey, Mike went frostbiting. 'Sailing in the summer, sailing in the winter... I did that all through high school. It was all I wanted to do so I found any outlet I could.'

### School, or sailing?

Mike skipped his high school graduation to do his first bluewater race, Newport to Bermuda on a C&C 61. Then in September he joined a group of up-and-coming sailors at the University of Rhode Island. 'All my peers were doing 100 per cent dinghy sailing,' but he was more excited by 'the ocean racing thing; I mean, that was an adventure. I loved ocean racing!'

So when a friend's father invited him to do the Cape to Rio Race during what should have been his second year of college – and to deliver the boat from Newport to Cape Town, with five other young guys – 'I thought it'd be the coolest thing in the

world.' He remembers calling his parents before he left: 'You're going where?? We don't even know these people...' They knew nothing about it, but they were always so supportive. And off we went; we left Newport in October, sailed non-stop to Dakar, Senegal and then Liberia. Biggest waves I've ever seen, by far...'

A broken headstay delayed them in St Helena for two weeks, but they made it to Cape Town for the start and raced back across the Atlantic to Rio. Mike then helped sail the boat north as far as the Panama Canal before heading back to Newport.

That summer a supportive yacht club member loaned Mike and Jerry Kirby his Shields. 'We raced every weekend. That's when the story about Jerry jumping off the bridge happened...'

I'd assumed that famous tale was Newport urban legend; Mike shakes his head. 'There was a Saturday race that started at one. We were on the boat waiting for Jerry, but it got too late.' They left the mooring and headed north to the start via the locals' shortcut, which took them under a relatively low part of the Newport Bridge – though still tall enough for a



**Above:** Tom Blackaller's previous SORC mount *Scarlett O'Hara* was one of nine Doug Peterson-designed Serendipity 43s built by Tom Dreyfus in New Orleans. But this was the era of elastic measuring tapes when it came to IOR measurement time and Dreyfus's 43s were at the heart of the action (as, pious Anglo Saxons, was Great Britain's *Victory of Burnham* with the biggest rating 'error' of all). Neither Dreyfus nor two-time Star World Champion Tom Blackaller was ever found at fault in the rating traumas that took place at every big IOR regatta at the time, but the 'colourful' pair could not resist milking a situation that had blue blazers self-combusting in every direction. So Dreyfus named his new 43 *Your Cheatin' Heart* and Blackaller turned up as skipper of *Mea Culpa*. And the late Tom Dreyfus... a man who attended briefings – and went offshore racing – with a pair of loaded silver-plated Colt 45s on his hip is worth a Google. Old school, but for those lucky enough to have been at some of those events a modern regatta can feel awfully 'safe'

Shields mast. 'And there he is... Jerry jumped off!' They picked him out of the water and continued on to the starting area. 'Just about every story you've heard about Jerry is 95 per cent true,' Mike says, as his smile wattage increases once again.

The Shields Nationals were in Newport at the end of that summer, and Mike says they were winning the regatta on the last run of the last race... but it was windy, and the boat had filled up with water on the upwind leg. 'We started bailing, with two buckets. First we lost one bucket over the side, and then we lost the other bucket over the side. And then the boat behind us surfed by and won the race – and they won [the regatta] by a point.' Shaking his head, the smile disappears for the first time.

But it returns when he moves on to what happened next – going back to school. Dinghy racing was 'something I wanted to do', he says. Even so, he only lasted one semester before ocean racing beckoned again – this time an invite to the SORC. He always planned to go back, but that would be his last stab at a formal education: 'I guess I just got sidetracked!'

### Stitching it together

At the 1978 SORC Mike met Jim Marshall who owned North Sails Chesapeake. Jim invited him to come and learn the art of

sailmaking in Annapolis, 'and maybe run the [new] spinnaker department if it works out. I said sure.'

Marshall also gave him the name of a woman who supposedly had a spare room. When Mike called she said she didn't know anything about it. 'But she became a really good friend,' he quickly adds, and he found a great place to live. Even things that didn't work out as planned get a positive spin.

That first job at North Sails consisted of stencilling on numbers, cutting out Dacron and making patterns. He also looked over more experienced shoulders, learning both how to design sails and how to stitch them together. After work he joined the most competitive local fleet – a trend that continues to this day. 'I'm like, 23, and I couldn't afford anything, but Jim Allsopp helped me somehow secure a J/24.'

Allsopp was the loft manager. In those days, Mike says, 'European grand prix sailing looked to America as the pinnacle. Sardinia Cup and Admiral's Cup were going on, so national teams were hiring Americans to come over and teach them. Jim Allsopp would go sail with the Italians and come back with sail orders. And then Jim Marshall would design the mains and jibs, and I would design the spinnakers.'

Sail design was quite different then, he reminds me. 'We didn't have anything like

the software that we have today, where you can build a 3D model of the flying shape and rotate it, pressurise it, put it through the virtual wind tunnel.' What they did have was a mast outside the loft: 'We'd design a spinnaker, hoist it and kind of hold onto the corners. Walk around, see what it looked like – then send it off to Italy.'

### America's Cup dream, continued

By the summer of 1979 Mike had developed enough confidence as a sailor to ask for a tryout with Dennis Conner's team – plus 'by then I thought I knew something about spinnaker design...' So once he made the team as a back-up trimmer he started pushing to design the downwind sails.

Two well-respected sailmakers were already on the team: 'John Marshall [North Sails] was making the mains and jibs, and Tom Whidden [Sobstad] was doing the kites. That's the way Dennis liked it; it kept everybody happy, and he had the best trimmers. But I kept bugging John: let me design a spinnaker.'

The answer was always no. Until one evening, when 'John came up after dinner and said, "OK, I talked to Dennis, and you're on." So I go to Dennis.' Mike chuckles. 'And I said, "Hey, John said you'd let me design a spinnaker," and

PHIL UHL



Dennis said, “What are you talking about?” John had set me up!

“But then Dennis said, “OK, I know you want to do this. Go ahead – but if it’s no good I’m not going to pay you. If it’s as fast as what Tom’s doing, I’m only going to pay 50 per cent, because we really don’t need it. I won’t pay full price – unless it’s faster.’ So then I had to call Jim Allsopp. And he said, “Absolutely. Go for it.”

“So I got in my car and drove to Annapolis – thinking, what have I got myself into? It was just kind of an idea, a concept...” But after sailing on the boat you knew what you wanted, I suggest. “That’s exactly it...” Mike says, nodding.

“There are a lot of good sail designers but I think the very best are the ones who actively race. Some sails test fast, but to race fast they have to be dynamic; trimming and easing and accelerating, pole forward, pole back – or bow up/bow down, however you want to look at it. That’s where the rubber hits the road in terms of what a fast sail is.”

So Mike designed and built a 12 Metre spinnaker, though it doesn’t sound as if there was enough time to hoist it up the loft’s test mast before driving the eight hours back to Newport.

Next day’s practice was a two-boat sparring match between *Freedom* and *Enterprise*. ‘One mile windward leewards,’ Mike explains. ‘On *Enterprise* we were 20 seconds behind around the weather mark, but then my kite goes up – and we go right past *Freedom*. Everyone’s looking at me... it was pretty fun!’

After the same result in the next race, ‘Dennis calls up on the VHF and says “send the sail over”. And that put me on the map.

‘My spinnaker design was on, like, six of the Cup teams, which was great. Everybody wanted my spinnakers!’ He cocks his head

to one side. ‘I’ve never talked to Tom about it, what he was thinking at the time; all of a sudden, there was a faster design.’

Dennis Conner’s team won that 1980 Cup but Mike says it didn’t quite fulfil his childhood dream; he still wanted to win as a sailor, racing on the winning boat. ‘So I wasn’t done with just one Cup; now I wanted to do another.’

For the 1983 Cup he sailed with Tom Blackaller and Gary Jobson on *Defender*. But their boat was only fast in light air so ‘*Liberty* just kind of steamrolled us. That America’s Cup summer ended pretty early.’ Which apparently gave him and Jobson enough downtime to write a book together; Mike says *Speed Sailing* was well-received when it came out early in 1984.

Once Mike’s Cup team was eliminated other teams asked for his design help. ‘Not too many people know this but I then got a call from Tom Schnackenberg...

‘The Australia II group wanted five spinnakers so they could test against their best to see if they had any weaknesses.’ And the next series was about to begin... so ‘they wanted to get the new sails and test them as fast as they could.’

They couldn’t use his designs for racing, he clarifies, but they could study them before building their own versions. ‘I’m sure Blackaller wouldn’t have looked favourably on it but I wasn’t sailing... and there wasn’t any rule against it. And Jim [Allsopp] was all for it.’ And of course that was the year the Aussies finally wrested the Auld Mug away from the Americans.

#### **Journeyman designer moves south**

‘After that America’s Cup I was still working for North Sails.’ (This would become a common refrain.) ‘North didn’t have anything south of Annapolis so they offered me the opportunity to start a loft in Florida.

Growing up in Newport, it was really hard to go to Florida... but I threw a dart at the dartboard, and chose Clearwater.’

By the mid-1980s Tampa/St Pete/Clearwater had become the hub of winter big boat racing; it was the starting point for the SORC, and ‘all the boatbuilders were there. It was the best place to be. So I moved down there and started the business,’ just in time for the 1987 recession... ‘But we were still designing a lot of spinnakers!’

It wasn’t long before the next Cup opportunity arrived, with Rod Davis and Eagle. Perth ‘was an amazing regatta: 12 or more challengers, two defenders...’ But before he could sign on Mike had to sell the idea to his business partner.

‘When I broke the news to Jim [Allsopp] he was kind of mad. “You can’t leave for six months and go to Australia! Who’s gonna run the loft?” And then I said, “But, Jim, we also need a navigator.” All of a sudden his attitude completely changed!’

*Eagle* was ‘really slow’ but ‘another great learning experience. Racing 12 Metres in 25-plus, every day!’ After they were eliminated Mike (and Jim) went back to Florida. ‘But by then I was designing sails for *Courageous*, and Italia and Canada wanted my designs too. So in the lead-up to the Cup we were supplying all their spinnakers...’

#### **Partnership of a different sort**

Jim Allsopp and Mike were close friends as well as loft partners, so when Jim got engaged Mike was invited to the party in Palm Beach. That’s where Mike met his future wife, Libby – the sister of Jim’s fiancée! ‘Libby got me into tennis and skiing, and I got her into sailing,’ Mike says.

He bought a Snipe (Clearwater’s most competitive fleet), and Libby ‘was just a great crew; athletic and natural.’



But all the big-boat sailing Mike was doing made it 'really hard to do a one-design campaign. So I would jump in and out of the Snipe as best I could. We were fast, and we had a lot of fun.' I decide not to tease him; a spinnaker designer, so enthusiastic about a non-spinnaker boat!

Libby and Mike got married in 1990, just before the next America's Cup call. 'Gary Jobson was in charge of bringing the America's crew together. And I said absolutely. I never said no to the America's Cup! Because that was always the goal. I still wanted to win as a sailor. Even though I'd been on the winning team it wasn't the same as crossing the finish line.'

America's was a really interesting campaign, he says, 'because it was no stone unturned; a huge budget!! And the people involved were just phenomenal. What I'd learned from my dad about being a football coach was that the team aspect of any sport is so important. And at America's it really was all about team.'

'There were a lot of really good all-star sailors who didn't last, because they weren't the team players that Bill [Koch] was looking for. As a result the crew was a group of just phenomenal individuals, and a lot of them are still close friends. We had a lot of fun – and a lot of success.'

'Bill's idea was to have good talent,' Mike continues. 'But he said the boat should have the personality, not the team. So everybody had to fit in. It was a very well-oiled team. Long programme,' he adds; 'I was there for 14 months.'

Fortunately Libby was able to join the team too. 'I remember talking to Gary and Bill: "Yeah, I want to come... but my wife is a physical therapist, and she's really good." So they hired her! Kind of the first Cup team to focus on the physical needs of the sport... a great experience.'

### That dream comes true

It was also the first Cup in which Mike was 'just' a trimmer. 'We had sails from three or four different suppliers, and there were a lot of smart people on the sail programme. We developed Cuben Fiber, which at the time was very groundbreaking. Sails were lighter, in higher modulus materials; a big edge downwind. Anyway, we won. That was nice...'

You got to cross the finish line, I say.

'Yeah. And I got to sail every race in that Cup with Jerry Kirby! So go back to being a little kid, learning how to sail and saying that's what we're gonna do. And we did it, together.'

After winning the 1992 America's Cup, I suggest to Mike that returning to work at North Sails must have been a bit of a let-down. But he shakes his head, because it was after that Cup when sailboat racing really stepped up to a new level. 'Suddenly owners were paying crews a lot of money to help sail their boats at regattas all over the world,' he explains. 'If you're a professional sailor that was kind of the heyday: from 1992, up until 2000, even 2003. Those 10 years, there was a lot going on.'

'I had the sail loft in Florida, and I was doing well. But I was always looking over my shoulder at my contemporaries who I did the America's Cup with; they were pro sailors, doing well and having fun – and I love to race sailboats, so the more I could race the better.' It looked so attractive that Mike was tempted to go pro himself. 'But I never did... and I'm glad. Because nothing lasts for ever, and I always had the business to go back to after a Cup.'

### Sails to Sales

Mike claims he's only had one job for 44 years, but that really means he's only worked for one company. After the 1992 Cup his skills led him to another new challenge and location. 'We had some really close friends who lived in Fort Lauderdale, and when Libby and I went over to visit my eyes kind of opened. There were a lot of yacht brokers selling big sailboats... what we today call Superyachts. And the 100-footers all changed hands through the brokerages in Fort Lauderdale – a deepwater port.'

Clearwater was shallow, the SORC had relocated to Florida's east coast and most boatbuilders had found cheaper real estate. 'There was a potential in Lauderdale that I wanted to take advantage of,' Mike says.

So he started a sales office called North Sails Lauderdale (that soon added a sail loft) and sold the Clearwater operation.

'By November 1992 I had also got involved with Swan and the Swan Cup, and we doubled our business really

**Opposite:** Ken Read with a star-studded entourage onboard Dennis Conner's AC72 *Stars&Stripes* during the 2003 Louis Vuitton Cup in New Zealand – (left to right) Mike Toppa, Read, Vince Brun and Tom Whidden. Would have been a lousy day at North Sails had things gone south that time... Hmm, come again? The same yacht flooded and sank off Long Beach a few months before during testing when the rudder assembly ripped out of the hull (left)

quickly. Bigger boats need bigger sails, and every time boats changed hands they usually bought new sails too. So it worked out OK...' This smile includes a not-quite wink, indicating modest understatement.

Yet what might seem like a major career pivot didn't require a new approach, he insists. 'Whether it's designing sails or selling sails my point of view is still as a competitor; I'm just trying to make the boat go faster.'

Mike was recruited for the 1995 Cup, but Koch's new team 'didn't seem like a good fit. And I was pretty busy, sailing big boats.' That included the 1997-1998 Whitbread in the Whitbread 60s, the first quasi-one-design race around the world; he managed Chessie Racing's sail programme and sailed three legs. 'I couldn't do any more due to other regatta commitments.'

Also some at-home commitments! His daughter Holley was two, and 'Libby was due to give birth in the middle of the Brazil to Lauderdale leg. We had a fast transit through the Doldrums and finished early – three days before the twins were born... just as well.'

For the 2000 Cup Mike sailed again with Dennis Conner and Stars & Stripes, 'which was a lot of fun. We definitely over-achieved with one boat; I think we got to the semi-finals.' Then it was back to the Whitbread, to help manage the Team Tyco sail programme.

### Stars & Stripes

By 2003 Stars & Stripes was a much better funded two-boat campaign. But 'that didn't end well. We had a laminar flow keel that was thicker at the back than the front. And we sank the boat in Long Beach!

'That was interesting... We had a new really high-aspect rudder that we went out to test – inside the breakwater, luckily. It was a good breeze and we were doing these really hard 90° turns, trying to see if we could get the rudder to stall. And on one of those turns the rudder bearing failed. That was like a manhole-sized circular bearing that went into the hull, so all of a sudden we had a 3ft-diameter hole in the boat.'

'Water's pouring in... We didn't quite know what happened at first; we knew we'd lost the rudder, so we started to steer with the sails. That was successful for about a minute-and-a-half, until the boat started to get lower in the water... and then someone popped up and said, "We're sinking."

'We had no control of the boat, so we dropped the jib and the main. The bow started to go down, and people were



ONINE VAN DER WAL



jumping off... We had 16, 17 people on the boat. The chase boat was busy picking people up everywhere.'

Mike was one of the last people off the boat, he remembers. And instead of jumping overboard he headed aft – toward higher ground. Just as he got there another RIB arrived. 'So I stepped off, never got wet!'

But there's another bad memory from that same campaign. 'We had a mast that had some voids in it. I was right next to the vang, taking a picture of the mast bend or something. And it snapped right above deck level, barely 4ft away from me; that was really scary...' The team finished a disappointing fifth in the challenger series.

### Cool coaching challenge

After Alinghi won the 2003 Cup and Valencia became the next venue, Mike says, 'Things were really rolling in America's Cup world. Ten-plus challengers for 2007! I was recruited by Oracle, but I couldn't leave the business for three years so that was a non-starter. And... again it didn't seem like such a good fit.'

He'd always been so lucky with his Cup teams, he says; 'Great sailors, but really high-quality individuals. People who, outside of sailing, you'd still want to hang around with.'

'The Oracle team was a little different, in my opinion; a lot of really good talent, but individuals who were not really compatible. And a year into it they still had a lot of turnover... and some issues.'

They recruited Mike again, but it still 'didn't seem like the right fit, so I declined. And then the South African Shosholozza team asked me to help coach, and that was a pretty cool challenge. I flew down to Cape Town, and they bought one of the old Italian boats. They would go out and train every day; it would blow 30 in Table Bay and they'd be out there regardless.'

'Later I spent a lot of time with them in Valencia, and it was really rewarding for me. They didn't have any experience at all, so they would never say "we can't do that; this is the way we did it before".'

'There was a clean sheet of paper, and really energetic people who were good sailors. I forget exactly what the final results were, but they beat a lot of boats they weren't supposed to beat. And a lot of those guys are still good friends.'

### Too many hulls, and trickledown

And then, he says, the multihulls came in – and 'everything changed. That was kind of a forced retirement... the end of my America's Cup.'

'Seven campaigns, two wins,' he adds, both face and voice dropping into neutral, as if to convey: not bad, but I could have done better. I'm too engrossed in his story to point out that he actually won three Cups – if you count his very first, as an 11-year-old dock boy.

'The America's Cup has been really good for the sport of sailing,' Mike insists. 'All that R&D budget that all those teams spent on developing just the smallest amount of performance gain eventually trickled down to what we all sail, whether we're cruising or racing. Look at the 2007 Cup... 3Di came out of that. Carbon winches came out of that. And composite rigging; that was all perfected then, and everyone uses it now. Wasn't even that long ago!'

But that progress stopped in 2007, he says. Since then 'it's all been about foiling. A lot of composite structure development, which is good. But I'm not sure it's trickling down to the majority of sailors like it did in the past. That's a pretty big change.'

'And the cost to compete... Today the dollar cost of entry is high, but there are also the intellectual property costs; you need a big squad of foiling designers – and that just doesn't exist, except within those groups. So you have to hire them away or start from scratch. All of a sudden trying to challenge for the next America's Cup becomes really... challenging. But it's still fun to follow!'

'I hope American Magic wins,' he says. 'I hope they'll bring it back to Newport. The average American citizen, they have no idea what the America's Cup is. Not



DANIEL FORSTER

any more at least. Maybe having one here... we'll see.'

His smile returns, happy to speculate all day long about the next Cup, but instead I finally remember to ask about his personal life. (By now the outside air temperature has dropped significantly, and Mike is still in shorts... so we've relocated to the comfortable chairs in his office.)

### Family fun, and parent-coaching

When his parents died Mike was able to buy the Newport house where he'd grown up. 'Nothing happens in Florida in the summer; it's too hot. And Newport's the centre of the sailing universe so it was the perfect opportunity. I was busy in Florida in the winter, and busy up here in summer.'

Mike and Libby's three daughters all learned to sail at Lauderdale Yacht Club, in Optimists. 'The junior programme started really early, at nine. But as soon as you learned how to sail the only next option was the race programme. And they weren't interested.'

So that summer in Newport Libby rented an O'pen BIC for the girls to sail off the beach. 'It's the coolest little boat, just a toy. You can jump off it, capsize it, flip it right back up and keep sailing. They'd go sail around, have a ball; they loved it.'

'Then we go back to Florida, all their sailing friends are now racing – and they still didn't want to. So I bought a BIC. And all of a sudden their racing friends wanted to sail the Open BIC more than they wanted to sail Optis and 420s! That kept them in sailing,' he says. 'Keeping them in the game; I'm a big fan of that.'

As a result, the family went to a lot of junior regattas together all over the world. 'It was just like going on a ski trip; you're together all the time. Fun family vacations, very healthy – and great memories.'

When I compare that to the usual Opti-parenting stories Mike chuckles. 'I kind of stayed as far away as I could! In fact, most of the coaching I did was coaching other parents to back off! Because you could see how horrible the effect was on the kids, as





good-natured as the parents tried to be. So that was my primary coaching role: helping parents to do it the right way... or go away!

### Back home again

After Oakley Capital bought North Sails in 2014 Mike became a 'full-fledged employee' rather than a loft owner. 'I was still coming up to Newport for the summer, and I'd go back in the fall. Until I figured out that the guys in Florida didn't need me! So I could move back to Newport.' He now works out of Newport Shipyard year round, unless he's off at a regatta.

Mike is also an active member of the Newport Shields fleet, which many – including Mike – call the most competitive summer sailing in town. It's a return to one aspect of his teenaged years, and 'a lot of those boats are still racing today!' He and his mostly family crew finished third at the 2022 Nationals; on the last day Mike turned the helm over to daughter Alie, so he could fly to Europe for a Superyacht regatta.

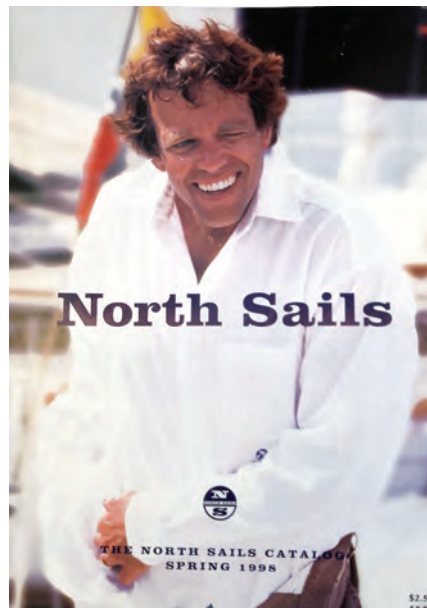
### Superyachting

Most of what he estimates to be 100 days of racing each year is now on Superyachts. 'Selling sails to big boats quickly got me in with owners who wanted to do a couple of races a year. It's easy to make a difference on those boats, because they don't usually race. If you can trim the sails 10 per cent harder and make the boat point a little higher and get the crew a little more organised, then all of a sudden you're going faster than the other guys. And it's also a management exercise, because you've gotta get 30 people on the same page.'

He shrugs. 'In the end it's just another outlet for competitive sailing. And it is competitive; not everybody wants to win, but no one wants to lose.'

Last winter Mike sailed on *Rosehardy*, a 56m Perini. 'I was tactician for Paul Goodison. How's that for a career arc? Learning how to sail with Olin Stephens, all the way to Paul Goodison's tactician!

'But it's all the same sort of thing, just making the boat go as fast as possible. I



also do some classic racing, which is fun. Any outlet where the competition is good is super-attractive to me.'

### Sail technology

Over four decades at his 'only job' the entire sailmaking industry has transformed. Building sails today is, of course, completely different from when he started. 'Cutting pieces of cloth and sewing them together to form a sail, versus moulding them and making the sailcloth at the same time. It's like cutting pieces of wood and nailing them together to make a boat versus building a carbon boat on a mould; just night and day. It's amazing to see the technology that's applied to sailmaking now.'

Selling sails and racing with customers still go well together, he says. 'What I do for North Sails gives me knowledge I can bring to race programmes... and it's the only job I've ever had, right out of school,' he repeats, 'which is pretty rare. I really enjoy what I do, and I'm still pretty good at it, I think; I still get invites for the best regattas. So as long as I keep getting asked to go sailing I'm more than happy to do it.'

### Giving back

Mike helped start the Lauderdale Yacht Club Foundation which supports the local junior sailing programme; 'not just giving out regatta entry fees or travel grants', he explains, 'but a lot of community outreach.

'We have a programme where kids in the elementary school write an essay about why they want to learn to sail, and the letters are fantastic. I was able to leverage some of my connections; Dennis Conner, Bill Koch, Gary Jobson were all super helpful and happy to donate their time to the cause. We raised over a million dollars, all for the benefit of youth sailing, so we've helped a lot of kids.'

He's also on the board of the Storm Trysail Foundation, which is equally 'junior sailing-centric'.

All this is motivated, of course, by 'the opportunities that I had when I was really young; I try to do what I can to carry that

*Opposite page: after disappointment in Fremantle in 1987 with the under-funded Eagle 12 Metre syndicate Mike Toppa's America's Cup career then lurched to the other extreme in 1992, joining Bill Koch's no-expense-spared America's Cup campaign in San Diego, the first Cup to be held in the new IACC 72-footers. Koch's science powerhouse of a group nailed it in one, as the first to spot that a narrow IACC beats a wide one – and no matter how used you are to sailing at the pinnacle of the sport the first time you win the Cup is 'special'. Left: summer of 1967 – Sergeant Pepper changes music for ever and in Newport RI an 11-year-old Toppa is welcomed aboard the 12 Metre *Intrepid* by her America's Cup-winning skipper Bus Mosbacher. And grinning even more widely 30-odd years later, Mike Toppa finally makes the front cover of the North Sails catalogue!*

on.' But there's only so much time, he admits. 'I volunteer as much as I can. But I don't want to get involved with anything I can't do 110 per cent. I travel a lot, still; I sail a lot, still. And family keeps me busy!

'But I've been thinking about when I do retire, whenever that is; I'd like to really roll my sleeves up and dig into all these things deeper.'

He's also on the selection committee for the Sailing Hall of Fame – though this year he'll make sure to stay off the subcommittee that might finally consider his own nomination. 'The bylaws restrict how many people get in any given year, so there's this huge backlog. But we're working through that...' (laughing)

### Winter sports

Mike doesn't play tennis any more, but he and Libby do still enjoy skiing. 'Another one of the great things about living here in Newport is that there's a forced break,' he says. 'In Florida every weekend, every day, every month is the same; there's no change in environment. Up here, when you can't go sailing because the water's too cold, you do something else. And there are lots of other things to do.

'Then a friend got me into shooting clays, so that's another thing I want to do more of this winter. And... I gotta get the DF95 going again...'

### Fast, calm, 'continuing on'

Before I let him get back to his 'only job' we commiserate about the boat work required to make Mike's DF95 raceable once more. He shares my preference for one-design racing, and claims that his best America's Cups 'were very close to one-design sailing. Speed and tactics; the mind game is part of it, and the boats are part of it. That's what is most attractive.

'I just love to sail boats and love to make them go faster,' he says, maxing out the wattage of that trademark grin once more. 'I'm lucky that I really do enjoy what I do, and that I could make a career out of what I like. Which is the reason why I've only ever had one job, why it's worked out. So I'll continue on until I can't do it any more...' □